EVENT

poetry and prose

53 • 2

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EVENT

Celebrating 50 Years!

NATIONAL MAGAZINE AWARDS

PERSONAL JOURNALISM • HONOURABLE MENTION 2023

POETRY • FINALISTS 2021 • SILVER WINNER 2020

JOURNEY PRIZE

SHORT LIST 2020, 2019 & 2018

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REVIEWS

COVER: 'NEPALESE MONKS,'
PATRICK CONATY, 2017

My artistic practice is anchored in Vancouver, where I continue to explore the intersections of visual storytelling and digital artistry.

—*P. C.* —

EDITOR'S NOTE:

EVENT is seeking cover photo submissions! We welcome photos from both established and emerging artists who are based in British Columbia, and we pay $200 plus two contributors' copies for one-time use. Our challenge is finding images that meet our technical criteria and are also striking—like Patrick Conaty's image on the cover of this issue.

We're looking for unique photos that will catch the eye—on newsstands, on social media, on a coffee table—and we particularly love photos that suggest a theme, a distinct mood and/or a narrative. Photos should be in landscape format and contain enough negative space for us to include the title, issue number, bar code, call-outs, et cetera. For examples, exact specifications, and submission guidelines, please visit eventmagazine.ca/cover-art-event/.

—*Shashi Bhat*

For the latest EVENT news, contests and announcements, please visit eventmagazine.ca.

JohnWall**Barger**

THE GOLDFISH SELLER

I am standing beside the road
A clear cold morning
Watching a fellow genuflect
On a rug

When an old woman
On a rickety bicycle rolls past

Water balloons jiggling
All around her
A constellation of balloons
A tall rack with hooks
Elaborate antlers

A goldfish in each one
Flames
Around her ears

It's more painful
The beauty
Than you expect

Like one of those impossible angels
Out of Ezekiel
Animal-human hybrids
Made out of wheels
Wheels turning inside wheels
Of dazzling topaz
Full of eyes all over

She rolls away
Wobbly
Between two rattling trucks

AT MY HANGING

I tore the hood
of the executioner. His ear, brick latrine,
poked out:

He yanked the lever. I twisted,
sand rose. In the night,
my name

cried out—not by you.
I saw you with them
who want me gone.

Sand rose, slow bathwater.
I craned to see if you had on
your earring, the one

in the earlobe not torn.
A fan clicked somewhere.
I called out, my tongue

of wheels, levers, wires,
the whole apparatus,
fevers, birds, dusk,

sand, I said—
A woman reached
out her window

toward me.
No, to check
for rain, perhaps.

DARWIN AWARDS SONG

Let us celebrate you,
Anastasia and Miguel, copulating on a balcony,
falling eight storeys.

From birth we advised:
keep your things close, do not share,
it's yours, all yours.

We were fools. Perhaps now
you are rocks falling into an abyss
for one hundred years.

Does it matter? Now all you had
is impounded. As if it were never yours!
Even the memories,

even the last: his erection in the dark.
Even your unpaid parking tickets.
Even those crates

of unread books in your parents' attic.
Even the possum in your garden
you never mentioned to anyone.

We're all teenagers, stoned,
horny, stepping out of the party. Praise us all!
Cut loose our strings.

We told you *we* were the teachers, *this*
the class. It's all for the good, we said,
hoping you would make it so.

Now look what happened:
you're no longer invited to dinner.
Even the good feeling

you became the wall around. Miguel
hoisted Anastasia onto the railing.
Anastasia unzipped him.

Let us giggle with them.
Let us make love to the air.
Like a Godard jump-cut.

Trick of bad editing.
That sound? A phone ringing.
Yes, it sounds close. It's not.

David**Barrick**

FAIRY TALE

Do not kill the frog that asks
to be kissed. Do not eat the pig
with a princess's eyes. Do not

steal the bear's meal while she's
out. The dog who drags your wounded
body home on a sled, who swears

he is your brother—he doesn't belong
in that oil-stained garage. Make
him a bed. Make amends. Rip out

the pasture fences—these milk cows
long to mingle. Their sorcery is more
than a handful of beans. Their sheep

extend the family—warm, woolen,
a fully counted sleep. It's simple.
If you walk through the Black

Forest, watch your step. Crushed
spiders and crickets rise like prayer,
like questions before judgment.

JOBS

My new job is lodged in my chest
like a cutting board. It pushes against

my sternum as I inhale, left corner jabbing
my kidney. I feel my new job wherever

I go, not just when I am doing my other job.
They have a pulse. They splinter, grow. The knives

rattle and clack somewhere below. I slowly
wake from a weird, deep sleep and realize

my old job is still anchored there—a sunken
ship with a galley glowing blue, the stove

swollen beneath kelp and algae. Outside, wind
floats through bamboo chimes and my other job

sways on the porch as my new job creaks
in the attic. I can taste them all

in this cup of evening tea, fennel and milk
thistle swirling over the crazed ceramic bottom.

NEVER SAW THEM WHEN THEY FELL

I don't understand this Bob Dylan lyric, but my dad says, *don't worry, it's meant to be cryptic*. We listen as the Rickenbacker jangles and hums. The basement is damp, lights low, stereo blinking. It feels like we're studying frogs in the woods, our raincoats shimmering as eyes drift across the pond. The sort of scene that can never quite be grasped because it is, in fact, studying us too. I remember when the old man's gaze—some Rembrandt print—followed me around the gallery shop, out the door and down the street. I asked him to explain, but his answer was always the same: *let it be simple, strange*. The way fast wheels seem to spin in the opposite direction. The way a face hovers upside down in a spoon.

Nicholas**Bradley**

TO A STUDENT WHO HASN'T RETURNED MY COPY OF ————————

Three months since you strolled off
with it and spring
is here, my tome
on the loose, left
at the gym or bar, dropped
along the bread-crumb trail
across a paramour's floor—
or is it set
to be jettisoned
when you sell your possessions
and move to Spain
to learn flamenco from the masters?
It's wandered from backpack
to kitchen table, gone
uncracked on
the bus. How creased
are the pages? What latte
stained them, what
argument now unfolds
in the margins?
I send you this poem
as guarantee
that I'll locate my book
where I lost it
in a firn of papers,
but just in case, a curse:
may you remember
every now and then
there was something important
you were meant to do.

FROM THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR OF THE PORTLAND HYATT, A LONE HAWK

…den Akut des Heutigen…

—Paul Celan

No gyre, just a lazy
loop this humid
July morning. The curtains
have been drawn
two hours. I've gone
nowhere. From this height
I can see it's raining
in the mountains. Still
sleeping, St. Helens'
flat-topped lump
is nowhere too. The hawk
might be a vulture. My glasses
are scratched, prescription
out of date. A floater
or I imagined it. There
is no bird to be spied
through the expense-account
window. Whatever caught
my eye has circled
into cloud
but, ah! inked in place
the acute accent
of the present
above the letters
of the day.

Michelle**PoirierBrown**

OH, LUCKY OBLIVION

Last night at dinner, a soft-stated wonder,
Really? It's dangerous to be an Indigenous person in Canada?
and into my plate falls again the need to testify.
I choose to tell the story of
my fat lip and bloodied elbow
after the Grade 9 science fair.
Who do you think you are, getting a prize?
So I left. Said *yes* then
to boarding school
an eight-hour drive away.

It's always a risk,
being in public.
Always a risk.

Make the same move
at dinner. Direct my attention
to the other end of the table.

It's only a problem
those times
you've run out of moves.

TWO LIPTON WINKING-EYE TEA CUPS

When my daughter was two, I used to seat her
on the kitchen counter while I cooked. It was just
the two of us. We ate simply in those days. Mostly
brown rice and codfish. Kale.
We were content.

It was a one-bedroom apartment
in the basement of a house I owned
but couldn't afford to live in.
My queen bed was in the living room/
kitchen/hall. Her crib in the bedroom.
Space to play.

Three 20-somethings
who worked in a restaurant
rented upstairs.

We owned few things. For toys and toddler
clothes, I scoured the want ads: garage sales
in good neighbourhoods.

We had a set of dishes that matched,
bought in Chinatown. Celadon.
With images of carp raised
in the glaze.

I prized a set of four crystal
whisky glasses and two Lipton winking-eye tea cups,
a man and a woman,
a gift of whimsy from my mother.

The male cup sat on my desk and held
paper clips. The woman sat on the counter
with tea.

My daughter's fingers—so tiny, nails
thin as paper, skin still like
roses—reach with the grace
of a swan lifting her head.

Then a flick
and a wealth of sentiment
broke on the floor. The wink
a shard now separate
from the smile.

She turned her wide blue eyes to mine.
I replied,
you are my everything.

Neil**Griffin**

YOUGHAL MUDLANDS

A boy drowned here, the older teens say, hoodied
aspects of minor gods, happy boots for a two-beer tithe
who perch along the shingle on thrones of ancient tires.
He slipped while pissing, cracked his head, they rap
malignant in the spilly shadows of an ebbing grass fire,
before flouncing off to smoke hash in the barn.
What did we know? We were just kids. Crouched
at the estuary edge in cracked plastic flip-flops,
matted hair curling cowlicks against our narrow necks,
staring into the black greasy water, where a little
moon lurching reflective in an oil slick became
a punctured glassy eye, a child's yawning skull.
A boy drowned here. It might be true.
Boys die. Little by little by little, it's what we do.

HARBOUR SEALS

While you walked on water,
or did whatever, turning over theories
along the flat plane of the strand,
I had only the waves, the stilly overcast
air and the boot-shucking mud for company.
Oh, and the seals. White spheres
bobbing offshore, a gaggle of cue balls
loosed from some deep-sea pool game
to rise and rise, popping the surface
with a quiet plink. How they catch
the light, the rhinestone shimmer
of each greedy whisker, beaded
in revolving sparks, like lighthouses
studded on long dark shores.
Teddy bear eyes, black tourmaline,
worn smooth like prayer beads
by constant play among sea's rough
hands. That's it. That's all.
What of the rest? A mystery—
beneath, below. Out of sight.
And anyway, you're coming back now
down the strand, brilliant in marine light,
the seals and I both watching.

Jónína**Kirton**

HIGH RISK POTENTIALLY LETHAL

within this body an ocean of words
keening
leaning
pressing
on my heart
sloshing in my throat
drowning out my voice
I want to cry but
you are here
and wouldn't understand
the depth of this inner ocean

my muscles tight to bone
imprisoned flesh
bring thoughts of my own death
two have tried to kill me
uttered death threats
with their hands on my throat
two have said they loved me
their hand in mine leading me
to my own destruction

THERE WERE NO BOMBS

and the backyard tent never set fire
there was a mother in the kitchen crying
one eye blackened
she calls me to help
he has her by her hair
a belly filled with my brother
she weeps and I just eleven
wonder why men are like this

Melissa**Lam**

ON PAPER, IN AIR

we must have learned

to write English at the same time

both of us hunched over

making each line and curve

resemble the one above

decades between us

you with a whole life elsewhere

in places I can't even spell

sheafs of paper with our names

written in the corners

never to be read aloud, of course,

for we have our own names for each other

not to be copied out or scrawled on a page

but called out with our mouths

our names lingering in the air

across a table

across a room

across a life

FIRST WINTER

in August the tree is all green,
its oval leaves full. I think nothing of it

come December leaves fall, cover
the ground in a crunchy brown carpet

I rake the leaves while my son jumps in
crumbs of them stuck to his pants

I do not jump, too lost in my grief
of having left home, of missing and wanting

then in January small sage buds
begin to unfold, announcing

here I am
a magnolia tree, after all

once a whispered want,
now here, all along—

there will be more blossoming to come
a wave of pink to wash over the yard

for now, it is in between—not at its height
of glory, but in blushing possibility

the surprise of a flowering tree in January
it can't be nothing

Khashayar‘Kess’**Mohammadi**

UBER-EATS GHAZAL

for Rahat Kurd

how much grief can a body hold? how much water? it was posted online somewhere
anonymity is key while the executioner’s blade hides somewhere

‘DON’T KNOCK ON DOOR. DON’T RING DOORBELL. BABY SLEEPING.’
the Uber delivery driver has to drop the food off somewhere.

short bursts of remembrances. another death in the family.
the bus filled with mourners stops to have a meal somewhere.

the screen finds disaster and then slowly builds outwards.
the blood on all of our shoes must be drained somewhere.

there’s a hum of a revolution, people gather in groups.
until a loud voice draws an arbitrary line somewhere.

our ancestors expected too much from us. we’ve tired of living.
we sit in tradition, yet unable to stay in our *somewhere.*

an empty cabin pearls the barren horizon,
for the next seeker who expects to rest somewhere.

from a distant haze in the sky spits forth an apology,
I wish God could keep silent until we build a home somewhere.

NON-BINARY GHAZAL

for Ellen Chang-Richardson, Conyer Clayton and the original Charlie's Angels

A gesture between *Want* and *Urge,* with a face hanging against a body
To be *SOMETHING* enough for a pronoun, minute against a body

The nothingness you'll gesture to out of habit
And a stranger grabbing at premature strands of the body.

It will be a poem when I call it one.
It will be a story summoned into the fictions of the body.

Perhaps no one has ever said anything of importance.
We hold all the context we need for the body.

A fist raised at injustice, and its potential to wake one
From the umbilical pull of the body.

To actualize the true meaning of the self
The Kestrel has finally stopped questioning the body.

Meredith**Quartermain**

FRAGMENT FROM A NOTEBOOK

for Doug Barbour

September 23, 2021. Beautiful sad day, full of sun and late-blooming roses. Doug living his last few hours. No longer able to speak but he can hear Sharon and tell her, 'I want everyone to know,' and get her to post on his Facebook page, 'I'm dying of cancer.' Responses pour in—many, many messages of love and admiration for his teaching, his publishing, his poetry, his friendship. Many, many friends standing with him in his last few hours. I dreamt about you all night, I tell him. I dreamt you came to Vancouver. You were laughing and making collages. First you dressed all in pink, then blue, then zebra. Oh happy, happy dream.

We mark the day at Third Beach. Count the anchored freighters dreaming their dreams of Singapore or Brazil or Japan. *Sunshine Bliss* with a white K on her stack. *JY Lake,* empty and riding high, puffs smoke and glides to the inner harbour. We bathe in misty air, sparkling waves, thin-brushed cloud on blue. The wings of sailcraft blur into haze. Ebbing tide licks at weedy rocks. Ugland's *Olita* with pea-green deckhouse booms her horn and heads out to sea.

COLLECTORS' ITEMS

Walnut shells' little boats. Wave-worn pebbles, orange, green, flecked. Gutter pennies for not-allowed bubblegum. Blue plastic skins from Dad's imploded flashbulbs—their turquoise eggs lined up along a bed ledge with walnut boats and pebbles. Hostile counteroffensive if sister Karen dared touch them. They cling to me that sometime did me peep—these childhood memories.

All in my suitcase, Peter yells in his sleep. That day we packed his studies of Zukofsky and Bunting—begun 50 years ago, never finished—photocopies of letters and manuscripts, pages of notes from trips to archives in Austin and London. Several file drawers into boxes bound for the library.

Two Inuit baskets that Mom and Dad brought back from the Arctic, 1958. Still pungent with sweetgrass. Memories of komatiks loaded with seals, dogs curled into snowbanks, women sewing duffel and duck parkas trimmed with bric-a-brac. Their hands that wove hundreds of strands of grass and sealskin in and out, in and out. How important those baskets must've been for carrying food and small tools.

Under snug lids, they hold two seashells, a red stone, a bit of green beach-worn glass. Four curled-up Irish stamps from a trip to Dublin to see Maurice Scully, a crumpled Remembrance Day poppy, a bookmark printed by Peter saying, Karen 50! Two British Museum ID cards for Peter, 1989 and 1995; a tiny Egyptian cat, two tiny teak fish with wavy fins and tails, a fish fridge-magnet Karen made, a fossil tooth, a trilobite, a seahorse, and Mom's World War II medals. They cling to me that sometime did me peep.

And now dear baskets, dear Irish stamps, dear seahorse, crumpled poppy and teak fish, I set you free. I no longer lay claim to you. No longer pretend I am your protector. Now you and I become so many pieces of detritus, bits of worldling and earth fluff. Drifted together in blizzards, blown off in another flurry.

And yet here you are on this page, here in this memory midden. You refuse to leave. Your particle wavelets ever-emitting signals ever outward.

Natalie**Rice**

STORM GLASS

Thunder

A cloudy glass
with some stars

indicates thunder. I couldn't
predict how the rain

would fill the swamp
where we harvested cranberries,

their wild reds

lipped the tiny white
flowers in the undergrowth.
I counted

the seconds between
lightning and thunder. November,

so, everything
softened in the mouth

at once.

Frost

If there are crystals
in the bottom, this indicates

frost. When I stood at the edge,
constellations rearranged

themselves as salt
in the river. A small sky

that broke
when I stepped

into it. Inside a weatherglass,
I am the space

behind my body. Fishing
boats in the night. I don't

remember where
I was going, but there is

a reflection I grab at,
then let go.

Snow

If the liquid contains
small stars on sunny winter

days, then snow
is coming. At the ferry dock,

I look at the same
light from the opposite

shore. We feel our way
across the water

with aerials, our delicate

filaments reach
across the channel.
We slide, ghost

flickered, into the three
o'clock horizon.

Wind

If there are threads
near the top,

it will be windy. The ocean
is a dark bloom inside

another dark bloom. The shovel
I left in the garden blows

over. Pitch
of whatever comes

after.

ON DOUBT

Like something distant
and bright not everything
has to be perfect

form. What you see at dusk:
a swatch of red osier

that softens everything. Snow
greets aspen as a ghost would.
Like the field unburdened

by gravity, you return
unafraid. Across the field,

horses trod to the barn.
A pool of window light below
winter sky.

Tosh**Sherkat**

DEAD I'VE KNOWN

for Alec Saviskoff

Yesterday I buried my grandfather
And tomorrow—
Today I search for my rest,
Of which, too much has been devoured
In mourning dinners and graveyards
Overlooking old trams and mining lines,
And the lake, rusting in decay.
This soft boat
Wades through the plump river—
The Glade Ferry—*Smallest in BC*
A plated sign reads. Blood
Awakens my mind, pouring
From my gripped hand
Ripped on a guard-rail screw, and joins
This river. I have blood
In this river. Now arriving
On the ferry's metal-plated shores.
A few steps forward
To sold Block settlements.
He would have been born here,
And not twenty minutes away
Buried, brown earth flung
From my own hand, I have
Blood buried in this land.
Ferry gone silent.
The land
Razed flat jars. Shines
In (the only) untouched thicket
Peeling from a pooled waterfall,
Groves far older than any dead
I've known. So much silence
Rips along the single street
Back to the ferry; the mill
In a valley wound north moans
And stinks and sap runs coolly
Over rough hands of loggers into waters
Of coastal salmon, now idle
Behind years of dams. There is blood
On my hands
Now. I have blood
In this land.

A GHAZAL PRAYER FOR GOING HOME

When you are finding your way home, *hos-blah-vee-blah-haus-la-vee.*
When you have found, at last, the final home, *hos-blah-vee-blah-haus-la-vee.*

Before the flight to Castlegar from the coast
Lifts from the hard snow, it is said (like *hos-blah-vee-blah-haus-la-vee*).

The not-taught tongue is now foreign, and
I turn to Google Translate to know *Господи благослови.*

From this longing I have misheard, my ancestors would not know
How to find me, and so I say for myself, hoping they are listening, *Господи благослови.*

Those ancestors who walked trails west from Russia, from Georgia,
Onto Tolstoy's boats where people didn't understand *Господи благослови.*

I'm lost, shrapnel into earth, far above the birds
I can remember crossing the trails of the Doukhobor, hearing *Господи благослови*

Like a peace offering and though they were pacifists
The propeller chops the air where God should live, *hos-blah-vee-blah-haus-la-vee.*

They settled on the confluence of the Kootenay and Columbia,
where to the burble of the waters they would wish, *Господи благослови.*

And was it there? Was it then that violence came?
When they tilled and prayed, *Господи благослови*

For good crops? I guess God became Canadian.
What do I pray for now, whispering poorly, *Господи благослови*,

Through my mask on a hurtling plane,
That I land? No, there is more to land. *Господи благослови.*

THE NEW KOOTENAY LAKE FERRY

Into the rusted waste crates at the Taghum dump I throw ten boxes of photo albums
and keep just one. They are too many; in each photo an eddy,
the licked wet of her fingerprint on the corners and faces of relatives I'll never know.
I go to the waterfront where I think she was, the deadheads
of the old port stand. The old barge grounded near the new
ferry's construction, the upturned husk of it black and hourly
lit under the floodlights and the earth
flattened for the work truck's parking lot.
The lake is harshed and high: generators and cars crossing
the bridge back home for the evening, white
caps breaking on the piles. What dies with you is all
you tried to remember, and grief is the body trying to hold the mind,
now alone in remembering. In the photograph, the lake is track-grated with skates.
Before this place was dammed, she skated on these waters:
the ice of her dress a smile of lips in the snow suckling the barge,
and the ferry, encased in the frozen lake, the photo album, the old century.

Yael**Tobón**

¡AY DE MÍ LLORONA, LLORONA!

Four women visit
The altar my mother and sister
Have crafted with their hands
How gorgeous the dead look
Covered in flower petals,
Cempasúchil flowers
My mother will write a poem
To mock The Death and ask
Her to take care of her mother

¡Ay de mí Llorona, Llorona!
In life, the four women enjoyed
Fresh fruit and good coffee so these
We put for them one more time
Don't let your country forget that
Debanhi, Michelle, Susana, Adriana
Are your daughters too
¡Ay de mí Llorona, Llorona!
Won't you celebrate with me
That once I wished to die before them
And now I raise a toast to life

A note from the poet: *In Mexico, 10 women are murdered every day. In 2023 alone, approximately 3,000 women were killed. These statistics are not intended to diminish the humanity of the victims, but to underscore the grave danger that Mexican women face daily. This poem seeks to honour the lives of individuals such as Debanhi Susana Escobar Bazaldúa, Adriana Fernanda López, Susana Rojas, and nine-year-old Michelle—all victims of murder cases that have deeply shocked and mobilized the Mexican public. These stories merit recognition and should be shared beyond national borders. It is important to acknowledge that these women represent only a fraction of the thousands who deserve justice and attention. My heart goes out to the loved ones of those both named and unnamed in my work.*

Ami**Xherro**

THE FIRST AESTHETIC OBJECT

I could not think of the word for—Adorno said—
Goosebumps are the first aesthetic object.
A rash is the way life expresses its allergy
To cash. That ass is its metrical equivalent
Is a different story.

A man mixes in his impossibility
To mince time with space: *lathe*
Biosas, or live unknown, but
That would be far too vampiric.

At the very least
He can hear the echo of his
Heartbeat
In his ear yes yes yes

PARANOID

Don't tell anyone
my legs are my mother tongue
the pre-discursive hinge
of my walk into town
let go of the beginning they said
but I never do anything but end
I'm a terminal beginner
I never sleep without dialogue
at least a conversation about dreams
I am about to have

My hands are the antennae
my soul needs to cope
with the gestures of its secret
the anticipation of my death

Don't tell what I've said
it's fear that imagines itself
somewhere inside my chest
that catches my breath
and heaves out language
if you can understand me now—

I don't know
it must be something we share—

I want you because I can
and then I do

Joe**Baumann**

WHAT YOU TOOK WAS EVERYTHING SMALL

Graham tells Trevor that every Wednesday at midnight he turns into a swarm of gnats.

This, after they've hooked up every weekend for a month, followed by another month of actual dates: miniature golf, a movie, Shakespeare in the Park, cosmic bowling. Graham has good date ideas. It is also his idea that they be official. That they see each other more often than on the weekends.

'And so, I thought you should know.'

'I don't understand,' Trevor says.

'It's what I said. I become gnats. A whole lot of them. Only for a few minutes.'

'No,' Trevor says. 'When you say Wednesdays at midnight, does that mean Tuesday when it becomes Wednesday, or Wednesday going into Thursday?'

Graham smiles. He has perfect teeth, slightly crooked dimples. He laughs and, rather than answering, kisses Trevor hard.

Trevor watches it happen two nights later—Tuesday nights, it turns out, as the clock ticks to Wednesday's port of entry—at Graham's apartment. Graham is an occupational therapist and lives in the kind of industrial-style loft that Trevor could never dream of affording on his reference librarian's salary: high ceilings, exposed ductwork, chocolate-lacquered concrete floors. Quartz, marble and glass cover everything that, in Trevor's smaller apartment, is particle board and Formica. They're lying side-by side in Graham's bed, squeaky clean atop his Egyptian cotton sheets following a messy attempt at shower sex in his cavernous stall, all glass enclosure, terra cotta wall tiles and built-in slip-prevention grain. There was plenty of space, but too much water pressure, and the only part that was pleasant was the mutual blowjobs, and even then, someone was taking stinging spray to the face.

The transformation is eye-blink fast; one second Graham is himself, and the next he is a cloud of bugs. It is soundless, and this catches Trevor off-guard; he's not ready for the swarm that is suddenly so close. He can feel them on his skin, itchy and popping; he clamps shut his lips but he's sure some slip in, grating to infinitesimal splatter on his teeth. They slide up his nose, surely, to die in his sinuses or make it to his brain. How many are stuck in his hair? But he resists the urge to swat them away, because what happens if some of them don't survive to be

reconstituted as part of Graham's body?

Five minutes later, when Graham is Graham again, the familiar contours of his muscled torso back in close proximity, his arms and face and mop of swashbuckler-curly hair flopped on the pillow once more, Trevor asks.

'Oh,' Graham says. 'Don't worry about that. Mostly, they always make it back.'

'Mostly?'

'A tiny piece of me disappears each time.'

Trevor sits up. He can still feel the gnats, all over him, like he's stepped on an anthill or been to the beach and is clinging with sand: that little itch, ghostly and invisible, seemingly inescapable.

'Every time?' Trevor says.

Graham shrugs. 'It's nothing. They're so small.'

'Where?' Trevor reaches out a hand and lets it hover over Graham's body like he's warming himself against a hearty fire.

'Oh,' Graham says, 'you wouldn't feel it. I can't feel it. I can't see it.'

'Then how do you know?'

Instead of answering, Graham snatches Trevor's hand and presses it to his chest, Trevor's fingers warm, sandwiched between Graham's skin. Everything seems like it's right where it belongs, but Trevor still feels a tremor, a pulse, an absence.

Trevor's father changed. Unlike Graham's clockwork transformations, his shifts into his elephantine shape were random, unexpected, dangerous. Destructive. He would be sitting in his recliner, reading the newspaper, and halfway through the sports section he would get a discombobulated look in his eyes and set down the pages, or if things were dire, let them fall to the floor in a fluttering heap. He would try to run out the front door or through the garage. Trevor always thought his father looked like he was on fire, or about to vomit, but instead his body would bloat, his clothing stretching and ripping, the floor whining under his growing weight. Once, he ballooned as he was leaving the house, splintering the front door frame and obliterating a Christmas wreath Trevor's mother loved.

Like Graham's, his father's changes were brief. A few minutes after he became an elephant, stinging the air with the odour of leathery skin and manure, even though he had enough self-control not to shit himself, he would curl back into his own skin, naked and surrounded by the tattered clothes he'd been wearing, the destruction he'd caused curved around him like a demolished offering.

It grated on his mother. Trevor regularly saw signs of the love that stabilized their relationship, like their hands catching on each other's

backs or shoulders during boring chores like cooking dinner or folding laundry. When they thought he wasn't looking, they exchanged what he would later know were flirtatious glances, or if he was around a corner spying, he'd catch them sharing a quick but deep kiss as one passed by the other. He heard them whispering behind their bedroom door all the time, the cadence of their voices anything but argumentative. But when his father rushed around changing, at least trying to minimize the harm, Trevor saw his mother's face slacken first, then sharpen into an anger she tried as best she could to keep under her skin.

He asked her once if she ever worried about being crushed.

'All the time,' she said.

'That's scary.'

'It's a small thing.'

He was 11. 'It doesn't seem small.'

They were sitting at the kitchen table; he was working on math homework, and she was finishing a crossword puzzle, the Friday doozy in the *New York Times*. She set the paper down in front of her, smoothed it, and lay her pen across it at an angle.

'Sometimes things can seem bigger than they are when they're all you see. But there's a really big world out there. Life is big. It's full of lots of things. Some of them will make others seem smaller.'

Years later, Trevor wishes he'd said, 'So does something that seems small mean it actually is?' But his mother died—breast cancer, that clichéd, terrible way to go—and his father had, suddenly, stopped transforming.

He shares some of this—a brief, careful summary—with Graham after he reconstitutes himself in front of Trevor for the second time. They're at Graham's again, in his bedroom with its ceilings just as high as in the living room, a trio of gargantuan windows peering down at a scrolling field to the left of his building—Graham's is the corner unit—where, despite the late hour, two dozen college-aged men are playing a game of soccer using two pairs of backpacks as goalposts.

'That sounds awful,' Graham says.

'Which part?'

'All of it.' Graham reaches out a hand and clutches Trevor's fingers. His skin is smooth and dry. For whatever reason, Trevor expects that Graham will be slippery and breathless when he becomes himself again, because his father was always gasping for air, perspiration pouring from his forehead and armpits, every time. The fecal smell clung to him until he showered, a dark mark reminding everyone of his change, an olfactory sign to go along with any destruction left in his wake. But Graham is just himself. It's as if he hasn't changed at all. His hand feels like his hand, the ridges of his knuckle bones, the minute folds of lines on his

palms, the hard edges of his cuticles: nothing different, nothing lost. But how to tell, when the loss is—in theory—something so small?

'It was terrible,' Trevor says. He swallows a gunky breath. His throat feels tight suddenly, like he's having an allergic reaction to something. For a second he imagines one of the gnats has flown down his esophagus and taken up residence there, a burrowed piece of Graham that will one day expand into his whole self, pulling Trevor apart, smashing him outward, the opposite of his mother, who was always terrified of being crushed into herself.

After his mother died, Trevor spent weeks helping his father with her things; alone, neither man could have handled sorting through her clothing and jewellery, or figuring out what to do with her many hand creams and her makeup, which she'd stopped wearing in the latter stages of her illness. She owned three wigs, and neither of them wanted to touch them. Trevor suggested they hire a company to do the work, but his father waved off that idea: even worse than rummaging themselves was the idea of strangers doing it. Also, the prospect made Trevor's father feel like he too was already dead, he said.

During those weeks, Trevor kept looking for the reminders of his father's transmogrifications. In the month they spent sloughing, one drawer at a time, through her things, his father didn't change once—at least, never in Trevor's presence. If he morphed at all he didn't say so, and Trevor saw no new signs of disaster or destruction. In fact, it became difficult to see any markers of his father's past poorly timed transformations: the front door frame was smooth and varnished; the top basement stair, where his father once set his left foot just as he began to expand, was level and straight, the slight bend in the wood that had been present for ages completely invisible. The cracks in the kitchen linoleum from when he changed while making French onion soup, an hours-long process of watching and stirring, had slithered into the ether. It was as if his mother's death had taken not only his father's changes but all of the house's history. Memory, erased.

He said nothing of this to his dad, who for months lurched through the house like a man lost at sea. Trevor wasn't sure if this was the heavy devastation of grief alone or also his vanished transformations. He wondered if his father could feel some absence, knew intuitively that his bones would never stretch again, his muscles wouldn't tear and explode, tusks wouldn't ram out through his mandible, his nose wouldn't elongate into a dexterous trunk. No tail would swish from his coccyx. Trevor couldn't bring himself to ask, couldn't bear laying out the implication: are you just as devastated by losing this piece of you that has wrought so much damage as you are by the loss of your wife, my mother? He

knew it was terrible to wonder, was sure the answer had to be no. But what, Trevor thought, if the answer was yes? What would that mean? It would mean his father was a different person than Trevor had always thought, that the real him was something else, something hidden beneath his skin that had never come out before.

'Would you stop?' Trevor says. 'If you could, I mean?'

They're lying in Trevor's bed for once, on a Tuesday, Graham coaxed by Trevor's insistence that it would be okay for him to change somewhere else. And because they'd gone to dinner at a restaurant far closer to Trevor's tinier, shabbier apartment, it just made sense for them to stay at his place this one time. After only six weeks, they've fallen into a habitual routine, going out to someplace local to eat every Tuesday, then slinking back to Graham's apartment—he drives, mostly—to fool around before falling onto his bed (never into, because the gnats, Graham says, could get stuck under the heavy top sheet and comforter: nothing deadly, just uncomfortable, challenging) to wait for his transformation. Trevor likes the idea of rhythm, of regularity; it isn't something he's ever had before in a relationship, mostly because they never develop deeply enough for that. Or maybe he has it backward: that you can only find yourself in a deeper place if you've carved out these beats and repetitions.

Graham sighs. He has not yet transformed, and in the minutes right before he does—the alarm clock on Trevor's nightstand bleeds 11:56 in red numbers into the room—he likes, Trevor knows, to have some quiet. Trevor wonders what Graham thinks about in these ticking seconds before his body breaks apart into thousands of tiny pieces, but he knows better than—or is perhaps too afraid—to ask. He tries, instead, to imagine himself bursting into so many pieces. Would he still be himself? Does Graham possess thought during the few minutes he is instead thousands, maybe millions, of buzzing insects? Is one of them his brain, another his penis, others each of his bones and blood vessels? Is there such a correlation, a one-to-one? Can a person be broken down in such a way?

'It's who I am,' Graham says finally. 'I don't know what I'd do without it.'

'Get more sleep?' Trevor says. He laughs, but Graham doesn't. And before either can say anything more about it, Graham has turned into a buzzing cloud.

That his mother was taken by something so small had not escaped Trevor's notice. Cancer—miniscule, cellular, a transformation starting at such a microscopic, almost irreducible level. He'd read, after her diagnosis—triple-negative, the bastard of the bastards—that the human body flushed out cancerous tissue all the time, that on any given day

people's tiniest pieces were going rogue, forgetting what they were, who they were, how they were meant to behave, but their neighbours and friends, recognizing a problem, come to the rescue, shunning and expelling the turncoats so that the body can continue, everything normal and cheery and functional. Except sometimes they didn't. They turned a blind eye, and that's how easily trouble started. And sometimes that trouble couldn't be stopped.

One night, Trevor traps a few gnats in his hands. He is careful, scooping his fingers through the cloud, not to clamp his hands shut like a bear trap. Instead, he rounds his fingers into a dome, a delicate, clutching ball against which the gnats bap and tickle. He can feel them against the folded lines of his skin, pressing their miniscule legs and wings. Many caresses. He considers keeping them until Graham transforms back, curious as to what will be left behind: flakes of skin, flecks of blood, slivers of fingernail? Lymph, semen, feces? Something too microscopic to be seen?

But Trevor chickens out. Moments before Graham reconstitutes, Trevor opens his hands and the gnats fly back to their brethren in a comet-shaped swoop, everyone accounting for everyone else, a network of the small. When Graham is himself again, Trevor asks no questions, offers no hints as to what he's done. He sucks in air and tells himself, *Next time.*

Three months in, Trevor's father wants to meet Graham. When they walk into his father's house, Trevor has to remind himself that his dad is still young, barely into his 50s. He and Trevor's mother married early, right after college, and Trevor came along shortly thereafter. She'd already found a job teaching middle school history, and Trevor's father, with his degree in civil engineering, was working for the city doing surveying work. The Clinton boom economy allowed these two young people to quickly buy a house, not just a starter but something meant for more, with several more bedrooms than were ever used, a trio of bathrooms that had been hell for his mother to keep clean until Trevor finally started carrying a spray bottle of bleach cleaner and a rag around on Saturdays to lighten the load. Trevor had no siblings, and he knew that there was some kind of tragic story there, but he'd always thought it better to let it stay buried than to ask and expose that pain.

He always expects to be greeted by a man decrepit and disordered, body slumped or gnarled by a humpback or busted knees, but when Trevor's father opens the front door, grinning and bombastic when he slaps Graham on the back and pulls him into a hug, he's all suntanned skin and scruffy beard. His blond hair is barely flecked with greyish-white, and thumb-sized recessions divot each side, but it is otherwise

still thick and fluffy, tousled like he's just woken. Rather than a bathrobe or some ancient, stained Oxford, he's wearing a tight grey T-shirt that shows off his lean musculature and a pair of bright pink chino shorts and boat shoes. He looks ready for a day on a golf course, or, shoes notwithstanding, a charity 5K.

'Lovely to meet you,' he says, releasing Graham. He gestures for them to come inside. Trevor tries to see the house through Graham's eyes, but then he realizes he has no idea what Graham would be on the lookout for. Does he, too, scan the living room for long-lost signs of transformation? Does he notice the single photograph of Trevor's mom on a side table, her smiling face framed by sterling silver? Does he catch the fresh smell of vanilla, as if they've caught Trevor's father baking? Does he notice the lack of dust in the corners, or bits of debris on the fresh-swept hardwood floor? Does it bother him, like it manages to bother Trevor, that his father is so well?

They lunch on a patio at a bar and grill, drinking tall pints of local pilsner. Trevor's father asks Graham all the right questions. He watches them laugh and share stories that Trevor has never heard before. He learns of Graham's accident as a child, when he flipped over the handles of his bicycle and cracked open his skull and broke both arms. He learns of his father's childhood obsession with Parchesi, how he would stay up late at night playing against himself, splitting himself into four to roll the dice and move each set of pieces around the board, castigated by his parents but stalwart. He learns that Graham's transformations started when he was 11, his father's when he was 13. Trevor spends much of the meal looking at his hands, which worry a napkin to pieces.

'I like him,' his father whispers when they're back at his place and Graham is relieving himself of his two beers in the bathroom.

'I do, too,' Trevor says. His throat itches.

Twenty weeks in: Graham, right before another transformation, breaks his requisite silence by saying, 'I love you, I think.' And then he shatters.

Graham says nothing when he blinks back to himself. He's lying on his back as always, hands flat at his sides. He stares up at the ceiling, quiet. Trevor doesn't say a word. He wishes he could burst apart, fly away.

It's strange, Trevor thinks, what time can take from you.

Twenty-four weeks, six months: Graham has not brought up the word *love* again. It clatters in Trevor's head like an army of flies, as if his brain has been shattered apart by the word as it moves through his skull. He does not know what to say or do. He knows that he loves Graham too, or at least, he's pretty certain he does. Being with Graham, hearing his laughter, feeling the weight of his fingers as he lays a hand on Trevor in

the most random of moments—idling at a stoplight, while they're both filling glasses of water at the sink, as they rise from their table at dinner, the bill paid, their jackets gathered—all make him feel filled with a warm, dizzying light, something boring in behind his eyes that is pillow-like and pleasant.

Graham doesn't acknowledge the monument of an anniversary, if half a year together can be called such a thing, so neither does Trevor. He doesn't tell Graham that this is the longest, most intimate relationship he's ever been in. They don't arrange a date at an expensive restaurant with overpriced wine and lasagna and bad lighting meant to be romantic. Neither buys the other anything. There is no hasty, ill-advised marriage proposal. There is just another night of good sex and Graham's transformation and Trevor waiting among the bugs until he returns. That is how Trevor has started to imagine what happens: a departure, a leaving behind, however brief it may be.

What Trevor does do is manage to trap and keep a single gnat. He is careful, dipping one finger into the nest of them until one lands on his fingertip, which he curls in toward his palm in a loose fist. He can hardly feel it. Trevor rounds both hands into a cage. When he tries to peer in between the cross of his thumbs, all he sees is dark. As soon as Graham returns to himself, Trevor hides his closed fist beneath the sheets. Graham looks unperturbed at this loss of a tiny piece of himself. Trevor, wondering how many small things it takes to make a big thing, isn't sure if the gnat is still there; once he's himself, Graham turns off his bedside lamp, staining the room black, saying nothing about the bug Trevor has stolen. Trevor unfurls his fingers, letting go of whatever little bit of Graham he's taken, releasing it without ever knowing what it looks like, whether something more than usual has disappeared.

A memorial is what his father calls it.

'After all,' he says. 'It's been three years.'

'It can't have been that long,' Trevor wants to say but doesn't, because he knows, with a quick calculation, that it has. All those tiny seconds and days have added up. Instead, he says, 'I'll be there, of course.'

'And Graham?'

The memorial is at the house, which is just as sparkling as ever. The grass is freshly cut even though the weather is getting too cold for it. Trevor and Graham huddle in the front of three rows of white wooden folding chairs that Trevor's father has rented from somewhere, along with a lectern in the same bleached colour. It feels too much like a wedding ceremony, except the guests are wearing comfortable clothing: jeans and windbreakers to fend off the October chill. They're whispering to one another, arms slung over the chair backs, laughter popping

up into the air at jokes and funny anecdotes. Graham rubs Trevor's shoulder.

His father gives a short speech, then produces a small tin the size of after-dinner mints. Trevor feels a squirm in his lower gut: the last of his mother's ashes, which he and his father had taken into the woods where his mother liked to hike during college, spreading them (most of them, apparently) into undergrowth in an act that was almost certainly illegal; neither of them had cared to look up the law.

'If you'll all join me by the tree,' his father says, and the assemblage, everyone except Trevor, is quick to stand.

Graham looks down at him. Without a word, he lays one hand on top of Trevor's, the one that trapped the gnat. Trevor feels something wriggling against his skin, tucked between his and Graham's fingers. Everyone else has already moved away, and Graham is the only one who notices that Trevor is, for lack of a better word, stuck.

'You okay?' Graham whispers. His voice is syrup dripping near Trevor's ear.

Trevor nods but still does not move. He is struck by the fact that he is not okay. That the idea of giving up to the wind this last bit of his mother, whom until now he has been so sure he has released, his grief settling behind his eyes and in the deepest recesses of his chest as a tiny ache that he won't ever let go of because that's what you do when you lose your mother, has suddenly startled him into immobility. How, he asks himself, has he suddenly ended up here, like this?

Graham sits back down and takes Trevor's hand—the guilty hand—in his. 'You don't seem okay,' he says. 'But that's normal. Who could be?'

Trevor's breathing is fluttering. He feels like he might shrink, and suddenly he wonders if he might transform into his own swarm, or perhaps into a kitten, or maybe a single-cell bacteria. But he doesn't. He simply sits there, Graham's hand clutching his.

'What happens if you don't transform?' Trevor says.

They're sitting in his living room after dinner at a tapas restaurant right around the block. Trevor has been there before, knew that it wasn't very good—the meat overcooked, the drinks overpriced, the service overslow—but he wanted Graham to come to his place after. They haven't moved into the bedroom yet even though there's less than 10 minutes before midnight; Trevor ordered them a second round of drinks at the restaurant and then opened a bottle of wine from his small stash of bottom-shelf fare he's stocked on his kitchen counter. Graham didn't complain; all he did was accept a glass, unbutton the top button of his collar, and sit down on the sofa.

'Well,' Graham says, setting down his empty glass. 'I don't know.'

'You've never tried?'

'It's just a part of who I am. I can't not do it.'

Trevor takes a breath. 'I'm not sure I can watch anymore.'

Silence for a long time. Finally, Graham shakes his head. 'This happens every time.'

'You don't understand,' Trevor says. 'I just—' He's not sure how to explain. At the memorial, life had finally returned to his legs, as if they'd been asleep, the circulation stopping and then starting up again, tingling through his bloodstream. He'd stood just in time to see his father open the small tin and, turning to block the breeze, pour the ashes out. Trevor was too far away to see exactly how they scattered, swirled and eventually drifted down, but the sight of these final smallest pieces of his mother disappearing had dislodged something inside him.

'You don't have to explain,' Graham says. He rubs at his eyes. 'I've heard it all before.'

'I don't think you understand.' But Trevor knows he doesn't understand, either. What it means to incrementally disappear. To shift and tilt, to become something different every day. Or to not, but to watch it happen to someone else. 'It's not you.'

Graham laughs. 'I've heard that one before, too.'

'I didn't mean it like that. It's not—I don't think it's me, either.' Trevor's been sitting with his fists curled tight. He opens his left hand. 'I stole one of your gnats.'

'You what?'

'A few weeks ago.' Trevor looks down at his palm, as if expecting the gnat to appear there, to have hidden in the tiniest folds of skin for so long, a survivor clinging to a piece of flotsam. But of course, there's nothing there. 'You never noticed.'

'It's just one gnat,' Graham says. 'They disappear all the time.'

Trevor shakes his head.

'I told you. It's nothing. It's fine. I'm sure a bunch of them vanish every time.'

Trevor takes a deep breath and looks at Graham. In the darkness, his face looks different, shadows crossing his cheekbones, his eye sockets. He's got one eyebrow raised. He's still Graham, of course, but Trevor thinks he also isn't.

Graham is about to say something, and so is Trevor. Their mouths are both open. But then the midnight hour arrives, and just as words start to leave his mouth, Graham changes. Trevor watches, lets his lips remain open, just in case one, two, 10, a dozen of the gnats want to slip inside, travel through his body, spend their final moments in Trevor's deepest, unchanging parts. He's desperate to welcome them, to want them, to let them settle in his gut, nourishing and thick, ready to remain, to be devoured forever.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

'Your kids are adorable.'

Claire followed Serena's gaze to the framed photographs that hung over the desk. A couple of towheaded children stood knee-deep in a lake. The taller one smiled widely—*cheeeeeeeeeese* through clenched teeth—while the smaller one looked down at the water.

'They're not mine,' Claire said. She motioned with her arm to take in the office, with its wooden bookshelves and stained-glass windows: 'None of this is.' The tenured Cultural Studies professor to whom the office and the children belonged was on sabbatical that year. Claire and her fellow sessionals rotated through with their laptops and piles of grading, perched lightly on the swivel chair, never adjusting the settings. Office hours was a bit of a misnomer, since she only had access to the space for an hour a week.

Serena looked embarrassed. 'Oh, sorry. I just assumed…'

'That's fine.' Claire took a certain thrill in disillusioning undergraduate students. 'Let's get back to your paper.' Claire did her usual spiel about how a B+ was a good grade, pointed out a few parts where Serena could have made her argument stronger, and then bumped her mark to an A- when she saw that the girl still looked like she might cry.

There were no more students waiting to talk to her, so Claire pulled out a pile of grading from her bag. She was teaching Feminism and Media Studies again this year. She and her teaching assistant Leesa had split the 100 reading responses into two large stacks.

Claire resisted the urge to hunt through the papers for an essay from one of her better students. She made it through two very similar, fawning analyses of a popular Instagram poet before her phone vibrated in her bag. She knew without checking that it was the veterinarian again. Claire had been avoiding his calls all week to spare herself the embarrassment of trying to explain in broken French why she didn't have her dog anymore. She let it go to voicemail.

'Hey.'

Claire looked up from her phone to find Michael in the doorway. Michael was another grad student who had the office after her. He smiled at her, waiting to be invited in, a vampire.

Michael had taken to stopping by during Claire's office hour to chat. Mostly he chatted. About his life, his work, his financial or romantic woes. Claire would nod and make sympathetic sounds, all while trying to look busy enough that he'd get the message and leave.

Leesa asked Claire how she could stand these impromptu counselling sessions: 'He's not paying you! Just tell him to leave.' Leesa was still in her 20s, and Claire admired her directness, even if she felt unable to emulate it.

'Hey,' Claire said, finally looking up from the essay she was marking. She smiled her least inviting smile, no teeth, raised her eyebrows a fraction to convey a subtle impatience.

'I've had the most insane day!' he said.

Claire made a noncommittal hmm sound, but it was enough. Michael came in, flopped down in the extra chair and began to describe in excruciating detail some administrative fuck-up that meant he wouldn't be able to access his grant money until the next semester. Claire nodded and kept grading, albeit at a slower pace.

'Oh, and I meant to tell you,' Michael said, 'I saw you on the apps the other night.' Claire looked at him quizzically. 'Tinder,' he said. 'I saw your picture! Super cute, by the way.'

Claire wanted to die. Leesa had made her create the profile a week earlier, but Claire hadn't looked at it since.

'Well, that's mortifying,' she said.

'Why? Anyone who sees you is on there, too.' Michael smiled a beat too long and Claire looked back down at her papers. 'Anyways, I need to grab a coffee before my office hour, see you later.' Michael picked up his bag and left.

When her hour was up, Claire put away her laptop and papers. She'd have to find a café to finish grading before class. She tossed her coffee cup in the bin in the hallway, glancing briefly at the bulletin board by the main office. A Xeroxed yellow poster caught her eye:

> Professor Siobhan Wright is proud to announce that
> DANIEL W. CHESTER
> A doctoral candidate in Education, will be defending his dissertation:
> 'Biblioklept: The Pedagogy of Theft' On: APRIL 15, 10AM

April 15 was in a week. How had he finished his dissertation so quickly? Claire felt the blood leave her extremities, ice water roiling her guts. Before it registered as thought, her right hand darted out and ripped the poster from the wall. Shreds of yellow fibre clung to the staples in the cork board, the only evidence of what she'd done.

Claire had met Daniel a decade earlier at one of those smoky Montreal loft parties near the train tracks. He'd come home with her that night after they stopped to pick up his dog, Siggy, a sweet mutt with a head like a warm anvil. They dated all that summer, doubling on his bike and drinking wine directly from the bottle at Parc Lafontaine.

After a couple of months, Claire wondered if the relationship had run its course. Daniel was a kleptomaniac, and he drank too much, even by her 21-year-old standards. But then he moved a block away from her apartment, and told her he loved her. Nowadays her students would call this behaviour 'love bombing' and identify it with the unnerving confidence of their generation as something toxic, manipulative. But at the time, Claire just thought she must be lucky.

It was the shoplifting that most concerned her. At first, it seemed exciting, daring, like Daniel was a character in the Jean Genet paperback he carried around. Claire had only ever stolen once, a pack of Thrills from the 7-11 in middle school. The gum tasted like soap, but she chewed the whole pack that same day, terrified and exhilarated.

Daniel finally quit stealing after getting caught trying to return a sweater at Simons. That was his scheme—he'd buy something, then go back to the store the next day with the receipt and grab an identical item off the rack to get his money back. It was a very time-consuming grift, almost a full-time job.

Claire tried not to say I told you so as Daniel wept on her bed that day, cursing the security guard who stopped him, and the police who came to the store to press charges. 'It'll be okay,' she said, rubbing his back, wishing she'd made a clean break earlier. Now it was too late. He needed her.

Claire suggested that Daniel apply to grad school, which she was doing. He moved in with her a few months later.

Daniel flourished in academia. The swaggering confidence that had made him a good thief also made him a compelling and unselfconscious writer. It was Claire who'd suggested he weave his shoplifting into his dissertation. Hiring committees loved that stuff, a personal connection to the thesis, but Daniel said no, that it was too risky. He must have changed his mind.

Claire looked down at her hand, where the yellow paper was still crumpled into a tight ball. She shoved it into her bag and took the stairs down two at a time to neutralize the flood of adrenaline that the poster had kicked off.

She pushed through the heavy wood doors and stepped outside onto the front steps of the Arts building. The pavement was still crusted with dirty snow, but here and there crocuses poked through the thatched grass and cigarette butts. The campus teemed with underdressed undergrads in shorts and salt-stained Uggs, despite the chill in the air. Claire zipped her jacket and headed south toward the café in the library.

She took her coffee over to a quiet table in the corner and set up her pile of grading, then smoothed the crumpled yellow paper over her pile. They'd only seen each other once since the night Daniel moved out, taking

Siggy with him. It was at a coffee shop downtown a couple of months later. He smelled different, and he was wearing clothes she'd never seen before. It started off civil enough. But then Daniel told her he'd moved in with his teaching assistant, Sophie, and Claire didn't remember much after that, except that she called him a cliché, a drunk, a liar, whatever else she could think of before storming out of the café.

She'd been forwarding his mail to an apartment in Mile End ever since. An apartment where he'd been working away for months, lovingly tended by young Sophie, who probably made him his gluten-free meals. Claire had met Sophie at a faculty Christmas party months before Daniel left; she'd even teased him that Sophie had a crush on him because she was always the first and sometimes only person to like his tweets. He'd just laughed.

Claire checked her phone. She'd texted Daniel earlier in the week to remind him about Siggy's upcoming vet appointment. Claire missed the dog. But it was more than that. She felt somehow that she needed Siggy to write. Before, when she was stuck on a chapter, she used to take him for a long walk, working out her ideas as he sniffed and pulled and marked every wall they passed. He was especially amusing in the winter, walking like his feet were suction cups in the ridiculous little condom boots she bought to protect his paws from the salt.

The dog was supposed to have a lump on his chest biopsied. It was probably benign, but maybe not. She knew Daniel thought it was a waste of money, so she'd offered to pay if he'd let her take him. But he never responded.

Her class that day was the usual blur. Up at the podium, looking out at her students' impassive faces blue-lit from below by their laptops, Claire felt the armpits of her polyester blouse freeze with sweat. She tried to throw enough impromptu inflections and questions into her lecture to keep her students from realizing that she'd scripted the entire thing verbatim, but she doubted anyone was fooled. Claire was not a natural teacher.

Daniel was. His course evaluations were always glowing, his students enthralled by his eccentric methods and confidence. *And what about his exotic accent? British*? one student wondered in a RateMyProfessors review Claire read late one night on her phone. More like British Columbian, Claire snorted. Daniel had grown up in Vancouver.

On her way to the library after class to finish grading, she spotted three more yellow posters and added them to her collection. At first, she was furtive about it, but after the first few, she just ripped them off without a glance as she walked by.

Claire chose the library carrel closest to an outlet and plugged in her

computer. She knew that taking the posters wouldn't make a difference. They were just a formality. The defence would still go ahead. Claire had been to at least a dozen. As far as she knew, no one ever actually failed. But just for a moment, she let herself imagine it like a wedding, that part where the minister asks if anyone objects. Claire couldn't remember that part of her own wedding, or much of that day, though it had taken place only a year and a half ago. She pictured herself raising her hand from the back of the room, an auctioneer's paddle in her hand, her face half-obscured by a veil: *I have an objection.* What was it, though? He stole my dog? He's sleeping with his TA? Claire smiled, then quickly looked down at her grading when she recognized one of her students at a nearby desk watching her.

No, his thesis committee would not be sullied or swayed by these trifling personal matters, Claire thought. And she'd never get her day in court either, not that she wanted it. Their divorce was shaping up to be such a bloodless affair, all DocuSigned PDFs that she'd mostly copied and pasted from a friend who'd gone through a divorce the year before. It was easy enough: all Claire had to do was go through and change the names and dates, excise every reference to her friend's 2009 Toyota Camry, but every time she opened the documents she was overwhelmed with a furious lethargy. No wonder Daniel had time for his dissertation, she thought. She was the one who always took care of the paperwork.

Claire opened the Excel document she used to input student marks, but then had a better idea. Dissertations submitted for defence were on a database at the library. Two minutes later she was opening the file, which was huge, 350 pages with way too many images. She scanned the abstract. He'd recast his entire shoplifting career as one of passionate knowledge acquisition in the form of stealing books. Claire had to admit it was a nice touch: there was nothing noble about stealing a vacuum cleaner. She hit Ctrl+F, then typed her name. Nothing. He'd thanked Sophie, of course, and his parents. Even Siggy. *My dog*, he wrote, even though Siggy had imprinted immediately on Claire from that very first night, followed her from room to room for the last decade. Claire closed the document and went back to her grading.

That night back at her apartment, which was still half empty from when Daniel picked up his stuff, Claire sat at her desk with a glass of wine and tried to make some headway on her literature review. The words she'd typed months earlier seemed strange and unfamiliar, but also rote, generic in their academic jargon. Her over-reliance on certain terms: hegemonic, ontological and—God help her—Gutenbergian, painful to fresh eyes.

'This is shit,' Claire said. She'd gotten used to talking to herself when

Siggy was there and hadn't shaken the habit. She was a bit drunk, she realized as she stood up. She grabbed her coat and stepped outside. The air was sobering and the darkness soothing after the brightness of her screen. She wished she still had the pack of cigarettes Daniel kept in the freezer. She walked and walked but it wasn't the same.

When Michael stopped by during her office hours the next week, he seemed excited.

'Have you seen the posters for Daniel's defence?' he asked. His tone was casual, but Claire felt him watching her closely.

She turned in her chair to face him. 'No,' she said. 'I haven't.'

'Yeah, it's tomorrow,' he said.

'Wow.' Claire leaned back in her chair. 'Good for him I guess.'

'Yeah, right, of course. It just seems kind of…fast?' Michael was studying her for a reaction.

Claire just smiled and nodded.

Michael leaned toward her. 'You know, if you were curious, I could go with you.'

Claire laughed. 'Ha! No. That would be insane. But thank you.'

Michael leaned in closer. 'I mean, we could just go sit in the back row and create, like, a weird vibe? I could even be one of those question assholes at the end if you wanted.' He laughed. 'Like the super pedantic guy who just wants to hear his own voice.'

Claire looked at Michael's hands resting on his knees, his thumbs jutting through slits in the cuffs, infuriating somehow, manipulative, like he wanted her to think he was a giant toddler instead of a 31-year-old man. She realized that she could sleep with him if she wanted to, and worried that she would. That she already had, in some alternate timeline.

'Thanks, but I've got plans tomorrow.'

The next day, the morning of the defence, Claire woke up early and took more care with her appearance. She felt nervous but excited.

She caught the usual bus to the unusual stop and walked a couple blocks east to the address she'd memorized. The three-storey walk-up looked just as it had on Google Maps the night before, only the branches of the nearby tree were still bare. She climbed the winding metal staircase to the second floor.

On the landing, Claire could feel her pulse thudding in her neck, but her hand didn't shake when she reached inside the black mailbox and felt around. Empty. He must have changed his hiding spot.

From inside the apartment came the familiar sound of Siggy's claws clattering on the hardwood followed by frantic barking, growing louder

as he approached the door. 'It's okay,' she said, more to herself, 'it's just me.' But his barking only intensified. She climbed back down to the street and walked toward the alley that ran behind the building. The fire escape was held together by peeling black paint, with a small balcony for each storey. Claire stopped at the second floor and took in the empty flowerpots, the propane grill, the beer bottle full of rainwater and cigarette butts. Dishtowels hung stiffly on the clothesline.

Siggy was barking even louder now. His face appeared in the window of the back door, eyes crazed and cataracted, hot breath fogging up the glass.

'Hi buddy,' Claire said again in her most soothing voice, but he was barking too loud to hear her through the glass. She rummaged around the flowerpots and finally found the key under the second to last one.

Claire put the key in the doorknob, adrenaline surging even though she knew they couldn't be home, not today. She turned the key in the lock and felt the bolt release.

She opened the door and Siggy launched himself at her. He stood on his hind legs and his front claws snagged her tights, red welts blossoming immediately through the holes. Daniel hadn't trimmed his nails since he'd left, she thought righteously.

'It's okay, buddy, I got you,' Claire said, leaning down and scooping Siggy up like a baby. She kissed his warm bony head as he tried to lick her lips. He smelled the same, like dirt and sunshine. The bump on his chest felt bigger. She carried him from room to room, snooping. She pictured everyone arriving now to the defence. She imagined Daniel chewing his nails, Sophie stroking his back supportively.

The apartment was a typical four-and-half, one of the two bedrooms turned into Daniel's office. She took in his gigantic desk, the oak one she'd found for him in their back alley and had had drawers made for his birthday, his library books about psychoanalysis stacked in the corner, and felt relief that she'd never have to see any of it again. She wandered through the kitchen and the living room, taking in the same kitschy thrift store art on the walls, the same books and objects from their shared apartment, now in different configurations. Claire was surprised at how indifferent it left her. Even Daniel's desert boots lined up in the hallway beside Sophie's made her feel nothing but a mild revulsion at how similar the two pairs were.

Siggy's harness hung by the front door, and Claire reached for it, looping it around his front legs as he jumped at the door. She pocketed the roll of dog bags, the funny condom boots, the Habs sweater she'd knit him years earlier. She was tempted to leave a note, something snide and sanctimonious, but thought better of it. Daniel hated the police, but she didn't need to push it.

Siggy looked up at her, panting.

'All right,' she said. 'Let's go.'

MarkAnthony**Jarman**

MY LAST TRIP TO TULSA

Pilots are coming from, well, from some destination beyond the Atlantic zones of fracture, some magic kingdom where pilots live. Deranged by wormwood coffee, we passengers pray to a distant meadow, to lost Elysian fields. Does an airport have memory, its own deities? Inside the Plexiglas walls of the tobacco addicts' aquarium, cigarette smoke floats up, but we do not float up, we are not charging up San Juan Hill.

We swerved to earth here, a *layover*: such a pretty word, sophisticated, Gallic perhaps, yet it translates into plastic seats, foul moods, and a king's ransom for turdish burgers, for acid reflux. How can even the least of our line cooks destroy an undemanding cheeseburger with onions? Exhausted and wired, waiting forever for lost planes, any iota of glamour vacuumed from travel as if by a Stalinist Five-Year Plan.

We are pleased to provide you new gate information! We do ask you consult our revised flight times! We do ask you to wait for a slim chance to lock your sore knees into sardine seats, to jam your flesh into the confines of 33E. We do ask that you start every sentence with we do.

Neil Young tune in my head, I wander, seek an empty gate, a quiet seat away from the other sales reps and princes of middle management. Bakers in some factory by a highway have hidden apple and cinnamon in my muffin.

Behind me a man taps his phone. Wire-rimmed glasses and a droopy mustache lend him a Teddy Roosevelt look: an old-fashioned mustached man who's charged up a few hills in his time. A calm voice directed vaguely toward his phone:

'Hello. I have a favour to ask. Don't call or talk to the kids for a while. Let it rest. Why? Boy howdy, you have to ask why? Because there's too much damn garbage going on.'

Who is Teddy Roosevelt calling? He mentioned kids. Is this his ex?

Teddy says, 'No, stop. No. Every time you talk to Crystal she ends up in tears. Listen, they need some space. Now I heard something. At the reception, you told Crystal to leave Alvin? Now why the heck would you say that?

■

'Oh, you don't want to deal with it now. You know what, we've got to deal with it. Right now. Did you take Jimmy? I said… Wait a minute, answer the darn question. Did you take Jimmy? Well then, did you tell anyone? That was a really bad decision to take Jimmy away from there. Well, I know, but I'm sick of this alcohol thing. I want things to stop. You and Rusty should be more in control. I'm going to put a hurt on Rusty for what he said to my wife.'

Teddy says, *My wife*. So the person on the phone is not his wife or ex? A sister? A daughter? This person doesn't hang up; she listens to the words.

'No, it's not a threat—it's the truth. He will pay for it. No way I'll accept him talking to my wife that way. And who the heck is this Vanessa chick? No, no, you guys were way out of control. Deb has two black eyes and a broken nose and a big bruise on her back. He will pay. He will *pay*.'

Is Deb his wife? Teddy's second wife? This is getting wilder. Weddings do seem fraught, trembling with our supply of petty hatreds and courageous hairdos.

At the last wedding I attended the DJ got super hammered, dancing like crazy on the dance floor and then snuck off with a sunburnt bridesmaid and did a Technicolor yawn. Vomit, bridesmaid, not sure of the exact order; I was pretty gooned as well. Anyway, the music and dance went south. He was a friend of the couple, but they were paying him to DJ, so they were pissed off at the botched entertainment, though it was amusing to watch drunken dancers making karate moves and HAH sounds to Kung Fu Fighting.

The bride gave out pale kittens, to make the world a happier place. Mine turned out to have feline leukemia. I wonder how many kittens were 'freed' on rural roads. Liz Truss and the lettuce, the kittens or the couple: the numerous new betting sites on TV could happily give odds on who will last longer.

Teddy says, 'I know you can't explain everything, but I'd appreciate *some* enlightenment. Alvin and Crystal need a fair shot at starting their life. Oh, I'll definitely talk to Rusty, believe you me. Fine. Okay. Fine. Fine. No, that's not true. I had no bad feelings about Rusty until Saturday. I know it was a wedding. Yes, I'm quite aware. Yes, I know there was alcohol, but they shouldn't be drinking that way. Are they on something else?'

■

'Yes, I know I wasn't there. I'm stuck, I'm doing my utmost to get the heck out of here. You think a goddamn airline might have a few spare pilots. If I was there, if I was there, it would have been a very different outcome. What do you mean? He's a frigging coward. I would've gone through that door and taken him down. How do I get a hold of this Vanessa chick? Okay, okay. Why didn't someone stop them?'

'I don't know, someone with a brain. Well, fact is we're pressing charges.'

I'm playing detective. Did this mysterious Vanessa clobber Deb? Must have been a solid blow to break Deb's nose and blacken both her eyes. Or a shove from behind and into something solid?

A long pause as the other person speaks to Teddy. It seems several minutes. As he listens to her words, a sensible German couple sits down, takes out a bottle of water, a Ziploc of raw almonds and a huge Toblerone bar. Unlike me, they are prepared for scenarios. I wait, but they don't break off a triangle of chocolate for me.

The young hockey player flying to Mumbai walks by and we wave. India is the very scary future and this is his first time going. If we ever escape, I assured him it'd be most interesting.

Teddy says, 'Okay. I agree. That has been the downfall of them. I agree 100 per cent. I'm sorry things aren't working out for him. But he needs help. I'm not interested in any intervention, but that boy needs help; this has got to stop.'

'Well, I'm sorry he got fired. I didn't know that. Yes. I agree. We need to work this out. We need to find some common ground. All right. All right. Is he in a lot of debt? Gotcha. Okay. Okay then. You take care now.' The soft click of technology.

Rusty sacked and I luck into this cushy new job. Maybe I've stolen his job. No training, but turns out I have a real knack for this. The bosses are happy.

But now I must travel, must relocate, seek a blank apartment down a blank hall. No one at the Xerox knows how good she was to me, the harmony in our heads, dangling conversations over tea and fine bread, the words and warm reasons that can't be explained in cold light and scrutiny.

■

Our secrets, our rapturous codes: are these elevated, sophisticated, or simply primal, caveman? Her Mexican posters and shrines now seven time zones away, a private wasps' nest I carry beneath my shirt where no one knows its buzzing.

I chose to exit her world and must give this new blank world a chance. I'm doing the right thing, right? Good pay, benefits, a 'career,' but it doesn't feel right. I'm in sales; I need to sell this big move to myself: *Bro! You are the crown prince of sodium! You rule!*

But how I miss her skeptical eyes, her dented blue pickup, her taste for whisky, her worries about money, her beauty spot's secret place. The office people so ordinary compared to her comfy sofa, her warm PJs. Love in our eyes and I left like a careless cat. At some point in my exile her grief will turn to anger, hatred.

The Xerox flashes like a lighthouse as we feed it reams of white paper, everyone dreaming of crisp BLTs, a quick glass of rosé. A city eats lunch, future toast erect in a silver machine, waiting for us. I'm the new guy, learning the copier's tricks, learning the factions, whose project has been back-burnered. No one senses the pleasure of my inarticulate tragedy.

This lost airport shudders, a fortress in shadow, shorn of maps and dreams, storm after storm written on winter concrete and rebar, blocks of light and wire your eyes try to fathom.

The sky hurls itself at us as an airline agent, in a French accent, announces another three-hour delay, explains haltingly that this airport lacks actual pilots.

Pilots fly high in the swaying sky, but we do not fly. We have a gate, but no gate crews. Heaps of baggage, but no baggage handlers. Ice on the wings, but no de-icers. Hotels, but no rooms left. Planes without pilots, customer service with no service. Welcome to an irony-free workplace.

A high TV screens a new show, *Rock Stars Feeling Sorry for Themselves*. Please give generously, Aerosmith needs more plastic surgery. Beep beep beep: Teddy Roosevelt punches in new numbers. 'You and I need to talk. I'm danged pissed. Do not communicate with them this week. Do not communicate in any way. We'll settle this. And what's the story with this Valerie chick? You running around with her? You're going to hear

more about this. You will pay for this. If you got any balls left, call me.'

Teddy said he is pressing charges. This call may be to Rusty, but Rusty doesn't answer. Does Rusty have balls left? And why won't the Germans give me a triangle of chocolate? Their stupid bar is a foot long. Her blouse open, lost to me, to someone else's greedy mouth, more words. I'm thinking tonight of my blue eyes, and I wonder does she ever think of me. Can't I live two lives? Teddy Roosevelt says, *Work on, my medicine, work!* No, sorry, that was Iago.

Teddy makes me feel I am akin to our friend Rusty; I am someone this Teddy Roosevelt would dislike. Teddy the straight shooter, on a subatomic level, would find me foolish, wanting backbone, guilty of manifold domestic failings.

This trip my eyes are acting up, the royal jelly inside my right eye coming unmoored. My right eye sees orange birds like flames when I turn my head, my right eye has minor lightning bolts, black bats swooping low. Who needs nature or jungles, who needs David Attenborough? The internet says pineapple juice helps floaters. I'm booked for a dilated fundus examination. My right eye has floaters, but we are grounded.

Nothing here moves, but my sense of home has shifted. Our lost lives, stored apart from us, like our luggage mountains hidden in airport backrooms. The meek shall inherit the aerodrome. Coming here we flew over a minor mountain. In my tiny plane window, a peak loomed like Kilimanjaro, as if we'd scrape its stormy stony top, but the pilot knew his dance moves, wanted us to see the peak.

Later, with any luck, a pilot from Helvetic Airways will float me over the Alps to new customers, a career so far from where I was pulled from the womb. All in one long day, or two or three days with these delays. Space bends and I travel in time, haunted before I am even haunted. We lift off and we fall. We all touch down somewhere, and a world absorbs us, the way it absorbs free kittens and all our stolen bicycles.

Teddy shifts in his seat, pinches his pants at the knees, tugs them outward. 'Be comfortable,' Teddy says, looking me in the eye. 'That's my motto.'

The Alps between Zurich and Florence are gorgeous in sunlight: bright snow and sharp blue rock, mountain goats with dainty feet, nothing petty in any direction, no dreck, no factions, no leadership teams, nothing connected to sales, to sin. Liaisons, seeing someone else: what harm

in that, other than the harm? That mystery, why a person is drawn to one person and repelled by another, trusting one, distancing another. I think about this all the time.

Beneath the riveted wing are snowfields so vast as if infinite, but the beautiful Alps can't be endless, nor the Himalayas. All of us know these lovely peaks must end somewhere, but I can't seem to see it, cannot see any end when peering out the small window assigned to me.

Miles below I see razor peaks and frozen waterfalls and deadly crevasses where an Italian climber has fallen deep inside a glacier and is alive, wedged so far from light. Just one wrong step. Not what they wanted, but there is hope he can still get out, escape the secret math.

Willy Loman has left the building. We are pointless primates dabbed in cologne, suits and ties hurled over mountains to our new territory. The world so far below and black letters on a white wing warn me: **Do Not Step Out of This Area**. I will obey, will try to not fall from the wing.

Alex**Leslie**

NET

From the balcony, she watched two figures in orange jumpsuits bind the jungle gym's limbs with tape. God, they were practically mummifying the thing. Black words on yellow tape: CAUTION ATTENTION CAUTION ATTENTION CAUTION. Her hair clung to her scalp as if she'd drifted in lukewarm salt water for weeks, carrying a mantle of sweat-cured kelp. She'd woken with her cheek pressed to carpet. The orange people wore white cone-shaped masks. Intergalactic grim reapers in the settling light. Slowly, they worked the jungle gym's geometry. She scrounged a joint, watched the yellow and letters emerge in a reel. ATTENTION CAUTION ATTENTION. When she was a kid, jungle gyms weren't like the one down there—this jungle gym was all round edges and crayon-coloured platforms. Spongy, blunt, the risk rubbed out. *Jungle gyms used to be dangerous*, she thought, weaning the joint of its weak-tea love. The jungle gym at one school she went to when she was eight or nine had a big chain-link net that swayed a couple feet above the ground. Every day the kids played the shaking game. The game was: some sucker was sent to the middle of the net—a sacrifice. The kids around the edge rattled the chains and the rule was that the kid in the middle wasn't allowed to hang on. They had to ride it out, flop like a fish gasping on a dry bank. Fuck, that was dangerous. A wonder no kid snapped a neck. Spines like powder-blue pipe cleaners. Whites of eyes, the singing of the chains. Air and chains mixing like silver water rising beneath her.

One of the jumpsuits waved at her.

She wiggled her joint in response, a withered 11th finger.

The worker made an oh-well gesture, like, *crazy times isn't it*, and ascended a narrow silver ladder, a radioactive monkey trying to find his way to a hole in the sky. ATTENTION CAUTION ATTENTION CAUTION ATTENTION, his yellow tail murmured. Ridiculous—as if a jungle gym could carry virus! People were getting nuts about this pandemic thing. She'd stay in for a few weeks, smoke all her weed, wait for it to blow over. CAUTION ATTENTION. She went back to the chain net.

She was taunted into the middle of the net one day, slunk her butt down over the cool crests. She remembered she was wearing her brother's silky black soccer shorts because she thought, *if I pee myself, no one will be able to tell.* The net, when it lifted in the circle of fingers, cried out like all the cash registers chanting good-*night* good-*night* after her mom's late shift. The net fell. Good-*night.* Ribbon of iced fear lazed behind her neck. A hot stripe, then cold. Good-*night.* The sky's bowl blazed

tauntingly at her, and she felt the contents of her chest cooked like a crab's flaky white meat, ready for scooping. Shoulder blades collided with reams of piano hammers, and she heard Leon from the dead-end street discharge a cartoon wolf howl, and she lost track of how many times she boomeranged through floors of hurt and memorized the light that bounced in star patterns from her crimson eyelids, until her mom held her backwards at the bathroom mirror that night and asked her over and over and over, *who hit you?*

Her mom had never looked at her that way before—mouth and eyes conjoined in a question—so present.

She wanted more of that feeling so she answered: *I did it to myself.*

Her mother clamped her pinky ring between her buckteeth, grabbed her keys and rushed out to start the car for the late-night deliveries.

She wanted to move out of this apartment above the park, because this was where she was living when the accident happened and she dreamed about the water, how it pressed with a fleshy blackness and refused to release her. But she was too broke to move and workers' compensation would never send the payout. Crooks and scrooges, scrooges and crooks. Never ever. This apartment had a big storage space, and in there was an alien moon's sky of exposed pink insulation and mouse shit that smelled like the liquid that she sucked out of her one cracked tooth at night, sleepless, a game of how slowly her dreams could poison her. She kept the three boxes of paperwork from workers' comp in that space. The only good thing about this apartment was this balcony overlooking the park—the jungle gym, sunbather hill, figure-eight path with white mosaic, and a picnic table where old guys played chess and kvetched into the salmon-pink evenings, their sleeping bags lazing like good sweating dogs around their boots and anger. The table was already wrapped up in CAUTION ATTENTION CAUTION ATTENTION. Where would those guys go now? God, she should really google more about this whole pandemic thing.

She'd spent the last three months toking and having disjointed background conversations with her sister on speakerphone about how workers' comp was not doing enough for her claim and re-watching *Gilmore Girls* and *The West Wing*, her teenage hormone-trance watches that felt like hanging out for days in a relative's living room and hearing news through a haze of half-forgotten names. Drifting in nowhere-comfort. Rory Gilmore's eyes implored her, *What are you doing? What's your plan?* Jed Barlet told her, *You're a good egg, you're doing your best, it's a heck of a situation you're in.* Her sister just could not get it about workers' comp, but she did listen and listen, clacking dish-stacks and deflecting kiddos. Her sister said things like, *It's a process* and *Nobody's out to get you* and the very worst thing: *It's not personal.* When she started to talk about the dam to her sister, the line went quiet like the signal had been

lost. She spoke into a static like a white sky wrapped around her own bones, a quiet that made her go cold with the knowledge that nobody could understand this.

Carpet naps helped. The old carpet felt like stubble against her face. Something like company.

Her main problem these days was that after calls with her case manager Bonnie at workers' comp she had to refrain from wanting to kill someone. She couldn't ever sleep. She dreamed about the water.

The next elementary school (when she was 10?) had a jungle gym that was even more life-threatening.

The jungle gym had a ladder made of tires—just car tires nailed in a steep incline up to a high platform. At the top there was a bucket pirate lookout, and she could see all the way to the empty broken-down church in the middle of the parking lot behind the megachurch; the little church looked like a dog house. Her mom and sister went to the megachurch for the grilled cheese sandwiches and hot chocolate, but she refused. She wasn't going to drink anyone's Kool-Aid.

The game with the tire ladder was: climb up, stand balanced on the top tire, hop straight up, slam your legs and arms together, drop through the hole, land upright without falling. The wood chips made tic-tac-toe boards of her palms and in warm bathwater they blackened, the sly bellies of ticks. One kid bit through his lower lip on impact. Blood spurted. He shrieked and poured like a cherub spouting venom. She remembered the hot dive into the long throat of kid screams. The feeling of running in a herd was pure current. Triumph.

Nobody ever wrapped up that tire ladder in caution tape. The chain net when it darkened early in winter flickered like a spider's eye, like a lake with its own kind of bright and slow consciousness. CAUTION ATTENTION CAUTION ATTENTION. Once, she walked to the net in the middle of night to get away from her mom's ranting and lay spread-eagled on the chain-link and swayed, a shining silver sky under a black sky of stars, basking in the feeling that no one knew where she was, lying there like a small silver fact shining in the middle of the ocean.

She flicked her joint tip down at the scrub brush.

The orange workers lounged on the jungle gym's low platform. CAUTION ATTENTION framed them. ATTENTION CAUTION. Masks blew from their wrists like doves tied there for good luck. They leaned close together and kissed. A long kiss. Maybe they were having a moment in a movie—brought together by the job of spreading warnings around the city, leaning on each other, experiencing the edge of mortality, unexpected relief in a hard time. Yadda, yadda, yadda. She watched them kiss, tiredness packing cotton balls around her sore eyes, the worst part being she was so beyond stoned that she wouldn't be able to get to sleep now. She'd

just stare at the popcorn ceiling until water dripped through it and filled her mouth.

Repeat.

Another jungle gym—long row of monkey bars behind her uncle's apartment building, where he'd done chin-ups and listed all the Latin names of species of birds on his arm tattoos. She remembered his sproingy voice, always trying to impress her, his smoker's voice the part of him that came back to her most often after he overdosed when she was 15. She watched one of the workers slowly loop tape around the other worker's body, while their laughter rippled out. The yellow climbed the orange. The second worker's body—a warning. ATTENTION.

Hey, hey, she yelled out.

They stopped and looked up at her.

Hey, you know it's bullshit, right? You know the pandemic's not really going to be a big deal right? she called.

One worker put both his hands in the air.

You been living under a rock?

What, you believe this? she yelled back. You really believe there's a worldwide emergency? The government's just trying to scare you.

The other, a short man with a dark beard, yelled back, after a silence, Don't believe us, turn on the TV!

Where are the kids supposed to go? she hollered.

Home!

Laughter.

Where am I supposed to go? she yelled.

They turned away, carving her out of their moment. The worker resumed wrapping the other man in tape, CAUTION on his chest.

Her mother had stopped hitting her for a while after the chain-link net incident. Her mom was dumb but she knew a threat when she heard one. *I did it to myself.* That was how it was with her mom—taking her on was like trying to reason with an electrical storm. You have to fight crazy with crazy—that was her mom's motto. You have to fight crazy with crazy, she'd heard her mom say a trillion times.

A week after her first ride on the chain-link net she'd gone back and asked the ringleader Leon, a seventh grader with a buzzcut and a Discman in a puffy eggplant case, to go again but he looked at her and saw that something was wrong with her. Nobody ever asked to go into the net a second time. One and done. He waved her off. He had the body language of a corrupt soccer referee. So she crawled under the net and hung off the bottom, fingers hooked in its belly, and they shook and shook the net, squalling a line from Wonderwall because she had said in class it was her favourite song, and she heard Leon yell, you're a tough little bitch aren't you, and she smiled, her squeezed lips like the red triangle

on the belly of an indestructible beetle.

You can't get rid of me that easily, her mom whispered at her over the phone when she packed up her stuff at 16 and stole the car; she was already two provinces away with the steering wheel's plastic humps branded into her palms like a tattoo of a tourist-mug mountainscape.

The jungle gym wrapped in yellow tape gave off a glow in the night. A hum. CAUTION ATTENTION CAUTION. She heard its flutey yellow voice. When she was a kid, a jungle gym wrapped in caution tape would have beckoned.

Sometime in the long night, the workers vanished, sucked into the true birth of the pandemic, the following 12 months that she smoked and floated through, her only witness her sister's voice and blue-masked tightrope walkers who zipped across the park and raccoon sentries perched upright on the jungle gym platforms as the CAUTION ATTENTION CAUTION tape loosened, sagged in spools like stockings on dancing legs, shredded and waved, became many flags, a distortion of letters, confetti. Kids stayed off it, wrists tugged by fearful parents. The two workers who'd applied the tape had really overdone it, knotted and layered the tape so that when a layer came loose, more was unveiled, like animal skin torn off to show layers of tissue and fat and muscle. A TT CA UTI ON. The jungle gym—an eyesore wearing a florid decaying cape. Her workers' comp money was running out. IO N CA T.

She sobbed on the phone to her workers' comp agent, Bonnie, who said if everyone who said they couldn't work weren't working nobody would be working, and she repeated her story of the injury, the dam that burst and the water that pressed her into a concrete wall. Bonnie was the only one who knew the whole story and Bonnie was a bureaucrat. Bonnie had read her file. Bonnie had sent her a notification letter of her return-to-work date, a date that she'd slept through by DoorDashing edibles. CA UT T ENTIO N AU ENT. Bonnie had told her before she was not her therapist and if she continued to refuse to see the therapist workers' comp offered to provide there was nothing Bonnie could do. When you were discharged from the hospital, you were cleared by—she cut Bonnie off, she couldn't hear it again. She told Bonnie about the jungle gym, how it looked at twilight, like an abandoned temple, and Bonnie said after a long pause: Honey, you really need to talk to someone. Nobody, not her sister, not her two final friends who responded more and more slowly to her texts, lost in their own pandemics, could understand. She told Bonnie, I just need more time. Time for what? Bonnie said, and she heard the keyboard in the background, like a metronome counting down the moments of her allowable speech. The jungle gym was most beautiful at dawn, the shredding strips backlit. AT TE N O N ON AT ENTI.

I died, I died, I died, she told the workers' comp psychologist she saw the next week, double-masked in an office building. In the masks, her glasses steamed; she wept in the twin small fogs, feeling like a blind bandit. I died, I died. She'd only agreed to see the psychologist to get a few more weeks of pay out of Bonnie. She told him of her prior underwater death and he said calmly: but here you are, sitting across from me. He smiled that bad therapist smile, like a wise tree in a cartoon, like a carny handing out popcorn at her own funeral. Fuck that guy and his eye wrinkles masquerading as soul. Fuck all of them, all the people who didn't know what it was like to be tossed by elements, to be light and flimsy as straw in the ocean, to be killed and buried in the same day.

She lost her last person. Her sister's voice on speakerphone reedy with background-kid-whine-pandemic-news-monologue-static and her ear hurt when her sister said: Listen I know you're struggling and I care but I need some space from—I don't have the skills—can you—a professional—I can't—anymore—

After her sister said those things, she bundled up in her sleeping bag on the balcony, on so much THC that she felt like an earthworm laid out on a warm glass dish for dissection. Softened by rain. A warm dream of the jungle gym coming alive as a yellow spider scuttled out of her mind by way of her ear canal. If she stayed out here in her sleeping bag in the rain, it would melt off and reveal her brand-new skin. The jungle gym stood down there, zombie tree in an abandoned amusement park. The trees were leafless. Twelve or so years ago, she'd lived in a house where the second-floor windows overlooked a magnolia tree. In full bloom, the magnolia tree's blossoms looked like the earth's cloud cover seen from an airplane. Tender pale world. In that house she'd been in a relationship with a much older rageaholic architect she'd fled one night—the only thing she remembered about leaving was the plume of adrenaline curling beautiful between two cumulus clouds as she drove toward the border. She could still see it, the magnificent white candle of her fear, standing tall in the sky. It was endless, it exhausted her, this inventory of the times in her life when she had saved her own life.

The pandemic is over because the CAUTION ATTENTION CAUTION tree has molted its emergency skin. Bits of yellow in the grass and worked into the muck like debris after a party.

The eviction notice comes. She has no one to tell, so she puts the notice in the sink and runs water over it.

The next day, an envelope from workers' comp.

A letter: *Congratulations on your successful return to work!* She reads her own name at the top. She reads Bonnie's name. FILE #G7-BC003.

Once when she'd called, Bonnie had picked up and said *Hi, BC003.* She reads the amount on the cheque that slides out of the letter: $183,083.73.

She puts the cheque in her pocket, hurries down the stairs, walks across the park, and climbs the jungle gym for the first time.

She lies down on the highest platform. Her heartbeat rolls around in her chest like a pool ball cleaving to a pocket.

The dam burst and water assaulted her with a thousand-fingered hand. One moment, another moment, and another moment, the thought from elsewhere: *I am drowning I am drowning this is drowning this is what drowning feels like.* Her eardrums rushed in, two cheapo firecracker rockets shoved in her brain. The sound. She'd read in the police report that she was under water for less than a minute. But there is no quantity or edge to that time—she was drowning. After the water retreated, she'd fallen off the cement like a spirit falling off the cold, white, outside wall of time.

There is no one to tell about the money and she lies up there, puts her hand on her chest, holds the pulse of this small heartbeat of luck. She turns her head and presses her cheek flat on the platform. At eye level the raindrops clinging to the plastic are massive glass domes. The domes wobble with a deep, milky light. She gazes into them. On the other side of the domes, the sky shimmers and warps. She reaches out a finger and pops the domes one by one. The light and water collapse under her fingertip and she begins to laugh, softly at first, then more deeply. Oh, if only she could call her mother, long dead from ovarian cancer, if only she could call her right now about the cheque. Fight crazy with crazy, her mom would say. The roaring water that lives always in a white room in her chest fights crazy with the airy laughter flooding the sky. This sick sad year fights crazy with the warmth of a breeze, the pleasure of the cool wet plastic. She laughs, laughs. The money fights crazy with the fear that's draining out like old sick, like the shadow fever casts on the dawn. Her fingers cling to the underside of the silver chains and she begins, slowly, to pull.

Annick**MacAskill**

THE PALE

Ordering another grand crème seems the only way Franny can avoid going back to her apartment and her roommate's parents.

By now, Britt has been missing for nine days. Franny has stopped telling herself that her roommate will come home and can't stand to hear Mr. and Mrs. Shelley repeat the lie she's only recently abandoned. Mrs. Shelley has a way of rubbing her fingers over the tops of her cheeks, mauling the skin beneath her swollen eyes, that makes her look wild, or just mentally ill. And Mr. Shelley is obnoxious with his deference to his wife and the doleful way he stares into his daughter's bedroom, which is heavy and quiet as a Sunday, still strewn with clothes and books and the postcards that have fluttered down from the walls where they'd been tacked up with the ancient blue putty Britt brought over from Canada.

Franny sips her coffee, avoiding the gaze of a bearded man who's been trying to catch her attention. Her chest tightens as she wonders how long she can nurse this third grand crème, and how much longer the Shelleys will insist on squatting in her apartment. They're set up in the living room on the cheap pink cushions Franny and Britt picked up from a furniture store on the outskirts of town their first week in Tours. The place has a funny Scandinavian name Franny can never remember, an incongruous mash of letters that makes it a caricature of itself, an obvious IKEA knock-off. The store is settled in a small strip of buildings that includes a cheap motel called Mister Bed and a hair salon called Scissors. No joke.

The cushions are part of a small batch of furniture that was to fill the four rooms of Franny and Britt's sunny apartment, rented for the year they're on exchange at the Université François-Rabelais. The cushions were stained with beer and pasta sauce by the time the Shelleys showed up to look for their daughter. Most depressing of all, Britt's parents leave them splayed out all day instead of tidily folded up; the cushions are actually collapsible easy chairs—a teeny-tiny step up from the bean bags Franny used in her dorm room her first year of university—that were to double as mattresses for guests. Britt's parents are the first people to sleep on them.

Only once have the police bothered to come by the apartment and poke around the rooms where Britt spent the last seven months.

'This happens,' a very skinny male officer said to Britt's parents. He was accompanied by a female officer who was short even for a French woman. In the 25 minutes they stood in the apartment, the female cop

spoke no English, while her colleague seemed eager to show off his language skills. He mostly did okay, though his delivery was clipped and cold.

'Young women, they make their minds. They meet boys and have ideas. Perhaps your daughter, she is in love. Or travelling.'

'It's March,' Mrs. Shelley replied, pointing out the window, her face splotchy. Her husband blew into his handkerchief, turning to the window and staring out at the rooftops in the direction his wife had just gestured, as if Britt might be found among the clouds.

Franny doesn't mean to be heartless. Certainly, it was a shock to realize that her roommate was gone. Franny came home one day with a baguette and a white-and-green box containing three delicately baroque pastries from down the street, set up at the kitchen table with her notes and books, and read about the Commune de Paris for a solid two and a half hours before realizing her roommate hadn't returned. It was a Tuesday, and Britt would have finished class before she did, with nothing much to do in the hours that followed. Franny spent the rest of the night on one of the squishy pink chairs in the living room, gradually chewing her way through the stout towers of her opéra, paris-brest and millefeuilles, and staring out the window until she felt sick.

The more Franny thinks about it, the more she agrees with the police. Not about there being a boy, but about there being little reason to worry. No foreign students have turned up in the hospital or on the shores of the Loire. There was never any sign of a break and enter at their apartment, or any rumours of a skirmish on campus. Not to mention that Britt's backpack is gone, along with the money belt her mother bought her, her credit cards, her cash, her passport and the same indestructible Nokia brick cellphone Franny has. They bought them together their first week in town, along with French SIM cards.

Some of Britt's clothes are gone, too, though Franny's not so sure on that point—Britt isn't really one for shopping, but she has brought home the odd item over the past few months—a baggy white T-shirt that cascades perfectly down her torso, a pink and brown striped scarf, like the ones the girls at the fac wear, faded blue jeans with embroidered flowers twisting up the sides. Britt's mom insists that too little clothing is missing from her daughter's wardrobe, but she doesn't know anything about these new purchases. Only Franny knows, and the details are already slipping away.

At the bar they go to, an Irish pub called The Pale run by a bilingual staff, some of them former exchange students themselves, the English girls pretend to miss Britt.

'It's so awful,' Cherie exclaims, her eyes wide. She has a pretty doll-like

face, round and soft, though her forehead is always dotted with tiny red pimples.

Priscilla nods vigorously, her glossy ginger curls shaking. 'She was so kind.'

Franny clears her throat, pouring herself another glass of rosé from the carafe she ordered. In truth, neither Cherie nor Priscilla have ever liked Britt, who always insists on getting home by 11 and has no interest in whirlwind trips to Barcelona or Prague. 'Why run away from France as soon as we're here?' she said once, in a completely unironic tone. A nerd, Franny had thought, watching other people react to her roommate, a nerd or a dork or a dweeb, though even trying out the words in her head felt mean.

She would never say it, especially not now, but the horrible truth is that Franny barely likes Britt more than the English girls do. Cherie and Priscilla are mortifying in their own way, applying makeup in the middle of class, their pink compacts angled high in the air as the French students look on, snickering and muttering in their musical, bell-like voices as the crass foreigners work colour into their lips and cheeks. Franny has noticed that few French girls bother to wear makeup, preferring to use colour in the sprawling notes that overwhelm the crisp pages of their gridded cahiers. Shortly after arriving in the city, Franny abandoned her own routine of mascara and lip gloss in an attempt to fit in.

Cherie and Priscilla, on the other hand, dress up for the pub, although they swear what they wear is casual. Back in England, they explain, girls really dress up to go out. 'Fancy dress,' they call it, which Britt always says makes it sound like they're little girls dreaming of costume parties. Always said. Whichever.

Of course Franny is worried, but she's not sure she quite misses her roommate. If she's being honest, she found Britt pretty judgmental for such a plain, dull person. They never would have been friends if they hadn't been thrust together, the only two students on exchange from Canada at the university that year. Franny studies history with a French minor back at the University of Guelph, while Britt takes French lit and poli sci in St. John's. Britt is the first person from Newfoundland Franny has ever met. It only occurs to Franny now that Britt might have fit in better with the German girls studying on their campus, a group of tall, fresh-faced blondes who can always be seen riding their rented bikes in a big group. Too late now.

Despite their differences, Franny and Britt became close shortly after arriving in the city. Tours is a strange place. Both girls have professors back home who pushed them to come here because of the supposed purity of the region's French, the rich cuisine, and the surrounding chateaux, about half a dozen of them, each attainable for less than five euros and 30 minutes or so on one of the rickety regional trains (or, if

you're German, slightly more time on a bike). But the students at the fac are unfriendly, the professors completely uninterested in them. No one participates in class. There's no homework or assignments, just four-hour exams at the end of each course, all-or-nothing evaluation looming over them like a storm warning.

Britt was someone Franny could explore with, someone who found the same things weird and had approximately the same accent and made approximately the same mistakes in French. The city turned out to be relatively small, but both found there was much more to do than back home. They went to the Musée des Beaux-Arts, where Franny admired the small Rembrandt and Britt studied the expressionists, chin in her hand. They wandered the cobblestone streets of the Old Town, planned a trip to Paris and then another one as soon as they returned. They booked their tickets home for Christmas, and when they got back, Franny was surprised to feel a sense of relief at returning to their apartment. During her two weeks home in Mississauga, no one had been very interested in hearing about her time in France. No one seemed to think what she was doing was important. She got back to Tours on the train late one night and when she opened the door to their apartment, Britt was waiting with a mug of mint tisane and an éclair bought just that day at the pâtisserie down the street. The minifridge in their kitchen had already been cleaned, and Britt had even thought to fill it with yogurt and bottles of Perrier and Orangina. Franny felt a sudden rush of comfort at being taken so well care of by her roommate. Usually, it seemed she was the one who had to take charge, planning their outings or ordering for them at the restaurants they'd visited in Paris. It was nice to see that her roommate could handle things, too—nice, Franny realized, not just for Franny, but for Britt herself, who was smiling at her now, a new kind of confidence shining behind her eyes.

The towering gendarme looks more handsome than usual today. His scrawny face still reminds Franny of a bird, but his eyes seem richer, darker somehow, with tiny veins of gold and amber.

The improvement in his looks doesn't make his condescension any less annoying. 'Madame,' he drawls to Mrs. Shelley (until today, Franny didn't think French men could drawl). 'If you have not heard from your daughter, that might mean she doesn't want to talk to you.'

'She's not like that.' Mrs. Shelley blows her nose into a translucent hanky. She balls up the fabric in her fist, and Franny looks away quickly, embarrassed for everyone present.

Out the window, the sky is a perfect cloudless blue. This morning, Britt's parents insisted on calling the police again. 'Maybe they'll have heard something…' Mr. Shelley said softly, after his wife had already started thumbing the officer's phone number into Franny's cell.

Now Franny listens as Mrs. Shelley tells the gendarme what a good relationship she and her daughter have. They were going to go shopping together in May, when the Shelleys visited for Britt's birthday. Britt learned her love of everything French from her mother, who completed a minor in the language almost 30 years ago. 'Ma fille,' she says now, pleading with the Frenchman. It's the first French Franny's heard from her since the Shelleys arrived at the apartment a week ago, their skin grey and their eyes clouded with worry.

Though she goes to sleep with her head full of lectures on the emergence of European nation-states and the prattle of the English girls, Franny dreams of nothing but Britt. It's either a deep dark lake of dreamless sleep she experiences, or a montage of images of her roommate sitting in the pub, in a lecture at the fac, eating an oversized bowl of pastel-coloured ice cream at a brasserie, wincing as she sips a too-strong petit café in the square in Old Tours. Banal, stupid images and dramas. Britt worrying over a lost book, a pencil case, a baguette. When Franny dreams like this, she wakes up sweaty, guilt constricting her throat.

One time when she wakes in the middle of a nightmare, she finds herself crying. It's early in the morning, just before sunrise, and Franny feels totally, utterly alone. For a minute, she's scared to be in the dark, the quiet pressing so heavy on her ears that she worries momentarily she's lost her hearing. She snaps her fingers next to her left ear, then the right, before relaxing somewhat, sitting back against the wall, her legs crossed and her shoulders rounded.

Franny's 'bed' is just a twin mattress on the hardwood floor. In the slightly smaller room on the other side of the wall, Britt has abandoned the same set up. Thinking of her roommate's empty room, Franny feels the guilt again. If she's so scared, how must Britt feel? Franny weeps for a moment, a rustling, wheezing sound coming out of her left nostril as she rests her head in her hand.

Slowly, she calms down. And then she's angry at Britt—so what if they could never get along? Is that all Franny's fault? Britt was truly strange—much like her father, a shell of a man when Franny met him in March, in a way you could tell wasn't just about his daughter. Britt always talked about how her dad and all the men in her family lost their jobs in the nineties after the cod moratorium. She'd bring it up at such weird times—waiting in line for a movie or at the pub with the English girls. She'd never get it when Franny would cast her quick looks to hush up. When everyone else around just wanted to have a good time, Britt wanted to natter on about government aid and workers' rights. That winter, she'd tried to drag Franny to a student Marxist reading group. It had gotten to be just a bit much. That couldn't be Franny's responsibility.

■

What Britt left behind: most of her clothes, though probably not all—but definitely most of the ones she brought with her from home, as well as the T-shirt she won at The Pale on St. Patrick's Day (the last night Britt and Franny spent out together), emblazoned with the bar's cheesy logo, which features a Kelly green outline of a leprechaun; her winter boots (useless in a city where it snowed for only five minutes all winter); her wall of postcards, photos of the Loire Valley's most spectacular châteaux, mounds of white and grey stone rising up in a flush green landscape like jewels on a crown, as well as the typical Parisian monuments—Notre-Dame, Sacré Coeur, the Louvre (the postcards still gradually falling off the wall, scattering over the panelled wood flooring in her room); her school books (but not the spiral-bound notebook Franny's seen her scribble in). Her 2-in-1 shampoo and conditioner and toothpaste (though not her toothbrush); her small collection of make-up; her hairbrush; her tin of bobby pins; her comb. Her one purse, a peachy pink shoulder bag that looks intended to accompany a senior citizen to church every week, not a young woman living on her own in a foreign country for the first time.

What an amazing adventure she's ruined, thinks Franny.

May 6. It's a Sunday, and Franny sits in Shawarma Best, the sandwich shop a few doors down from her apartment, sinking her teeth into a panini trois fromages. Alongside the sandwich, she's ordered frites with sauce blanche and a whole pot of mint tea just for herself. She's eyeing the row of pastries displayed on the counter, trying to decide if she should have a piece of baklava here or take it to go.

The men behind the counter are quiet today, their eyes fixed on the small television secured to wall. It's the second day of the second round of the national election, and the results have just been announced: Nicolas Sarkozy, a true troll if Franny ever saw one, has triumphed over the stylish and socialist Ségolène Royal, whose headshot offers the world a smile so blithe it's as if she knew what was waiting for her all along.

Franny glances at the television now and then, but mostly she stares out the big glass window at the front of the shop. The semester has been dragging on—exams aren't until later this month—and she is bored of both her classes and drinking with the other anglophone girls at the pub. She's finally befriended a real French person, Aurélie, a sweet hippy from her comp lit class. For a month now, Aurélie has been asking Franny to come home with her to Blois for a weekend, but Franny keeps making excuses about having to study. Soon, Aurélie won't bother to press anymore.

Sipping at her tea, Franny studies the text scrolling by at the bottom of the screen. The race was tight. Franny is happy for the update, but the television isn't the reason she came to the shop tonight. It's Britt's

birthday, and Franny wanted to do something special. She's wearing a lipstick from that first shopping trip with Britt, when they picked up the furniture for their apartment. She hasn't touched the tube since she bought it nine months ago, but today it made sense—a brownish-red Britt had pointed out to her, a dated nineties colour that turned out to work perfectly for Franny's complexion.

Britt's parents returned to St. John's at the end of March. They've never stopped paying for their daughter's share of the apartment, convinced, despite the steely discouragement of the French police, that Britt will surface before mid-June. After all, she has her return ticket booked for the same day as Franny. If she's not back by then, Franny doesn't know what she's going to do. She can't just abandon Britt's things in the apartment, but even she isn't cold enough to insist that the Shelleys come back to France. It was sad enough to watch them last time.

Her own mother was going to come to France this month, around the same time Britt's mother had planned her original trip, but Franny's mom is mad at her, thinks Franny should have come home after Britt disappeared. After saying nothing at all about France while Franny was home for Christmas, now she has an opinion. They had a couple of nasty fights on the phone, her mother crying and whining her worry in a way that freaked Franny right out, Franny's father's muffled voice in the background, trying to reassure his wife. Her dad has been strangely sanguine, convinced that Britt is just off having a good time. 'She probably met a boy at school,' he's said several times, to both his wife and Franny. Franny is getting tired of men saying that, as if they were so interesting as to upend a woman's life, even one as boring as Britt's.

Behind the counter, the panini shop staff have turned to look out the window. One of them abandons his station at the shawarma spit and races out the front door, veering to the right. He shouts something at the others, who jog out behind him.

Within seconds, Franny hears it too—a storm of voices shouting in French. The noise grows louder, and soon the protestors are passing by the store. Marching shoulder to shoulder, they fill the boulevard—demonstrators of all ages, grandmothers and teens and children. Franny recognizes a couple of students from the fac, including a guy with glasses who's shouting into a megaphone about Sarkozy. Something about liberalism and not resting. *Something something fight fight something*, the voices roaring together.

It's hard to believe at first, but she's on the edge of the crowd, in clear view of the shop. Her hair has grown. It looks thicker, too, piled up on top of her head, secured by a turquoise scarf. She's shouting with the crowd, and though Franny can't hear her, she knows that Britt has lost her accent, that when she opens her mouth, no one doubts for a second that she belongs. Her arms are bare and tanned and she's lost weight,

though the change has only made her look more solid, like she's rooted firmly in the ground. Within seconds, Franny drops her panini and bolts up from the table, but by the time she reaches the sidewalk, Britt is gone.

Teya**Hollier**

THE WEIGHT OF THE WORLD

My mother was bent over the black-barred bundle buggy trying to shove the silver microwave oven inside it. It was the only way we were going to get the appliance to the pawnshop, so it had to work or else we'd starve another day. Sweat dripped off the tip of her nose, and her face burned bright as a tomato as she struggled. My big brother D held onto the handle to keep it from falling over, watching the top of her head like he could see inside it. The desperation, the hunger. We were all too familiar with hunger and not just for food. Although all our stomachs currently cried a choir of pain, we were starved of other things too. My mom was feeding an addiction she couldn't afford. And my brothers and I craved more practical things: quality clothes and shoes, consistent housing, cupboards free of roaches, present fathers, love, and nurturing untangled from pain and resentment. But at that particular moment, I just wanted to keep my mother from selling off our movies, specifically our Disney collection. Every week our collection shrank, and my heart sank with each character I had to say goodbye to. Goodbye to Belle and her unconventional desires. Goodbye to Ariel and the power in her voice. Goodbye to Aladdin, who proved that honesty could set you free. Goodbye—

'Are you listening?' my mother's voice cut in. 'Get on the opposite side and help out.'

D was now on one side of the buggy, his hand gripping the top bar. He stuck out his tongue as I took position across from him. I rolled my eyes as I gripped the bar opposite him.

'Pull as hard as you can,' she demanded. 'Ready?' We nodded and tightened our grip. 'Now.'

D and I pulled with all our might, trying to widen the mouth of the buggy so it could swallow the microwave. My brother groaned for dramatics, a vein boldened along his thin neck. I groaned back, to prove I was trying just as hard. My mother pushed down on the microwave, begging God to just *once* make things easy. But God was too busy for us. The microwave wouldn't budge; it was too long and too wide to fit inside the buggy.

'It's too big,' I said, loosening my hold on the bar that dug into my palms.

'No duh, genius,' D said, still pulling like his life depended on it, his lean brown arms revealing strained muscles.

'Fuck it,' she finally said, standing up straight and wiping away

sweat-slick strands from her forehead. 'I'll have to figure something else out.' And I knew she would; poor people always find a way.

With the microwave still sitting on top of the buggy, she tipped the buggy back so the handle was pressed against her stomach and the microwave leaned against the handle.

'This'll do,' she said, rolling the buggy back and forth against the hardwood floors. The microwave held firm against the handle. 'You'll help me keep it from falling off.' She gave me a confirming nod.

'You sure you don't want me to come, Mom?' D asked, eyeing me with distrust.

'No, you have to stay home and watch your brother.' Our little brother sat in the living room absorbed in the chaotic misadventures of *Pinky and the Brain*. He was still too young and, therefore, lucky to be oblivious to the importance of this journey.

I stuck out my tongue at D, who was clearly trying to switch roles with me. He didn't think I could handle this very important mission because he was older and taller and stronger, but I would prove him wrong. He rolled his eyes and folded his arms across his puffed-out chest.

'It'll be fine,' our mother declared as she continued to roll the buggy back and forth. The wheels whined like a caught critter squealing for freedom.

My stomach felt like an empty bowl as we exited our building and turned onto the sidewalk. The chill in the air stung my cheeks, but I'd get numb to it eventually. Most things, no matter how painful or scary, were less so once you got used to them. At least that's what I tried to tell myself. I felt the hunger growing inside of me, rumbling against my skin like it was trying to break through. I found ways to ignore it: searching the sidewalk for cracks to avoid, swinging the bag of movies I held in my hand against the wind, following the up and down of my mother's wide hips as she pushed the buggy ahead of me. Good thing she had big hips; she held the weight of the buggy and the microwave with a stubborn ease. She was a fat woman. She would say it often, how skinny she used to be before us. Before we ruined her frame, she was tiny. She wished she had pictures to show us just how tiny, to show us how pretty and young she used to be. But those pictures were all lost or never taken. I guess there weren't many smiles to capture in her past. Still, I tried to picture it. To slim her down, smooth her out, soften her sharp edges, but I could not envision her any differently. She pulled me from my straining imagination by shouting at me to stand at her side.

'Stay close,' she warned. 'Keep watch for bumps in the sidewalk, and make sure the microwave isn't sliding off.'

I squinted at her conflicting demands but tried my best to keep my eyes both on the ground and on the microwave atop the buggy. It was

having a bumpy ride but still seemed set in place. All was going well. I practised a satisfying smirk for when I returned home to D's surprised face. He made me promise to get a box of freezies if all went according to plan. This was a promise I planned to keep, if only to prove my capability.

It wasn't a long walk to the plaza; my mother would say it was about two blocks. We had to walk to the intersection of Victoria Park and Lawrence Avenue, cross the street twice, and then walk down a slight hill that entered into the plaza. As we neared the crosswalk, where a restaurant sat at the corner, the breeze carried the smell of cooked beef into my nostrils and down into my aching stomach. My stomach cried out and I fought the urge to voice its complaints. There was no point in announcing an ache that couldn't be soothed. We waited for the light to change as the cars flew by us. The world outside was so loud and busy; I wondered if anybody noticed us. My shouting stomach and torn shoes. My mother's shaky arms and sweat-stained temples despite the chill in the wind. Sometimes it felt like we were on display. The neighbours would whisper distaste at my single mother and her three mixed-raced babies. The shame, the horror. But sometimes it felt like we were completely invisible. Silenced and buried by the busybodies living around us. Like the cars' engines blocking out the rumbling of my aching stomach.

'D asked me to get him a box of freezies,' I blurted out, swinging the bag high in the air, 'even though it's like a million degrees out here.'

'You mean it's *minus* a million degrees out here,' she corrected me. 'And we'll see.' She watched the light like she was willing it to change. 'It depends on how much money we get.'

'How much do you think we'll get?' The bag rustled past my ear as it swung back down to my side.

'Considering it's only a year old, I'm hoping 200 or so.'

My eyes bulged at the number 200. That was plenty of food. That was snacks! That was, hopefully, an *Archie* comic! But that also meant something else. Something I was growing to hate more and more. My mother's treat: beer. A piss-yellow liquid she consumed for days on end until she was no longer recognizable. I recalled my mother stumbling down the hallway the previous weekend, barging into our bedroom to yell at us for hiding her smokes, or was it her lighter? Accusing us of being thieves. Of trying to ruin her life by taking all the good out of it. Beer made her distrustful. It also made her forgetful. She found whatever we had 'stolen' shortly after her outburst. Misplaced by her own sloppy hand. I shivered at the memory. Beer made her dumb. Made her mean. Made her cry until she melted onto the floor. Made her sweet as candy until our teeth bled with cavities. Every emotion was emboldened, stretched out of her like a second person trying to unglue themself and become their own being. And I worried the day would come where we wouldn't get her

back like this: sober, strong-willed, stubborn as putty as she pushed the rattling buggy and the hefty microwave against her hips along uneven concrete to ensure we were fed.

'If we get 200 dollars, will we still have to sell the movies?' I asked, my heart already aching at the thought of having to say goodbye to Pinocchio and his tumultuous journey to become a real boy.

'No,' she said as we started to cross the road, the cars paused, rumbling like my stomach. 'You'll get to keep your movies,' she promised with a hint of a smile.

I jumped with glee, swinging the bag as high as I could into the grey skies. I was too distracted by the bag in the breeze and the possibility of keeping my movies that my focus was no longer on the microwave. She called my name. Nearly screamed it and snapped me back into my body. She was bent over, half on the sidewalk and road, the microwave slipping in her arms, only inches from the ground. I ran over and offered my hands. We lifted the microwave back on the buggy and my mother sighed like the whole world had just been eased off her shoulders.

'What did I tell you?' She bent over to face me. The breeze carried her usual scent of stale smoke my way. 'What did I tell you to do?'

'Watch the microwave,' I mumbled, feeling like the weight of the world was now on me.

'Yes, that's all I asked. Is that too much for you to handle?'

I shook my head and pouted my lips at her question. I stood up straighter and stomped my foot on the ground to make my point.

'Good,' she said. 'We can't let this fall, you understand. We're so close.'

'I understand,' I assured her, but she looked at me like she didn't believe me. I locked my eyes on the microwave and we resumed our walk.

My mother, the buggy and I took up the entire sidewalk as we made our slow decline down the hill. People noticed us now; they had to pause to let us by or step out onto the road in order to pass us. They lowered their brows, rolled their eyes, kissed their chattering teeth, but my mother ignored them. Maybe she was used to being watched, being seen. Outside of her big hips, she was also a tall woman, nearly six feet. She had eyes the colour of emeralds and chestnut brown hair that could flow down her back like Ariel's if she let it. Sometimes I would brush and braid and run my fingers through her soft strands and do all the things I struggled to do with my own curly, defiant fro. I glanced up at her pursed thin lips, squinted eyes and the tremble in her jaw as she pushed the weight of the microwave down the hill and I thought I could see it. How young and beautiful she was. There were times she would try to prove it to us. In slurred words, she'd gather us for a story. Tell us about the time an older gentleman approached her at a bus stop and told her she had the beauty and physique to become a model. Of course

she didn't believe him. Maybe because she knew to be suspicious of men offering promises, compliments, and a way out. Or maybe because she couldn't see herself the way that he did: beautiful, statuesque, young and with the whole world ahead of her. She took his card, tossed it into the nearest garbage bin and forgot all about it, only to see him a few years later on a talk show promoting his successful modelling agency. Her story would start with a voice loud and thick with passion and always end in a weakening whisper, so we had to lean in to really get a hold of it. So we had to incline to really feel the decline of her pride.

Like I watched her face now to witness the weakening of her resolve. The bite of her lower lip, the reddening of her face, the huffing of her breath like clouds of smoke and the straining of her fingers on the handlebar as we neared the top of the hill. She looked like a warrior at the end of battle. Like Princess Xena after she'd conquered an army: sweaty and spent. I pictured her wielding a sword in the air in victory while screaming the length of her lungs for all the world to hear that she'd conquered the hill, the biting wind, the unyielding bundle buggy, the bulk of the microwave—

But then there was a loud crash. My mother halted and I jumped back, both of us looking at the microwave now face down on the pavement. My pounding heart dropped into my stomach, joined in on the cacophony of hunger cries. My insides felt like a marching band. Drums and trumpets of doom and anguish. My mother seemed to glitch beside me, her finger frozen while pointed at the fallen microwave. Her bottom lip hung open and sputtered words came out. I was too afraid to call her out of it. But then a car flew by, the music blaring, the bass vibrating from the soles of my feet to the rattling of my knees and it appeared to right my mother. Unfreeze her from the trance she was under.

'Help me pick it up.' Her voice was cold as the wind. She bore most of the weight as we lifted the microwave back onto the bundle buggy. She leaned down to inspect it, her eyes and fingers tracing every inch and surface of the machine. 'It looks fine, right?' she whispered, a decimal of hope in the shake of her voice.

I nodded while also examining the silver shine of the microwave. There were a few scratches by the handle, but nothing else looked damaged. It was a miracle. Like a fairy godmother had touched it with her magic wand to keep it intact.

My mother looked down at me now, her face hardening, her eyes green marbles about to pop out of her head. 'This can't happen again, okay?' Her words were icicles poking at my pounding chest.

'I'm sorry,' I mumbled.

'I mean it, keep your eyes glued. You understand me?'

I nodded and glued my gaze to the stupid microwave that was intent on destroying itself.

We merged into the parking lot of the plaza that was bustling with families walking to and from their cars, pushing carts and strollers full of groceries and cooing babies. The No Frills took up most of the plaza and was at the opposite end of the Cash Converters. We made our way towards the pawnshop, which was squashed between a hair salon and a convenience store, with slow and steady steps. I could see the Cash Converters' bright sign, green and blinking: OPEN. I liked going inside and looking at the odd items they sold. It was a store full of random pieces that didn't belong together, once-cherished items turned into disorganized clutter. A large, golden-rimmed clock hung next to a shiny guitar next to a faded painting of the countryside that hung above a keyboard. I often looked for my Disney movies within the chaos, but they were always gone. Some other little girl got to sit down and sing along with Ariel, or soar the star-studded skies with Jasmine and Aladdin.

Vic, the pawnshop owner, reminded me of a snowman. He had a round shiny bald head, a large gut that squeezed between the buttons of his shirt and stumpy legs that made him walk like a penguin. He was also very loud; his greetings always sounded like the announcements at school in the morning, roaring through hallways and into classrooms. The fluorescent lights flickered above us as we stepped further into the shop and Vic's jolly face bellowed:

'Hello! Welcome to Cash Converters! I'm offering 10 per cent off some of my finest jewellery! Come in, take a look!' He squinted as my mother rolled the buggy closer to the counter. 'Oh! It's you.' He grinned; his smile was yellow. 'What have you brought me today?'

'Hi, Vic.' my mother grunted as she lifted the microwave and placed it on the counter.

'A microwave, eh?' He lifted his glasses from his shirt pocket and put them on. 'Hmmm, it looks fine indeed.' He traced his thick fingers along the front of the oven.

'It's good as new; we've only had it a few months,' my mother lied behind a strained smile. 'How much do you think we can get for it?'

'Ah, ah, ah.' He wagged his finger at us. 'I have to check if it works any good.'

'It works fine. We used it last night,' she assured him.

Vic turned his back to us, and my mother looked at me with a steady glare. When we looked back at Vic, he was holding a black rod attached by a curly cord to a rectangular controller.

'What's that?' I pointed at the object in his hand.

'This? Why, this is a magical wand!' His thick eyebrows raised with the glee in his voice. 'It'll scan the microwave and tell me if it's any good.' He turned and plugged in the microwave.

My mother's fingers gripped the edge of the counter, her knuckles

turning translucent. 'I'm telling you Vic, it's brand new.' Her chin quivered along with her assurances.

'Then this'll be quick.' He waved the wand around the outside of the microwave. 'Hmmm.' He concentrated on the rectangular box in his hand. It had a needle on the front that started to jump back and forth. Vic opened the door and began swaying the wand around inside. My mother tapped her foot repeatedly. The wand buzzed. Somewhere, a clock tick-tocked. My stomach groaned. Vic grunted and shook his head. My mother whimpered.

'I'm sorry, this fella's no good,' Vic declared while unplugging the microwave.

'What? What do you mean!' my mother shouted and then, as if catching herself, spoke softly. 'Sorry, I—just, it's brand new.'

'Ah, well it must have been defective when ya got it. Ya see this…' He directed our attention to the needle that was pointed at the green part of the meter. 'When it's on green, it's good to go but when it goes to yellow…' He pushed the needle to the yellow side. 'It's no good. Unfortunately, it was on yellow for most of that scan.'

'But that's impossible! It's good as new!' Her voice raised without restraint.

'It's not safe, ma'am.' He shrugged. 'There's nothing I can do.'

'Please Vic…we just carried it all the way down here,' she pleaded.

'It might look fine, but it's damaged and I don't sell damaged goods,' he said sharply.

She took a deep breath, gripping the edge of the counter like it was the only thing keeping her upright.

'What's in the bag? Any more classic Disney movies?' He peered down at me with a wink and a lift of his double chin.

My mother said nothing, still breathing deeply, staring down at the microwave as if she were telepathically cursing it. Vic was eyeing the bag like it had jewels in it. A man on a mission to find the next gold mine.

'Um…*Pinocchio*.' I mumbled.

'*Pinocchio*?' His eyes bulged through the lens of his glasses. 'Ya know that's a hot commodity right now. I could give ya a hundred dollars for it.'

'A hundred dollars?' my mother spoke suddenly, as if he'd said the magic word and pulled her from her hypnosis. 'Really?' She grabbed the bag so quickly, I nearly stumbled backward.

Sweat droplets sparkled along Vic's bald head as he took hold of the bag and began scavenging through it to find the treasure.

'Ah.' He pulled out the *Pinocchio* VHS, grinning like a Disney villain who'd successfully stolen the magical jewel that would give him God-like powers and abundant riches. But then his eyes squinted as he brought it down onto the counter, 'Look here…the plastic cover is torn.' He held

the bent crinkled corner. 'I can give you 60 dollars.'

'What? But you just said a hundred.' My mother pounded her fist on the edge of the counter.

He shrugged while toying with the tiny tear. 'Take it or leave it.' He turned to give me a side smirk, but I didn't trust him. He was like Jafar or Scar, playing nice to trick their victims into destitution. He could see through my mother's stiff posture, the desperation, the hunger. And I could read the greed and trickery behind his villainous smirk.

My mother took another deep breath like she was preparing to beg or fight, but instead, through tight lips, she relinquished. 'Fine, we'll take it.' And I didn't blame her, she was too tired and hungry to bargain. Sometimes you had to surrender to survive.

Vic placed three 20-dollar bills in my mother's hand slowly, as if to show that he wasn't cheating us. My mother was biting her bottom lip so hard I thought I saw blood. She pocketed the money as we watched Vic tear the entirety of the plastic cover off the *Pinocchio* box. He opened the drawer below him and pulled out a smooth new plastic covering and slid the movie box inside.

'Voila!' He grinned, wiggling his brows like a magician who'd just wooed his audience.

'Seriously?' my mother seethed through her chewed lip.

'Good as new.' He winked at me. I darted my eyes to the floor, wanting to melt into it. My stomach roiled like the anger vibrating off my mother.

My mother said something obscene to Vic as she stepped back from the counter.

'Hey, it's just business.' He threw up his hands in defense, the shine of the new cover reflecting the sheen of his sweaty head.

My mother continued to mumble profanities as she took hold of the buggy and my hand and pulled us toward the exit.

'Hey! You forgot the microwave!' Vic called after us.

A gust of wind whipped us in the face as she pulled me onto the sidewalk. She was walking so fast she was basically dragging me along the street.

'Mom! What about the microwave?' I shouted.

She continued to pull me towards No Frills, the buggy jittering in front of her.

'Mom?!'

She ignored me. I caught a glimpse of the side of her face; her skin was white as snow, her lips pale as paper. She'd turned translucent. My small brown hand appeared to be holding an invisible being. A ghost. I knew what was coming; it wasn't the first time this had happened.

As soon as we reached No Frills, she released her damp hand from mine, abandoned me and the buggy, ran to the side of the grocery store, bent over and threw up. This would happen at different places during different

journeys. Bus stops, public bathrooms, train stations or outside the social service office just before or after a meeting with her worker. She'd turn nearly see-through, find a bush or a toilet or a garbage bin and let loose her insides. Life was *trying*, she'd say, every day a different battle, a different fight. Sometimes it was all too much, and it'd boil up inside until it had nowhere else to go but up and out. She'd wipe her mouth with a tissue or the back of her hand and carry on a little lighter, a little bolder. I stood on the sidewalk with the buggy and watched as yellow liquid spewed from her mouth onto the white-shingled wall. My stomach flip-flopped, a wave of nausea replacing the pains of hunger. I turned away to give her privacy. I observed the active parking lot where families strolled with full carts toward their cars, relieved they were too busy to notice us. I watched a little girl in pigtails throw back her head while laughing in her mother's arms. She giggled and squealed and kicked her dangling legs as her mother threw her up into the air, neither of them afraid she might fall. The little girl brought her arms out like a cross and slid back into her mother's hands with grace. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't imagine myself in her place. High up in the air like that, unafraid, knowing there were safe arms ready to catch me. Knowing I had a mother to count on. Sometimes I had to count on myself. Sometimes it was my mother who needed the catching. I turned to face my mother, who was sitting down on the ground with her knees up and her head leaning towards the smoke grey sky.

I pushed the buggy toward her with ease as it no longer carried the weight of the microwave. The weight of the world.

'Come on, Mom,' I urged softly. She seemed to shrink the closer I got.

'Vic, he just—he…' she stuttered, looking past me, her eyes searching for answers.

'I know, Mom.' I nodded. 'I understand.'

She looked at me like she believed me. Her eyes were so wide and glassy, I saw myself reflected in the green gleam of them. How much taller I looked. How much older. I was eight or nine or 10, it didn't really matter. At some point time had blurred and age became insignificant. I was like Simba forced to grow up after the loss of his father, or Belle trudging through the wolf-infested forest to save her father. Forced to step into a role I didn't quite fit and hoping not to stumble. Not to fall. Because if I did, the whole world would come down on us.

I held out my hand to her, and she took it. Using a bit of my strength and her own, she pushed herself up on two legs. She was tall, wide and towering, beautifully terrifying. Like the blaze of a fire.

'You have something…' I pointed to her chin which was spotted with mustard-coloured drops. The waves in my stomach swayed and I willed the storm to settle.

She wiped the drops away with the back of her hand and took hold of the buggy, stepping on steady legs back onto the sidewalk. Back into the world. With only 60 dollars to spend, there would be no snacks, no *Archie* comic and certainly no freezies. But D would understand. As much as he teased me, he wouldn't hold it against me. We were used to letdowns and less-thans. We expected it. I wouldn't even need to explain. D would take one look at the cart and all the space left in it and he'd understand. He'd see through the bags—the rice, chicken, milk, cereal, eggs and toilet paper—and know we got just enough for us to make it a few more days. And then he'd look past the bags and see the six-pack of beer and he'd know that she got just enough for her to survive the night in a drunken distraction. He'd look us over—both the frustration and relief on our faces—just once and see the damage and the salvage of our mission. But he'd nod at me regardless, confirming what I already knew. That I could handle it. The disappointment, the desperation, the hunger. The journey. Maybe even the whole world.

Monica**Nathan**

CHILDHOOD REINCARNATE

The park is ripe with the smell of uncovered earth. In front of me, a playground swarms with children, their shouts piercing after the quiet of winter. They wear a confusion of clothing: winter coats paired with shorts, sandals with mitts.

Picking my way down a muddy hill, I catch sight of my son, fizzing over with fresh air and too much sugar. Throwing his arms around my legs, he cries out 'Mama' as if he hasn't seen me in years instead of the few hours we spent apart. And I think, same kid, same.

There is a general stickiness about him, the film of a purple moustache, bits of brown dalmatianed on his T-shirt. I tuck his lanky frame under my arm and join the birthday boy's mother clearing a picnic table of streamers, juice boxes and Paw Patrol paper plates. Her eyes are bright, triumphant that the party proceeded with few tears and fewer injuries.

'Fifteen kindergarten kids and only one me.' She says it with the air of a martyr.

I recognize some of the boys from the few times I had volunteered at their school, counting frayed bean bags in an Angry Birds math competition, or layering tinted cellophane in a lesson about secondary colours. I had supervised their self-portraits, peach crayons used down to nubs. One freckled kid I had pushed on a swing during a field trip to Chudleigh's Apple Orchard when a mother from a different class charged at me to ask who I was there with. These instances usually required some form of personal modification. Either grow large, yell, make a scene, or shrink and defuse the situation. In that moment, I had chosen the latter, pointed out my son flying off a slide made efficient with rainwater while my body prickled with embarrassment.

My son leaves my side in favour of gathering his loot bag and a carefully painted dinosaur craft. After a meaningful look, he mumbles a thank you to Max and his mom. The birthday boy is covered in dirt, caked in it so that he resembles stone come to life. I try not to recoil, reminding myself that this is a six-year-old boy and my son's best friend. They have become inseparable since the start of kindergarten, as if the Velcro on their shoes is stuck together. For the school's Twin Day, Max's mother had offered to darken his face before I explained the connotations of blackface, and now I wonder if this is how he would have looked, with mud cracking and flaking around his eyes.

As my son and I walk home, I ask him the standards. Did you have

a good time? What did you do? When I came home from playdates as a child, my mother's first question had always been whether I had eaten enough. We all have our priorities of what makes a person whole.

I affect a casual tone, a neutral face, and finally ask what I most want answered: 'Was everyone nice to you?'

My son's hesitation tightens my belly. My senses are attuned to every sound and movement of his body.

'Max spat on me.' He says it as though reciting one of the random facts he brings home from school. Red and yellow make orange. A square has four sides.

I stand rigid, stunned into stillness. Mama bear, tiger mom, a hundred other animal mothers pulse inside me.

I force my voice into a bright octave. 'By accident?'

'We were climbing the big tree. Max put his hand out to help me, but he looked down and spat in my face.'

Fury presses against the back of my eyelids. 'What did you do?'

'Nothing,' he says.

The outline of a tan circles his left eye where I studiously place eye patches to correct his amblyopia, strengthening a weak connection between his brain and cornea. Tracks stripe the grime of his cheeks. They could be sweat or water, tears or spit.

The official line from school when dealing with a bully is to 'use your WITS.' Walk away. Ignore. Talk it out. Seek help. But in that moment, I am a child again, frustrated and impotent.

'At least the liquid's coming out of his mouth this time,' I say. 'It's usually coming out of his eyes. That boy's always crying.'

The words are out before they are fully formed in my mind, and I feel something loosen in my belly, a taming of the beasts still leaping inside me. The remorse I should feel never comes, and instead, I hope my son tucks away this insult, as shelter or ammunition, for if Max ever bothers him again.

He shrugs his bony shoulders, leaving me with no understanding of whether my words resonate. By the time we reach the end of the block he is happily chatting about a worm he discovered near the base of a slide. I marvel at his ability to forget the ugly episode, knowing that forgetting is a blessing.

I am 12 again. A boy from my class stares at me from the far side of the schoolyard, emboldened by his new haircut. The length of it runs in a straight line around the back of his head, barely brushing his temples. He looks like his friends, and they, with their pale, lanky bodies, a cluster of mushrooms.

He points his chin in my direction, nudges his friends, and sings to

me: 'Paki Birthday to You.' His voice cracks as he holds the high note.

I am off balance, teetering in the leather strap of a swing, suspended before a freefall. Anticipation seems to hang from the kids around me like a wide-open mouth. Half-formed snowballs drip from gloved hands and a snowman's head lies abandoned mid-roll. I study my long brown fingers as they stiffen against the swing's chains and smile through the humiliation, pretending I am in on the joke.

I am more confused than insulted. I'm not from Pakistan. My parents are from India. I speak fluent Bengali at home, play dress-up in my Indian clothes when the occasion calls for it, and know when to place my palms together and echo the inscrutable mantras the priest monotones in Sanskrit while we sit in the converted farmhouse that serves as our community's mandir.

In the evening, I ask my parents what the word 'Paki' means. My father tells me to take it as a compliment and imagine I'd heard 'pakhi'—Bengali for bird—instead. A soft-focused memory resurfaces of him strangling a stranger on a TTC bus, but ours is a 'do as I say' household.

My mother dons a red, oil-stained hoodie on her way to cook fish in the garage. When my brother and I catch sight of it, we race upstairs to close our bedroom doors. The oil-stained sweatshirt is a harbinger of classroom ridicule well before the sharp smells ever reach our noses.

In the summer, I sign up my son for karate, hoping to compensate for his small stature. He is a slight boy, having fallen off the growth chart in infancy—hovering below the first percentile. No surprise coming out of me. I had been lanky all my life. 'Tang tang skinny' my father called me, wagging his index finger from side to side as if illustrating a sapling bending in the wind.

The sensei, kneeling to my son's height, asks him to take a jab at his hands, holding them up in a 'don't shoot me' pose. My son, looking overwhelmed in his ghi, keeps his hands at his sides and says, 'hands are for hugging.' There is little relief in having a gentle child.

We visit the playground for my son's first ever homework assignment—an art collage with fall leaves. I promise myself that I will be hands off, allow him to fail, reject the helicopter parenting I grew up with. But as my son peels the brittle browned leaves from the ground, I steer him towards the newly fallen red maples, still intact, their bright reds bleeding into yellow.

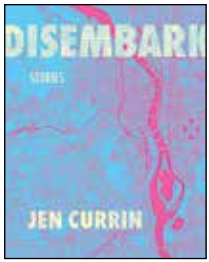
Leaves bagged, my son points to a sandbox where Max sits surrounded by plastic trucks. My son has forgotten the spitting incident, but I remember enough for the both of us. I am an elephant mother with a goldfish son.

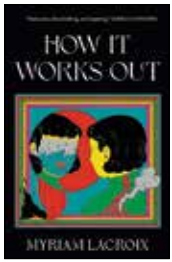
The boys make lopsided tracks in the sand with a motley collection of

construction vehicles while I make small talk with Max's mom. My son pulls too hard on the bed of a bright yellow dump truck and sand flies into Max's eyes. I step forward ready to intervene, a rubber band pulled taut. But Max only laughs, and with a layer of sand still covering his face, offers my son a toy excavator, its back wheels missing. Their bodies, backlit against the sun, cast long shadows across the pit, and my son and Max spend the late afternoon shifting dirt from one dark profile to the other.

REVIEWS

FICTION





Jen Currin, *Disembark*, House of Anansi, 2024
Myriam Lacroix, *How It Works Out*, Doubleday Canada, 2024

In story collections by Jen Currin and Myriam Lacroix, relationships take pride of place. They're bumpy, rocky, unpredictable and volatile; they endure despite the odds or flame out in a moment or subside as time inevitably passes; they even involve different species and planes of existence.

Nimble, irreverent storytellers, Currin and Lacroix deliver results that are delightful and artful and clever, books containing hours of inventive, guffaw-worthy fun.

Both collections are showcases for authors with something to say about infinite possibilities for the short story form and with points to raise (some jaded, some despairing, many of them plain funny in a blackly humorous kind of way) about what beings reveal via their pairings.

In the case of Currin, I thought I was prepared. I'd read *Hider/Seeker*, Currin's debut story collection, and expected spare and pensive accounts of urbanites on quests—seekers hopeful to find peace or a eureka that might help free them from the burdens of an unfortunate past or present.

While the dozen stories of *Disembark* do display some continuity, they're looser. A pleasing volubility replaces the former concision. The narrators appear freer, which can also mean less in control, and plights, while undeniable, range from impossible (dead romance, dead-end job) to fantastical. Comic wit animates them too, often so.

Still, relationships are Currin's forte. They are front and centre in 'My Tumour,' which traces a fragile and distant relationship between a sister and brother whose adult thoughts wind back to 'the dreary house, the smell of mildew and gin, their mother's slurred stories dragging the day

out until it blurred into evening.' Interplay within a newly formed family informs 'Banshee,' where the narrator and her wife Matilde—already knee-deep in a relationship slump—awaken to find a bald, wizened woman, 'a little over five feet tall, a lumpy figure with large breasts in a black robe,' humming in their apartment. She's a banshee. Ordinarily a harbinger of death, this contemporary version avidly smokes marijuana and dresses in a leopard print minidress. As the world burns—'it was hot and getting hotter'—the narrator reflects on apocalyptic news and respite from it.

Set in Vancouver during 'the era of answering machines,' 'Sister' captures episodes from the tangled romance of Elise and Marin, which is tension-ridden and worsened when a friend—a source of jealousy—visits with her boyfriend. When the evening together goes off the rails and the friendship crumbles soon after, Marin seeks to help her girlfriend with one of the healing crystals Elise adores. Marin's inability to locate it speaks volumes.

In 'The Golden Triangle,' Max recalls herself decades ago. She was 20 then and resided in Denver, where she felt unencumbered but also far less settled. 'There's always some compromise,' she remarks. Max remembers Del, a free-spirited crush who moved to New York City following their youthful benders that starred romances, nightlife and intoxicants. Relatively comfortable in routine in the present day, Max and her partner witness what could have been via Del's postcards, which reveal her enchantment with the constant rush of people and the bars open till all hours.

'Joey, When She Knew Him' glances back at youth too, when Sid and Joey worked together at Pets 'R Us and scrimped for hairspray and black eyeliner. Now going by Richard, Joey has success and status that has eluded Sid. Other pieces, such as 'The Knife,' 'The Charismacist' and 'Dark and Rainy,' revisit scenes from the past. They conclude with ambivalence: there's a lesson of some kind to learn, but its exact nature is far from plain.

In *Disembark,* adulthood is a quandary too. Set 'in these challenging times,' 'The Dean Regrets' anatomizes the befuddled day of Laurel, an adjunct professor whose colleague advises her to 'lie lie lie. And smile smile smile.' Informed by a dean that 'there's going to be some job loss….I mean, work reduction,' Laurel intuits that all the correct behaviour in the world is not going to secure her position. Near the start of the title story, Jolene's mother offers her a cigarette on a ferry. She explains, 'Sometimes people take it up here. It's something to do.' Jolene soon meets Tanvir Singh, Dean of Energetic Arts at New Harvard. He asks, 'Do you remember how you got in the water?' Turns out, the ferry is the Stygian sort, and Jolene has arrived in an afterlife after drowning. Her

guides include her mother, who asks, 'Honey, why did it get so bad after I left?' Serious but quick and funny in an absurd way, 'Disembark' represents Currin's essence: serious-minded and probing but not averse to a well-timed joke or a far-fetched scenario to examine in detail.

The gist of *How It Works Out* is a trick—and, whoa, it's a captivating one—that starts at the dedication: 'To Allison, I figured it out. I know how it works out.' In the next eight stories, each one featuring Myriam and Allison, Lacroix's protagonists are parents, celebrities, athletes, clowns, authors, entrepreneurs, cannibals, household pets and the subject of a true-crime movie.

Coupledom is a through line in Lacroix's collection, but whatever *It* might be (life, love, a romantic relationship never without hiccups, the story collection itself), *It* works out in ways the reader cannot begin to fathom. This is a good—and highly amusing—thing, a terrific premise.

For instance, 'Love Bun,' the second story, introduces Myriam, who is writing her thesis on trauma in the works of realist writers, and Allison, a call centre worker with hopes of being a pop musician. Out skating, Myriam hip checks a kid to protect Allison, whose index finger is nevertheless severed. Myriam eats it. Banned from UBC 'for laziness and generally making other students uneasy,' Myriam catches Allison in a nursery, where she's chewed two toes off their infant. Other children (Kale, Framboise) are eyed as assets, flesh for the taking, and a boon to their relationship: 'It was potent stuff. A few scrapings of a knee and we'd rise astral through the ceiling, make love all night among the constellations.' The duo wind up buying a sheep farm. Lacroix is not a moralist.

By 'The Feature,' the final story, Myriam and Allison are the subject of Vancouver-shot *Love Bun*, where FF (for '*face de foetus*'), an aspiring actress from small town Quebec, is cast as Myriam, 'a mentally unwell lesbian' who develops 'an addiction to her lover's flesh, a sort of gore-camp allegory for sapphic passion, or, as the synopsis put it, *What girls get up to when the boys aren't around.*' Naturally, FF's relationship with Karla S., who's playing Allison, gets complicated.

A page before 'The Feature,' 'Anthropocene' comes to a spectacular close. In it, Allison, a newly appointed Climate Ambassador at Glacier Air, a formerly bush-league air conditioning company in Vancouver and now 'one of the highest-grossing corporations in North America,' has just been turfed by Myriam, the company's obnoxious and acid-tongued CEO, who's a 'total slut for power' and sexual submissive.

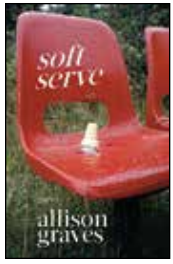
Myriam meets Claire, Allison's double, in 'Love and the Dark,' where attempts to become her 'best self' produce iffy results. Allison, a 'minor celesbian' in 'The Sequel,' tells a tale as old as time: although sick of the socially mediated narcissism of her partner Myriam (who eventually dies 'a tragic death after eating a contaminated salad' in Italy), Allison

nevertheless agrees to a wedding/media tour that will help revive their fading stardom—attained a decade earlier with the publication of their bestselling book, *How It Works Out: Building a Healthy Lesbian Relationship in the Patriarchy*.

Tired of being 'the wrong-for-each-other couple' in 'How It Works Out' Myriam and Allison trade arguments for long-distance running. Eventually an 'entity, a large mass of muscle made up of two lady-shaped lobes,' they attain a kind of perfection that's predicated on demolishing their half-marathon competitors. In the objectively shortest and arguably oddest piece, 'Mantis,' Allison has a tail and Myriam calls a terrarium home; one's a dog, the other's an insect.

With gags and satiric impulses and a well-honed sense of ridiculousness, Lacroix could do stand-up. With Myriam and Allison, whether squabbling celebrities or pets stuck at home, she shows herself as a student of 'sapphic passion.' A funny one, yes, but an observant one as well.

—Brett Josef Grubisic



Allison Graves, *Soft Serve,* Breakwater Books Ltd., 2023
Jennifer Falkner, *Above Discovery*, Invisible Publishing, 2023

Sometimes, it's easy to mistake melancholy for ennui. Boredom and sadness often show up at the party wearing the same shirt. Catch them on a good night and they may finish each other's sentences.

If you need an introduction to the unwitting pair, Allison Graves's debut story collection, *Soft Serve*, may help break the ice. Although a few branch out into Ontario and New York City, most of the stories in *Soft Serve* centre around middle-class Newfoundlanders and their relationship troubles. As it turns out, Newfoundland isn't just a place where, as one character puts it, 'The people [are] nicer and more understanding,'

and the houses are 'connected like a bunch of handshakes.' *Soft Serve* shows these often romanticized islanders as struggling, questioning—wanting more out of life or maybe (can you blame them?) out of the people they've chosen to spend their lives with. The airy deceit of failed marriages and relationships on the brink abound. Secrets are kept, but usually with a reservation that stifles dramatics. Instead, Graves often chooses understatement and negative space in style and narrative as her technique of choice. She has no trouble giving us a cutting observation when she wants, as in 'Bad Ending,' where she writes: 'She was sensitive and obsessive: a bad combination.' But most of the time, she opts for restraint. It's a good thing she does. It's hard to imagine stories like 'Swiffer Wetjet' and 'My Friend, My Parrot,' wonderful examples of pacing and economy, with any more detail.

The stories themselves rarely end in revelation, if only because, most of the time, closure and love just don't mix. We witness many characters either returning to everyday life questionably altered or wondering if they'll ever change. The ones that do transform may not do so positively, or it may be in the face of forces beyond their control, like with the unchecked desire of others in 'Winter Salad' or the difficulties of age in 'Staying Alive.' The more stable variables are how Graves's protagonists reach out into the world, ready to get their fingers pinched by an insensitive lover or an ignorant parent. There's a lot they want to say to their friends or teachers, many of whom are even more flawed, but they spend most of their time avoiding it. The characters in *Soft Serve* revolve around each other like the same pole of different magnets, keeping an invisible void at the centre that repels them from broaching the unspeakable. Sometimes, as in the case of the earlier story 'Eat Me,' it's even both. The most common denominator for them all is their acute sense of middle-class suffering, whether it's the young women who occupy most of the stories or the older couples who fill another handful. As with a predecessor, Mary Gaitskill, who Graves references in 'Shallow Water,' you're left so moved by the mysteries you forget about the commonalities. We all suffer. We all love. We all try to move beyond.

If *Soft Serve* is focused on that eternal problem of minuscule scale—the one-on-one relationship—then Jennifer Falkner's *Above Discovery*, another debut story collection, could be said to place these same types of conflicts against larger set pieces. Falkner's speculative stories are preoccupied with catastrophe, often within grand naturalistic settings, such as Mt. Sinai or the Yukon. Their characters struggle against big, swaying shifts in history and the ensuing struggle to handle them. The narrators often play the part of everyday intellectuals in the form of artists, academics or scientists. Very few pieces take place in present-day

Canada, set instead in historical periods like ancient Greece, the Klondike Gold Rush or Elizabethan England. Some of the stories take us into the near future, where climate change and global conflict have altered the natural world but have left those permanent human issues of desire and relationships untouched.

If there is a science in some of the more science fiction-oriented pieces, it's the twins of biology and ecology. Animals pop up everywhere, in dreams and abandoned houses, either as plot devices or metaphors, sometimes both. Just as common are the flora of Falkner's stories, and occasionally, as in one of the standouts, 'Sometimes a Tree,' this biological bent, our questionable global future, exploitative relationships and Falkner's terse but poetic style merge to make for some engrossing results. Even though the division between nature, history and society is just as blurry as depicted, it's still remarkable how often these stories use climate and ecology to bring us further into their characters to exacerbate the hopelessness. As the narrator of the story 'Nineteen Above Discovery,' says: 'It seems impossible that there is a fortune under all that muck. Or that the two of us could even extract it if there is.'

In *Above Discovery,* platonic and romantic love aren't at the forefront. If they become the focal points, the dynamic is rarely conventional, and it's never a question of boredom interfering with a plain life. A story like 'Columbina' may be a tale of that common trope of codependent friendship, as we've seen in *Soft Serve*, but what happens when one of those characters is a marionette, quite literally animated by the opposite party? We may know the Pygmalion story all too well, but how would we deal with its inverse, as in 'The Stonecutter's Masterpiece,' where a real live woman is turning to stone and demands that a sculptor turn her into a work of art? These types of twists populate *Above Discovery* in abundance. When done right, they set in motion a subtle reversal that gives these stories their unique atmosphere.

And while love in *Above Discovery* certainly won't save anyone from impending doom or material uncertainty, that doesn't mean we should avoid it altogether. Falkner's characters rarely have time for socializing in the typical sense. Still, they manage to scrape together their own meaningful lives, even when they may be more interested in surviving the cold to stake a claim or touring in Shakespeare's theatre company than patching things up with a flaky ex. 'Lion in the Desert,' for instance, is a romance set within the context of an archeological dig. War and politics—those grand, sweeping forces—render any kind of optimistic outcome impossible, but the characters fight for themselves anyway. By the end, the desert becomes an otherworldly location where history and fate commingle.

However, it would be false to say that every story in the collection is a

conflict of nature vs. humanity. There are plenty of memorable relationships throughout, just as there are memorable characters. 'The Anchoress' shows one of Falkner's more contemplative protagonists, a religious ascetic who may be having visions of her own:

> She prays for her mother's soul as she was instructed to do. She wonders if her father is still living. She prays for his as well, in case he is not. She prays for the villagers, that they may be preserved from sickness, that all their babes are delivered safe and well. She prays for the crops. As she prays, she can see, tucked under the warm soil, the barley seeds splitting, unfurling, sending roots deeper into the earth.

Whether she actually heals the pilgrims who make their way to her church is anybody's guess, much less her own. And the anchoress isn't the only character who lingers in the mind. How many depictions of Shakespeare show the playwright as a beleaguered head writer, parrying insults and witticisms from his troupe?

What's more, many of these characters boast their own philosophies, some of which, as in 'A Complicated Kind of Falling,' become unexpectedly poignant meditations on the role of the artist:

> No matter how perfect the scene or fast-paced the patter, [audiences] want more. They want better. Better than anyone can possibly give. But the player is infinitely worse. For he is greedy enough to want to be the only one to give it to them.

True words, indeed. Leave it to these two debut collections, which have set the standard high, to give us the scenes we crave. Whether it's Newfoundland ennui or pilgrimages to Mt. Sinai, we're sure to want more.

—Stephen Meisel

RM Vaughan, *Pervatory*, Coach House Books, 2023
Russell Smith, Ed., *Secret Sex: An Anthology*, Dundurn Press, 2024

Pervatory and *Secret Sex* are so saturated with portraits of sex that their pages practically drip with the fluids that fill their respective narratives: sweat, saliva and semen, to name a few. Although both books are different in form, they each showcase their authors' keen awareness of the power that words hold to arouse. In a story from *Secret Sex* entitled 'My Skin Isn't What It Used to Be,' the narrator admits to his girlfriend, upon receiving a gift of porn magazines, that 'images don't stir [him] as much as words,' and he goes on to explain to the reader that 'if a writer is going to describe a sexual experience, the writer should know a thing or two about the English language.' The minds behind *Pervatory* and *Secret Sex* expertly demonstrate, through each description of a kiss, nibble, spank or caress, that they live up to this qualification. While both texts journey deep into the pornographic, neither can be dismissed as mere smut. Whether capturing the excitement of a new Hinge match or highlighting the banality of BDSM, both books present scenes of intimacy that expand conventional understandings of what constitutes the erotic, emphasizing that experiences of sex are as beautifully varied as the people who participate in and co-create them.

The novel *Pervatory* was edited and posthumously published three years after the death of author RM Vaughan in 2020. It is narrated by a middle-aged writer named Martin who, dissatisfied with the direction his personal and professional lives have taken in Toronto, relocates to Berlin, a city known for its flourishing kink scene. There, Martin indifferently passes his time by moving between leather bars, kink clubs and dungeon parties, largely underwhelmed by the spectacles of sex that surround him. Considering his perception of sex throughout his life as a whole, Martin confesses that many of the highlights of his storied sexual history 'became exciting or ironically glamorous only after the fact,' and that during most of his sexual encounters, he has found himself feeling 'stupid and detached.' His dissatisfaction increases in the German capital, in a city that, according to him, offers 'the exact and correct

atmosphere for casual sex.' He observes that in Berlin, 'You can take the dog to the park or take yourself around the corner and bend over a fisting bench in a filthy piss-stained backroom. It's all the same. Nothing seems to register with Berliners as novel or extreme.' Through his blasé catalogue of hookups, Martin strips Berlin's kink scene of its transgressive mystique, while he nonetheless continues to frequent the clubs and bars, hopeful he may happen upon an unlikely glimmer of excitement.

Martin's sexual ennui eventually evaporates at a kink club on 'Blue Monday Pansexual Chillout Night'—an event he describes as '[b]oring straight people night.' As he stands in the middle of the dimly lit venue, feeling 'about as sexy as a potted carnation,' he spots Alexandar, a brawny, well-kempt man who introduces himself with a kiss before swiftly and skillfully overpowering Martin, bringing him to orgasm with two fingers and 'the sound of hand hitting rump,' and then disappearing without a goodbye. Captivated, Martin spends weeks searching for Alexandar in Berlin's gay bars and sex clubs to no avail, until eventually the two men encounter one another at a punk bar, where within minutes of arriving, Martin is in a back alley, playing the role of Alexandar's submissive. A third chance meeting solidifies the bond between the two men, and they begin a relationship—Martin's first real relationship—founded upon an intense physical connection that makes Martin feel both euphoric and, at times, endangered. Martin (usually) delights in being pushed to the frontiers of pain and humiliation, and he wonders, 'How do you tell the man you love that you love him the most when you think he's going to kill you?'

As Martin's affection for Alexandar evolves, however, he struggles to learn more about his beloved and becomes increasingly wary of the stranger who shares his bed. Martin ponders not only the minor details of Alexandar's life—for instance, has he 'shaved his bum'?—and speculates too about more significant details, such as Alexandar's nationality and even his occupation, as Alexandar's biography remains opaque to Martin throughout the duration of their romance. Martin is hopeful he may come to know more about his lover during a spontaneous night out with Alexandar's friends, but several shots of a mystery liqueur rob Martin of consciousness, and when he awakens, he finds himself in the centre of a strange and violating ritual. As the novel reaches its climax, Alexandar's inscrutability foments a profound paranoia within Martin, which develops into a madness that ultimately renders him a questionable narrator. Dark, irreverent, perceptive and lewd, *Pervatory* yields neither to readerly expectations nor to conventional sexual mores as it presents a lustful love story that is as troubling as it is mystifying.

■

The story anthology *Secret Sex* offers a different variety of mystery as it presents 24 pieces of short fiction that all share a general focus on sex. What makes *Secret Sex* unique is that each story is anonymously authored. While readers are told which Canadian writers have contributed to the collection, they are not privy to the knowledge of which story belongs to which writer. In the introduction to the collection, editor Russell Smith discusses 'how much authors…agonize over the question of how people are going to respond to any description of sex, and how nervous authors are about accidentally revealing details of their own sexual predilections by fictionalizing them.' *Secret Sex* is an experiment that sets out to find what prominent voices in Canadian literature will dream up with the freedom that privacy affords, as it seeks to push back against the sort of sex-negativity that produces *Literary Review*'s annual Bad Sex in Fiction Award, as well as provide imaginative alternatives to the 'clumsily written S/M erotica' that often upholds misogynistic and heteronormative sexual ideals. The stories that comprise *Secret Sex* range from raunchy to romantic, from heartfelt to hilarious, as they celebrate sex in its many forms and genres.

The opening story, 'Sext,' is a transcript of a cheeky message exchange that both begins and ends with a classic 'u up?' text. 'Calliope,' on the other hand, takes place in Paris, centuries earlier, and is narrated by a disembodied brain that spends years witnessing the sexual exploits of its human companion, a young doctor at the Pitié Salpêtrière, until it is unknowingly conscripted into playing an essential role in one of the doctor's romantic science experiments. 'The Politics of Passion' details the beginnings of an unlikely romance between a white government lawyer and an Anishinaabe community leader who spot one another across a conference table during treaty negotiations, while 'Party, Party, (Sex) Party' presents an evening in the life of a broke international grad student who desperately searches for a toilet on his way to an orgy in Montreal.

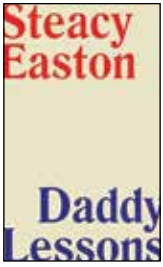
Each in their own way, the stories 'Maria' and 'After Nicolette' explore the healing power of masturbation, when after reconnecting with desire after breakups, their characters are newly able to access the joy of self-love. Despite falling prey to a sextortion scheme, the protagonist of 'Maria' realizes that he is grateful for a catfish who helps him to realize that 'he's alive in the world, there's nothing shameful in that.' On a trip to Lunenburg, Nova Scotia, the freshly divorced protagonist of 'After Nicolette' similarly feels enlivened after an evening of unexpected flirtation and connection. Alone in their hotel room, they consummate a new relationship to themself, imagining a full moon bursting 'into infinite glittering constellations that sear so bright on the inside of [their] eyelids' as they '[c]autiously, curiously' ride self-generated 'waves of pleasure.'

Driven by curiosity and the pursuit of bodily pleasure, characters

demonstrate, through playing with themselves, that sex—whether solo, partnered or in a group—can be a creative space of play. The diversity of ways in which the authors who contribute to *Secret Sex* take up the task of writing about this taboo topic reflects the degree to which both fiction and sex can be generative spaces of imagination. *Pervatory*'s narrator, Martin, gestures to this same idea when he remarks at a 'puppy-play party' that although 'all S/M is bad theatre,' the scene around him is 'bad improv, open-stage night at the Second City.' Production quality aside, his references to theatre and improv emphasize the capacity for cultivating play that resides within the sphere of sex. In their anonymity, the writers responsible for *Secret Sex* have space to play freely with words and narrative as they produce a set of stories that are fun, poignant and bold.

—Avery Qurashi

NON-FICTION



Mike Barnes, *Sleep Is Now a Foreign Country*, Biblioasis, 2023
Steacy Easton, *Daddy Lessons*, Coach House Books, 2023

Mike Barnes's memoir of madness begins with a scene of him reading about Picasso's *Guernica* when 'something caused [him] to look up from the book.' He realizes the date is April 26, '[t]he same day as the Guernica attack, exactly seventy years later.' He experiences some time-space vertigo, is maybe hallucinating and first mentions 'going insane' in a footnote. And so begins *Sleep Is Now a Foreign Country*, a mind-spiraling, free-associating book that eludes easy meaning making.

The tricky business of writing about madness is whether to portray the going mad or the having been mad. The former runs the risk of inaccessibility,

the latter of imposing order on what is inherently a disordered experience. Barnes's book, to its credit and its detriment, is an attempt to do both at once. Merely 85 pages, the book depicts two psychotic breaks, decades apart. Before the first, the young Barnes knows as a matter of unquestioned fact that he will go mad, and he glumly accepts his fate:

> I had left my parents' house abruptly, taking my shaving kit and a few clothes. Not just to be free of them—I was eighteen—but to find a quiet place where *it* could happen. I felt a shame about what was coming and for as long as possible I wanted it to happen out of sight…. Something ancient knew all this, perhaps had coded it through millennia, and had procedures even in the midst of chaos.

The book proceeds according to this internal system of logic, where signs of approaching madness—Barnes calls them 'transmissions'—are hints about an impending event, a big inevitable *it*. The nature of this event is the book's main propulsive question, and Barnes builds up to it, or around it, through a series of memories laid out like clues. There is a broken watch, a dream of a childhood crush, another classmate's markings in the dirt. These memories jump in time, and include seemingly unrelated footnotes, resulting in a disorienting kaleidoscope of anecdotes, each pointing from a different angle towards Barnes's madness.

Despite the confounding cumulation of scenes in this book, there is a compelling momentum built into Barnes's narrative, with all action marching towards this mysterious event and the narrator's acceptance of its inevitability. There is a sense of suspense in the book's early pages, although it soon becomes evident that a payoff will not be provided in the way we might expect. Barnes is not interested in recounting a linear tale of his descent into madness, where symptoms appear, a mental breakdown occurs, and there is some kind of recovery or transformation. Instead, Barnes brings the reader on a journey outside of cause and effect, past and present, even sanity and insanity. The present-day Barnes seems to have no better understanding of his mind than the young Barnes waiting for madness to show up at his door. By the end of the book, it is unclear if the big event has happened, if it will, or if it even matters at all. Barnes has created an unreliable narrator out of himself, where symptoms have become literary devices, and even the most intriguing bits of writing point to an unsolvable mystery. Barnes, at least, seems wholly aware that his book's framework makes slippery business out of its interpretation: 'similes, like everything else, depend for their meanings on the frame that bounds them, on how far they're allowed to go. Meaning is a bonsai operation.' As such, the frame that bounds *Sleep Is Now a Foreign Country* provides a tenuous support for its psychic investigation. We learn almost nothing about Barnes outside of his psychosis; his diagnosis, treatment, sanity, personal or professional life are

left all but unexamined. We have no context for who Barnes is outside of the mechanisms of his thinking about his own madness. Barnes writes early on in the book, 'I needed to believe, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, that my own life followed discernible patterns.' However, reading *Sleep Is Now a Foreign Country* feels like attempting to penetrate a private experience governed by an incomprehensible logic. The prose is often elegant, and the subject matter of madness is rich terrain for investigating the human mind, but it's ultimately a wild goose chase where the chase happens in a maze, the goose becomes a ghost and the past and present collide.

Where Barnes's memoir is firmly rooted in impressionistic, elusory meaning, Steacy Easton's latest collection of personal essays, *Daddy Lessons*, wants desperately for the reader to understand. The short essays (Easton calls them lessons) are depictions of a child having adult experiences: ones they shouldn't, ones that are imposed upon them—sometimes violent, sometimes tender—but each functioning as a way to understand sexuality, love, joy and an immense amount of pain. Like many queer memoirs, *Daddy Lessons* is hyper sexual; the word 'cock' appears in the first sentence of the prologue, and there are many graphic depictions of sex. However, Easton's book seems more interested in synthesizing experiences into a sort of philosophy of queer living than in titillating the reader.

Easton's essays tell the growing up story of a young queer body controlled by a very thirsty mind. We learn that Easton grew up Mormon, was sent to an Anglican boarding school as a young teenager and later sought further extremes of spiritual-cum-physical experiences in the world of rodeos and bathhouses:

> I learned that my body was this dangerous feral thing, to be moulded by touch, by violence, and eventually by desire. I was sent away to make me a boy, in order to make me a man; aping the boy, aping the man, a set of ambitions that were shattered, then reassembled, then shattered, then assembled yet again.

These essays make it at once shocking and relatable how a child can put themselves in so much danger yet still handle the often tragic outcome with such wonder and curiosity. At a young age Easton became aware they possessed 'a body that seemed to come alive only in the seeking of pleasure,' and that this pleasure often involved a degree of risk. This led to a life governed by desire, in a world full of men seeking to take advantage of it.

Easton announces in the book's prologue: 'I am writing pornography here. Not only explicit references to sexuality, but a form meant to excite and entice the body.' This isn't the entire story, nor is it necessarily a

misdirection. To label the book as pornography as such is to define what it does and doesn't do, and even this categorization is an intellectual act rather than an embodied one. But by squeezing the pornography out of sexual trauma, Easton shows how the discrete parts do not add up to the whole, and the truth exists somewhere between the often contradictory components:

> The violence in the school—none of that I wanted, none of that was under my control, and I had no say in how the Dorm Master touched my body and usurped my desires. But in the privacy of my own head, in those sweet, quiet moments, I could imagine a life where fucking him was an act of liberation.

All told, this book is incredibly horny and there is some great sex writing, but it is mixed with equal parts cultural references; Foucault, Barthes, Beyoncé and PJ Harvey are just as present as the bodies having sex.

With *Daddy Lessons*, Easton demonstrates that the body is a text with infinite ways to be read. Pleasure can come from pain, sex is ripe for analysis, and it is all rich terrain for self-understanding. It is no spoiler to give away the final line of the book: 'I know that Daddy isn't good for me, and I want a Daddy anyway.' It's a closing line for the queer ages, pointing to the nuances, contradictions and ironies in a person's sexual awakening.

—Michael Lake

BOOKS RECEIVED

Books from these fine presses have recently arrived at EVENT for review (May – August 2024):

Anvil Press • Biblioasis • Breakwater Books Ltd.
Brindle & Glass (TouchWood Editions) • Book*hug Press
Coach House Books • Doubleday Canada • Dundurn Press
Fish Gotta Swim Editions • Harbour Publishing • House of Anansi Press
Invisible Publishing • McGill-Queen's University Press
Mother Tongue Publishing • Ronsdale Press

Apologies to anyone we may have missed. To have your title considered for review in EVENT, please forward review copies to:

EVENT
Attn. Marisa Grizenko, Reviews Editor
PO Box 2503
New Westminster, BC
V3L 5B2
Canada

Note: Review copies that do not get reviewed in the magazine are donated to the Carnegie Centre Library in Vancouver, the Royal Columbian Hospital Auxiliary, and to various literacy programs in BC.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

JOHN WALL BARGER is the author of six books of poems. His book of essays on poetics and film, *The Elephant of Silence*, came out in spring 2024 with LSU Press. He's a contract editor for Frontenac House, lives in Vermont, and lectures in the Writing Program at Dartmouth College.

DAVID BARRICK is the author of the poetry collection *Nightlight* (Palimpsest Press, 2022), as well as two chapbooks. His poems have been published in *Grain*, *Best Canadian Poetry 2024*, *The Fiddlehead*, *The Malahat Review*, *Arc* and other literary journals. He teaches at Western University in London, ON.

JOE BAUMANN is the author of four collections of short fiction, most recently *Where Can I Take You When There's Nowhere to Go* (BOA Editions), and the novels *I Know You're Out There Somewhere* (Deep Hearts YA, 2023) and *Lake Drive* (Rebel Satori Press, 2023). He was a 2019 Lambda Literary Fellow in Fiction. joebaumann.wordpress.com.

NICHOLAS BRADLEY is the author of two books of poetry: *Rain Shadow* (University of Alberta Press, 2018) and *Before Combustion* (Gaspereau Press, 2023). His poems have appeared in a number of journals and anthologies, including *Best Canadian Poetry 2024*. He lives in Victoria, in lək^{w}əŋən territory.

MICHELLE POIRIER BROWN is a Cree Métis writer. Her poetry appears in numerous magazines including *Arc*, *CV2*, *Grain*, *The Greensboro Review*, Plenitude, The Puritan, untethered and *Vallum*. Michelle's debut book *You Might Be Sorry You Read This* was published by the University of Alberta Press in 2022. www.skyblanket.ca.

MORGAN CHARLES is a writer based in Ottawa. Her writing has appeared in The Ex-Puritan, *The Malahat Review*, EVENT and *Reader's Digest*. Her essay 'Plagued' won *The Fiddlehead*'s Creative Nonfiction Contest and was nominated for a National Magazine Award (2021). Morgan is currently completing her MFA in UBC's Creative Writing Program.

NEIL GRIFFIN is an award-winning poet and essayist. His work lives in The Narwhal, The Tyee and on CBC Books (as well as dwelling in the unsearchable archives of various extant and extinct literary journals). His website, which is rarely updated, is www.neilcgriffin.com.

BRETT JOSEF GRUBISIC is the author of five novels, including *My Two-Faced Luck* (Now or Never Press, 2021) and *Oldness; or, the Last-Ditch Efforts of Marcus O* (Now or Never Press, 2018). He resides on Salt Spring Island, BC.

TEYA HOLLIER (she/her) is a graduate of York University's creative writing program. Her work has recently appeared in *The Soap Box Press*, *Grain*, *Room* and Verses Magazine. She is the 2022 recipient of the Bronwen Wallace Award for Emerging Writers (fiction). Hollier lives in Toronto and is currently working on her first novel.

MARK ANTHONY JARMAN is the author of *Touch Anywhere to Begin*, *Czech Techno*, *Knife Party at the Hotel Europa*, *19 Knives*, and the travel book *Ireland's Eye*. He edits fiction for *The Fiddlehead* and co-edits a new magazine, *Camel*. He edited *Best Canadian Stories 2023*, and *Burn Man*, his selected stories, was *The New York Times* 2024 Editors' Choice.

JÓNÍNA KIRTON, a Red River Métis and Icelandic poet, was 61 when she received the 2016 Vancouver Mayor's Arts Award for an Emerging Artist in

the Literary Arts category. Her third book, *Standing in a River of Time*, was released in 2022 with Talonbooks.

MICHAEL LAKE is a writer and bookseller living in rural Nova Scotia, where he runs a small bookshop out of a former church.

MELISSA LAM is a second-generation Canadian and a graduate of SFU's Writer's Studio. Born in Toronto, she now lives in Vancouver, where she writes, teaches, and plays with her husband and son.

ALEX LESLIE has published two collections of poetry, *The things I heard about you* (Nightwood, 2014) and *Vancouver for Beginners* (Book*hug, 2019), shortlisted for the City of Vancouver Book Award and winner of the Western Canada Jewish Book Award, and two collections of short fiction, *People Who Disappear* (Freehand, 2012) and *We All Need to Eat* (Book*hug, 2018), shortlisted for a BC Book Prize.

ANNICK MACASKILL's poetry collections include *Shadow Blight* (Gaspereau Press, 2022), winner of the Governor General's Award, and *Votive* (Gaspereau Press, 2024). Her fiction has previously appeared in *The Ampersand Review*, Plenitude and Canthius, among others. She lives in Kjipuktuk (Halifax) on the traditional and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq.

STEPHEN MEISEL is a writer in Atlanta, GA. His fiction and reviews have appeared in X-R-A-Y, Maudlin House and *The Southern Review of Books*. His email is meiselstephen@gmail.com.

KHASHAYAR 'KESS' MOHAMMADI (they/them) is a queer, Iranian-born, Toronto-based poet, writer and translator with two poetry collections from Gordon Hill Press, a collaborative project, *G* (Palimpsest Press) and *Daffod*ls* (Pamenar Press). Their translation of Ghazal Mosadeq's *Andarzname* (Ugly Duckling Presse) and their collection *Book of Interruptions* (Wolsak and Wynn) are forthcoming in fall 2025.

MONICA NATHAN is a Pushcart Prize-nominated writer whose work has appeared in *The Fiddlehead*, Barren Magazine, *The Feathertale Review* and other publications. She is a Tin House alumni and a recipient of Diaspora Dialogue's mentorship program. She is a contributing editor at Barren Magazine, an advisor for the Festival of Literary Diversity, and is currently working on her first novel.

MEREDITH QUARTERMAIN's poetry books include *Lullabies in the Real World* (2020), *Vancouver Walking* (2005, winner of the Dorothy Livesay Poetry Prize) and *Nightmarker* (2008), all from NeWest Press, and *Matter* (2008) and *Recipes from the Red Planet* (2010), from Book*hug. From 2014 to 2016, she served as Poetry Mentor in the SFU Writer's Studio program.

AVERY QURASHI is a recent graduate of the UBC English Department's MA program and currently works as an English instructor for international students.

NATALIE RICE is the author of the poetry collection *Scorch* (2023), published by Gaspereau Press. Her second collection will be published by Gaspereau in 2025. Her poems have appeared in Terrain.org, *The Dalhousie Review*, *The Malahat Review* and elsewhere. She lives in Nova Scotia.

TOSH SHERKAT (they/them) is a Persian-Doukhobor settler-of-colour born on Sinixt territory (Nelson, BC). They are an MFA candidate studying poetry at the University of British Columbia (Okanagan) on Syilx territory. Their writing has appeared in *filling Station*, carte blanche, Terrain.org and others, and is forthcoming at *Grain*.

YAEL TOBÓN is a Mexican writer and poet based in Tiohtià:ke (Montreal). Admitted initially into med school, they are currently enrolled in an honours program in English and Creative Writing with a minor in Interdisciplinary Studies in Sexuality. Concerned with the echo of what has been left unsaid, they write about those forgotten corners of the memory, the tender process of loving and the marvelous mundane.

AMI XHERRO is a poet, translator and scholar working across English, French and Albanian. She is the author of *Drank, Recruited* (Guernica Editions, 2023), which was longlisted for the Pat Lowther Award. She is a co-founder of the Toronto Experimental Translation Collective, which attempts to push the practices of translation beyond the tongue and further into the body.

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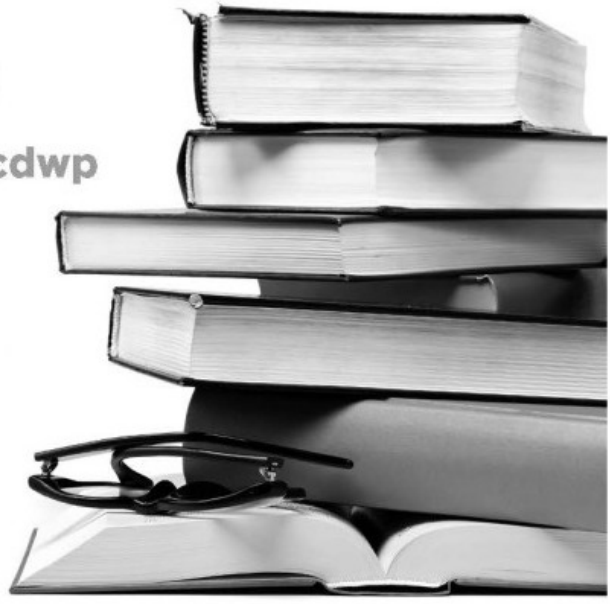

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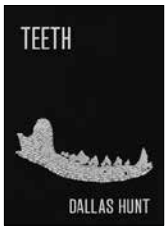

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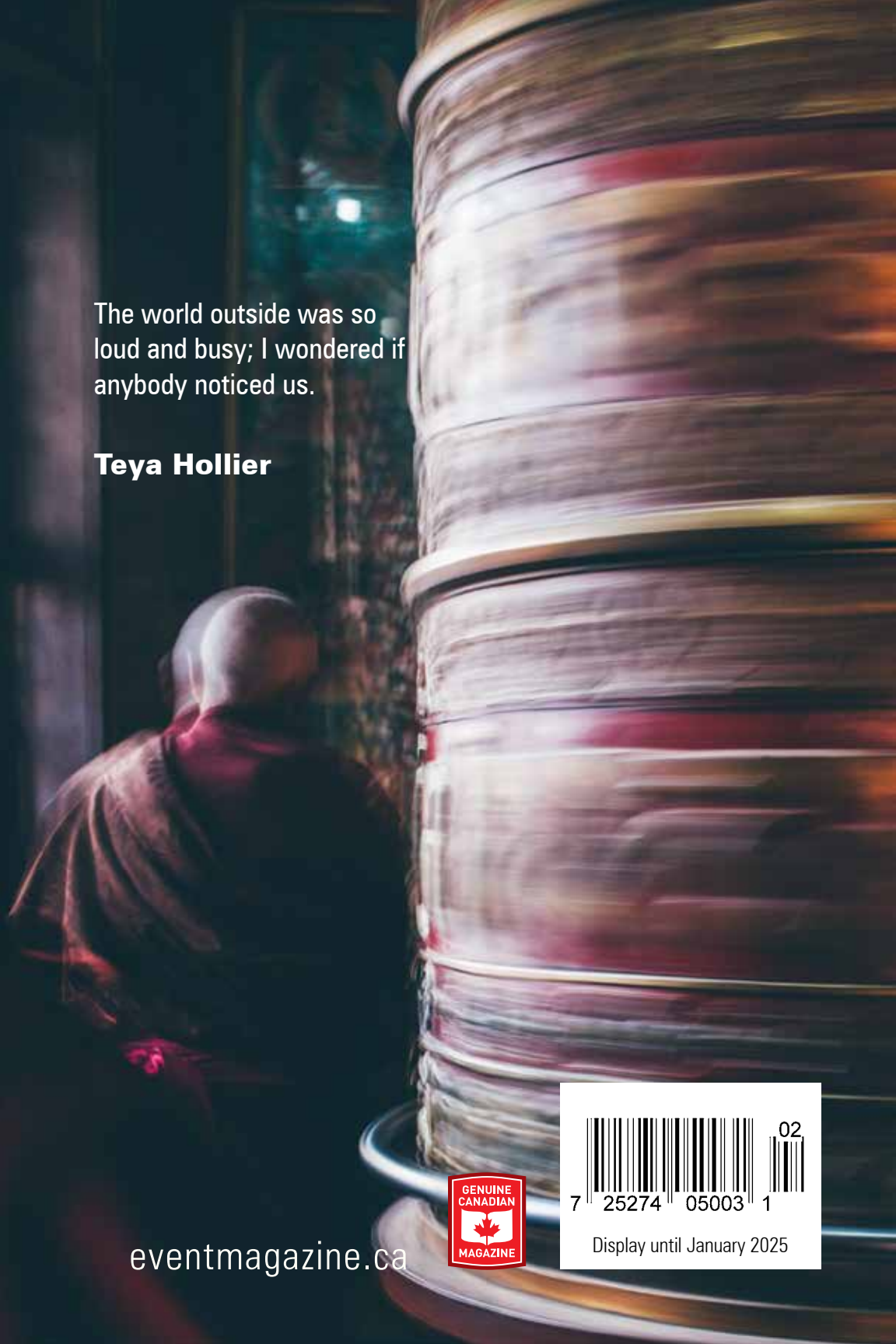

The world outside was so loud and busy; I wondered if anybody noticed us.

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