

more star than cell



grain

the journal of eclectic writing

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The artwork featured in this issue is by Jeff Dillon. More of Jeff’s work can be found at jeffdillon.ca

FRONT/BACK COVER:
(Detail) #271-Celestial Chill
18" x 18"
Acrylic
2024

TITLE PAGE:
#268-Moonlit Forest Glow
30" x 30"
Acrylic
2023

more star than cell

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FEATURED ARTIST | *Jeff Dillon*

Jeff Dillon is a Canadian fine artist located in Ontario, Canada. From a young age, Jeff found himself fascinated by nature and weather patterns, exploring the diverse landscapes of Canada. Over time, Jeff studied horticulture and weather, evolving from sketches to canvas paintings. His lifelong goal has been to encapsulate and share the serenity and beauty of nature. In his early thirties, Jeff immersed himself in his painting, working after hours and late into the night after family and job commitments were fulfilled.



In the beginning, Jeff painted for the sheer pleasure and escapism that his art allowed, soon committing himself to a daily practice. He has described the urge to paint as a need, a calling of sorts, that if ignored for too long produces an uncomfortable frisson that can only be satisfied by painting. As Jeff's skill and confidence grew, he showcased his work in galleries and art shows, earning acclaim for his bold, dynamic style. His unique approach emphasizes light, gesture, and vibrant colours, distinguishing his art with striking lines and shapes. Objects in his paintings retain their realistic appearance, yet have a vibrancy and fluidity about them that are a unique signature of his work.

Jeff Dillon's new expression is both beloved and revered in the Canadian and global contemporary art world. Jeff is confident that the rest of his years will be spent in his studio, brush in hand, as he brings to life on the canvas the world he fell in love with as a child.

Wishes rarely come true. Especially those made on massive balls of helium and hydrogen gas floating in galaxies far, far away. Yet here I am. The new Interim Editor of *Grain Magazine*. Filled with so much joy and excitement, sleeves rolled and ready to take on the challenge, bursting with supernova energy.

I'm sure you can feel the oscillations in your hands already, because the prose and poetry inside this Spring volume vibrate with intense brilliance. From the outset, the poets and authors take control and direct our gaze. Balcony to balcony, lakeshore to tree top, they invite us to observe. Sometimes downward to phone screens and photographs, other times further outward. Beyond fir boughs, feathers, and rocky Nova Scotian outcrops. To the stars.

While we're gazing down at newborns or up at the Milky Way, we're asked to consider questions surrounding care and time. How time fluctuates in the context of motherhood or mothering, and the ways we care for others. How time passes rapidly for parents watching their children grow and for children watching their parents grow old. How we reconcile the significance of human life, in an ageless and infinite universe, with the knowledge that all things inevitably end.

A phrase drawn from Kenton K. Yee's poem, "Neighbourhood Watch," provides not only the perfect title, but it also encapsulates this issue's central preoccupation: "more star than cell." If only we could be "more star than cell," more effervescent light to span the years—what would be possible?

And speaking of what's possible, the winning pieces of the 2024 Kloppenburg Hybrid Grain Contest demonstrate the vast spectrum of possibility inherent in hybrid writing. Ranging from more traditional verse to erasure poem, to prose text punctuated by sheet music, diagram, and equation, the winners boldly go where not many have gone before (in their writing, at least).

I'm so proud of the work curated between these covers, and I couldn't be more thrilled to launch Volume 51.3 into our small "corner of the cosmic wilderness."

DEEP COVE IS SIX MILES AWAY | *Meghan Kemp-Gee*

But you can measure the distance in light
years and open fisheye sockets. You can
creep east like a heatwave, open your mouth
against the wildfires, sing to the sirens
as the crow flies, dive in where the Inlet

meets the Arm, eight floors and then twenty-six
metres down. Here you can leap from sun-bleached
wood to the ghosts of whalefalls and nineteenth-
century canneries, downriver dialect,
Tseil-Waututh clamming ground. You can make great

leaps across the distance, is what I mean.
You can live again like an inverted
echinoderm or asteroid, nestle
your shoulderblades against the painted shells
and five-armed flowers, let distance settle

like seastars, pink spiny, vermilion, rose
and painted. You can watch kelp greenlings feed
on brittle molluscs, sculpins calculate
the distance, contemplate how mud-bellied
lingcod align their spines along the sky.

THE POLYDACTYL CAT TRAVELS TO PLANETARY
NEBULA NGC 7026, SIX THOUSAND LIGHT YEARS
AWAY

On your last day, the forecast calls one
hundred percent for steady rain. Where
would you like to go? I'll make you some

promises. The sun comes out at ten
o'clock. A balcony of toddlers
below us blows soap bubbles. A few

of them make it up to us, holding
you on the eighth floor. I'm still speaking
of weather. Here are my promises:

The colour pink, the smell of warm bread,
your favourite food in gravy. That you
can go in any direction you

want, soft-bellied, short-tailed, sipping cool
water from crystal vessels on your
bright ride. You can go alone or kiss

companions with your forehead, check in
on keyboards, on alien ankles
and planetary rings. You can go

brindled and saddled. Your heart murmur
will wonder and mirror the Hubble's
cloudy chartreuse eyes. The nebula's

pinpricks and rich oxygen will chirr
and roar in while you are sighing in
your sleep. On your last day, you'll instruct

your glowing destination with your

good example. You'll teach the diving
constellation Cygnus to live more

peacefully, stretching out its gnarled neck
of fingers, its head on the pillow
of your crown of twenty-two white toes.



#177-Twilight
24" x 24"
Acrylic
2019

on the balcony
across the courtyard a guy
behind a telescope

like a gunner behind his cannon every night. Stars must fascinate him as much as bright screens fascinate my other neighbours. He spends an hour on each star. That's over a thousand stars per year or, since I've lived here, twenty-five thousand stars, just a corner of the cosmic wilderness. But still! I'm in my bedroom. The lights are off. The moon is ashen and the sky is icy tonight

the glint off our lenses
the lightyears
between us

So many stars. A cornucopia of stars. Or mirror images of one star. What's it like to be fire and ice, to have my shine be the only thing Earthlings know of me? I'm not wishing to be a star. I'm wishing to be a star. Time, space, light, and a cat grinding her teeth. I see therefore I am. If only I could shine, be more star than cell. How hard it is to shine and not care who sees, to let invisibility be my power and darkness, my ship.

you behind the tube
I a.m. every night
I am lonely too

DO YOU KNOW ABOUT THE
FLOWERS ON THE CORNER OF
SAINT-ANTOINE AND BERRI?

| *Misha Solomon*

You know, on the corner of Saint-Antoine and Berri—
the smallish brick apartment building with the apartment, the one on the upper left,
the one with the windows surrounded by flower boxes.

Do you know it? Throughout the summer, maybe even the fall, the flowers
are so well maintained, they surround the windows on all four sides.
Have you ever wondered how they water the flower boxes above the windows?
You must have wondered.

You've seen it, I'm sure. It's right on the bike path, and right off the highway,
and the flowers look almost fake, that's how beautiful they are.

Once upon a December, Kayla and I walked out of our freshman dorm, Furnald Hall
at Columbia University, and she remarked that the snowbound trees, so beautiful,
were like a winter-wonderland-themed bar mitzvah, and I said, no, they're like
a winter wonderland.

I just want to know if you've seen the flowers, and thought about them?
Guillaume wants to buy fake fruit for a pleasing fruit bowl I found, so we can
keep the fruit bowl in the living room, and I said, sure, but then let's buy fake fruit
that's explicitly fake, purple lemons or somesuch.

They're not worth a detour, the flowers, but if you're biking or driving by,
and you get the long red light to cross Saint-Antoine, do look up awhile.
There's nothing else to see right there anyway and I'm pretty sure
they're real flowers. Have you ever seen someone watering them?

In 2019, it seemed that everyone had dead plants in their house,
there were flower stores that sold more dead flowers than living ones,
dyed, not garishly, but dyed all the same. We had them too, at the time,
but then it started occurring to me, with increasing frequency, that they were dead.

I'd love to see the tenant watering their flowers.
Tell me if you see them first. That would be enough,
almost.

Amy lived a few blocks away from one of those big city parks, and because it still appeared to be relatively safe to walk there alone, she had started doing a loop after taking her daughter to school. How bad the weather got didn't matter once the habit took. In fact, she preferred when it was bad because few others would be out. Right after a snow was the best, when everything, coated in pillowy white, muffled the roar of the expressway. She found that she missed not walking on the weekends, so she would say to her husband, "I'm just popping out for a quick walk." Not specifying "park" had become another habit.

At a spot along one of her routes, she often saw someone standing with an elaborate camera, or binoculars, looking up at the treetops. Occasionally there would be a new person, but mostly it was just a few regulars. Amy might slow as she passed, trying to see what the fuss was about. A hawk's or even an eagle's nest, she assumed. Perhaps there were babies up there, and if you looked closely enough, you might see their little heads poking up. But she never saw anything herself, and she didn't want to be one of those people who stopped and asked, "What's going on up there?" If she was the one with the camera or binoculars, she would want to be left alone.

The park had a small zoo, but Amy avoided it because of the rankness of the pens and because the sight of the animals—the bison, especially, with their big solemn eyes—depressed her. Sometimes animals would escape. A peacock had once breached the park's perimeter, flying rooftop to rooftop in Amy's neighbourhood. Two capybaras had also gotten loose, and as far as Amy knew they had never been recovered. Both episodes had made the news. There was speculation that the capybaras had most likely taken refuge in one of the park's many ponds. Since then, Amy had always kept an eye out, not just around the ponds, but whenever she heard something rustle in the bushes.

Aside from squirrels, which were everywhere, she had encountered raccoons, skunks, possums, foxes, and even coyotes on two occasions. With the first coyote, she had thought it was someone's off-leash dog before realizing what it actually was. The animal had loped in front of her, crossing the road, paying her no notice. The other time was right at the park gates. It was a different coyote, much older and missing patches of fur. While there was still a vestige of some magnificence in the creature, its haunches were

scraggy and trembling. It just stood there as though unable to decide what to do. A few people had stopped a distance away to watch or take pictures with their phones, and Amy, conscious of her rising sentimentality, imagined the animal as a cub, bounding about and discovering the world, and she checked her coat pockets for a bar that she could give to it. She didn't have one, and only later, after she'd been home for a while, did it occur to her that she could have just run back and brought it something from their fridge. Some raw meat. The coyote wasn't going anywhere in a hurry. And she would have done it, too. She almost couldn't believe that no one else had. But, of course, they wouldn't, and they wouldn't have let her get away with it either. They would have told her off, or just talked about her behind her back. *Doesn't she know you shouldn't feed wild animals?*

One day, a clear and cold winter morning, she was walking by the place where people brought their cameras and binoculars, but no one was there. She stopped and looked up in the direction that they always looked. Most of the trees in the park were deciduous and had been bare for months. She spotted the clumped leaves of two squirrels' nests in the branches, but knew that this wasn't what drew the people here.

No, it had to be the fir trees, something tucked away in one of the high boughs. She stood for a long time, scanning, though nothing obvious popped out to her. On crisp, cloudless days like this, days when the air was thin, the expressway was even louder than usual. She could mostly tune it out when she was walking, but now that she'd stopped, it was all she could hear.

As Amy turned to get back on her way, she saw in a different tree a shape that, before her eyes fully settled on it, she took for another squirrel's nest. But it was an owl, a large grey owl staring back at her. It was so close, maybe fifteen feet up, that she could see its great talons biting into the bark of the limb that it perched on. Its eyes, like black marbles, were set back in its face, and the fact that it had no ears, or rather that its ears were not part of its profile, lent the bird a hooded look that was vaguely human. She didn't know how she'd missed it before.

"Hello," she said. The owl, which had been stock-still until now, rocked its head from side to side in three quick movements. Amy took a step forward, and the bird tracked her. She watched it adjust its footing ever so slightly, one of its claws opening and then closing on the branch. She stood for a while without moving, marvelling at the owl's own stillness, its intensity. Then, slowly, she raised her arm.

It was not as though she expected the owl to come to her. Not

exactly. But with this last gesture that Amy made, the owl opened its wings and lifted soundlessly off the branch, flying not toward her but to another tree, one farther away. It swivelled its head around to look at her before taking flight again. She watched it disappear into the trees.

As she walked the rest of the way through the park, and then along the streets leading to her home, Amy imagined telling her husband about the owl. She practically rehearsed it, the order of events. She'd tell him about the people that were usually out there, how their absence had enabled her own curiosity, prompting her to finally stop. Then, of course, the surprise of seeing the bird itself. Its sheer size and presence. The talons, those piercing black eyes, the mottled grey body. Imagine that. It had been watching her that whole time without her even knowing. And right there in the city! She'd almost missed it. She wouldn't mention how she'd spoken to the owl, or how she'd lifted her arm. But she'd describe the way it had moved its little head at her. She'd describe as best she could what it looked like as it flew through the trees.

It's natural to want to share, Amy thought as she walked. It was a phrase that had come to her before, usually in relation to her daughter. Probably Amy had read it once, though she couldn't remember where.

When she entered the house, her husband was set up at the dining table on a video call. She emptied spent grounds from the coffee maker, started another pot, then went downstairs to transfer a load of laundry to the dryer. When she came back up, he was still on the call. He spoke animatedly, loudly, leading discussion as he often did.

She sipped her coffee in the kitchen, opened and sorted some bills. Soon she had to join a meeting of her own, so she went up to her office and logged in.

There were eight others on the call. Three of these, including Amy, had muted their screens. Her friend Carina was one of the ones who had not. Amy pulled up the chat function and began typing a message. Carina liked reading people their horoscopes and had kept a jagged purple crystal on her desk in their old offices. She looked for the signs in things and was often teased for it, though in a good-natured way. People liked her. Amy wrote, "I saw an owl in the park this morning. It was beautiful." She paused before adding, "What do you think it means?"

Amy was about to click send when she heard that Carina was being called on to speak; she'd had her hand up. Amy listened, trying to pick up the thread of conversation. Then she opened a browser and typed "owl" into the search box.

It didn't take long to identify the one she'd seen. A barred owl. *My owl*. She scrolled through the various images, then read a little about their habitat and behaviour. Some people called them the "hoot owl." They ate mostly small mammals, but also occasionally other birds, even fish. After the meeting ended, Amy remembered the message to Carina, sitting there unspent.

Her husband came up to see her around lunch, but neither of them had any real time to talk. Amy decided she would wait until later, perhaps over dinner, to mention the owl. Her daughter would want to hear about it. She'd have all kinds of questions. Maybe the three of them could go out over the weekend to see if it was there. Probably it wouldn't be, but it might be nice to try.

Though as the day went on, Amy felt her excitement start to slip away. She didn't want it to, but it did nonetheless. Her husband, for sure, would have an opinion about what she'd seen. The kind of owl it was, or even if it had been an owl at all. He might try to say it was one of the big, speckled hawks that were sometimes spotted in and around the park. They'd seen one themselves, perched on an electrical pole in their laneway.

So she didn't say anything. The opportunity for it came and went. At dinner, they all fell easily into the worn path of their usual conversation.

Amy had difficulty getting to sleep, then was awake in the night for at least an hour. Her mind felt unsettled. She did think about the owl, but only fleetingly. When she got up for the day, she was surprised she wasn't more tired. It was as though some of the energy from the night was still with her, a tension beneath her skin.

On her walk through the park that morning, as she neared the place, Amy felt a return of the other excitement. Someone was there, looking up. A man she'd seen before. Grey hair, orange coat. His camera had a long black-and-white lens, and he cradled it in his hand, waiting. She looked to the tree where the owl had been, half expecting to see it there.

The man raised the camera to his face, spotting through the viewfinder, and then lowered it just as quick. Amy looked where he looked, that place far up in the firs. She scuffed her feet as she approached, seeing if she could get his attention. But the man didn't acknowledge her in any way. He kept his eyes on the trees.



#151-Stargazer
36" x 36"
Acrylic
2019

Droplets of air suspended beneath
a thin skein of ice
along channel narrows and as
encroachments along the lakeshore
in geometric patterns
isosceles triangles and tangents
resemble the formations of geese in flight
as they trumpet loudly above
before settling upon open water
to float in silence

Lone magpies glide by
alighting upon the limbs of cottonwoods
gazing skyward in awe
at the cacophony of trumpets
and the graceful landings of geese

Further on the path
the gentle gurgling of throat songs
from a solitary magpie
searching the detritus of leaves
a momentary glance toward me
acknowledges my presence and
the advent of autumn

While yet a pair of magpies
only the warm day before
danced amidst flight
synchronized swimming in air
in twists and turns of fancy
like memories of Spring
seem now long distant
as the skiff of early morning snow
melts upon the tawny afternoon
of wet straw-coloured grass

A BIRD IN THE HAND | *Tanja Bartel*

Come inside, dear self, and have some soup.
Even the pigeons look cold.

Fewer hairs on my head, I collect the mail.

Lips thinner, tighter. White-knuckle
an empty plate across the bare boards to the sink.

Wasted sugar grinds down the soles.

The fertile darkness.

Catastrophe is so clearly imagined.

Summer's tiny spider grows gigantic
during each micro-sleep when I slow-blink.

Euphoria in the gap between fool's gold found
sifting a wide river and knowledge of its true worth.

Lottery ticket plans.

A bowl of soup in the hands, rat gnawing at your knuckle
as you dip your spoon,

is worth two perpetually full cauldrons in a storybook.

THE DRAIN

The best beginnings are slow.

Red mouth from beef and merlot.

It will take a good hour to get there,
or a bad hour, depending who's on the roads.

Everything perfect but the consequences.

Feel free to throw those out.

Even the pears. It was all a façade.

P.T. Barnum reincarnated as a floppy-haired president
reminds me there's a sucker born every minute.

We went years without rat poison, now there are two bags.

Leaning together by the freezer.

Break me a promise,
circulate blood through your inner racetrack.

Send it to the cleaners, the heart
where hurt is processed.

Exit the building to wrinkle further under the old sun,
fry an egg on the neighbour's new car.

Lob my leisure into the tar tomorrow.

Or the next day.

Everything speeds up at the end.

HUNGER: NOTES
TO MY DAUGHTER | *Adrienne Gruber*

The first week of your life stretches out like pulled taffy. It elongates with heat and time, in a fog that floods the apartment.

Each night you sleep the most and I the least. It feels cruel. I set the alarm on my phone to go off every three hours. By the time I coax a few ounces of milk into you, I only have an hour before I have to wake us both to begin the cycle all over again. You sleep through everything: the heat and the clamminess of the air, my frustrated jerks in the night, your own hunger. The task of feeding you, of being the sole party responsible for your ability to thrive, is daunting. Where is your hunger? Mine has kicked in. I can polish off multiple pieces of peanut butter toast in the morning and then finish my toddler's half eaten eggs and pieces of nectarine. I inhale the pastries my in-laws bring over when they come to visit. There are six lasagnas in our freezer, and every night I devour slices of thickly congealed noodles and cheese.

For each feed it takes me twenty minutes to wake you. I change your diaper, blow on your face, and tickle your tiny, curled feet. I drape cold cloths over your skinny limbs and pat your fleshy cheeks with the condensation from my water bottle. I get five minutes of sucking before you're unconscious again. I want to shake you awake. Instead, I go to the kitchen and pump for ten minutes on each side to relieve the throb from both breasts. When they are soft enough that I can lie down without pain, I curl up in the dark bedroom once again. You sleep deeply beside me. I stare at the ceiling. You're not eating enough. You're not eating. Not. Eating.

This morning is rough. Everything takes eight times longer and is twelve times harder than usual. By 11:30 a.m. I'm falling asleep at the table. We've run out of coffee. Dennis promises he'll run out and grab coffees after he makes breakfast. He dices jalapeños for the omelettes. He grinds fresh black pepper and pinches coarse salt into the eggs. He slices mushrooms into thin moons. Each vegetable goes into its own tiny metal bowl and he washes his hands between prepping each ingredient, meticulous in his hygiene. I watch him do all of this and my eyes sting from exhaustion. I want to murder his face.

I don't know what to do with the hours that you sleep when you shouldn't. Time is a body slipping beneath the surface of the ocean, forced under by the weight of each nursing and pumping session. Eventually time

stops thrashing and fighting and sinks like a stone. The bottom is murky. My chest aches. I flop back and forth trying to find a comfortable position. I sweat excessively and fluid leaves my body at an alarming rate. I try to catalogue the days and nights, categorize events. Each day is a blur of light and dark, of feedings, of spit up milk.

While I wait for you to wake up, my breasts become hard as rocks.

* * *

In the second week of your life, you rest your cheek against my breast, your tiny fish mouth slightly ajar. My nipple pokes out. Seconds ago, it slid out of your clamped lips and a trickle of milk slid down your chin. Your hand clutches the skin of my breast. My neck has a kink.

My friend Jen texts me a photo of her six-week-old baby's head. I smile at his goofy looking crown. Another text appears underneath the photo: *does Ori's head look weird to you?* I don't really know what to say. It does look kind of weird, but all babies go through weird stages. I text back: *I don't know, all babies' heads look weird to me.* I believe my own text, but then I stare at your perfectly formed head. You are passed out and I roll over. I keep forgetting I can lie on my stomach now. I also forget that coffee after 2:00 p.m. is a bad idea. My body melts into the bed, creating a large divot in the mattress.

Your dad thinks I'm a terrible co-sleeper. Every time he checks on you he pulls the sheet off your face. I wake just enough to pull you into me to latch, the stiff mound of my breast softening with each gulp and swallow.

Another text comes in: *the nurse thinks he needs a specialist. She was a total bitch about it, but I think she might be right.*

When you fall asleep during the day, I try to access your birth photos, but the files are large and cumbersome, and they download at a snail's pace. Milk collects at the corners of your mouth as you occasionally suck on a phantom nipple in your sleep. You're more alert now, and starting to actively enjoy nursing, which means I can ease off on the app I downloaded on my phone that tracks feeds, poops, and pees. This also means I can stop being so paranoid about your night feeds.

Your eyes scan from side to side while you're latched. They are a dark liquid blue, almost black, like octopus ink.

A photo appears, one of your head that has just been born, our midwife's hands reaching inside me to wrench your shoulders. My face isn't in the photo, just my body—a well-oiled machine.

* * *

During the third week of your life, we see our new family doctor, all four of us. Sure that you have gained weight, I'm eager to get you on the scale, but you've lost two ounces in the last five days.

Your sister begins to melt down in the doctor's office as the appointment drags on, even after she is given free reign over the box of stickers. Your dad carries her out to the car while I stay in the empty office and nurse. Letters of the alphabet hang on the wall in cheerful colours. I look down and your eyes are closed. In spite of my tears on your face, you have fallen asleep.

I read a memoir years ago written by a mom about her teenage daughter who had anorexia. The mom took it upon herself to do everything she could to get her daughter to gain weight. She made all her daughter's meals and snacks using the highest fat ingredients she could—whole milk, butter, cream, and full fat yogurt. She'd sit down with her daughter at every meal, watch each bite she put in her mouth, laboriously jotting down notes as to what her daughter ate and how much. Every day after school, the mom would make her daughter a homemade milkshake with vanilla ice cream, whole milk, and coffee cream. At dinner, she'd limit the amount of vegetables to make sure her daughter didn't fill up on low calorie foods.

For the next several weeks we'll do our own version of this regime. I'll pump after each feed and give you bottles of hind milk, the thick fatty kind that come toward the end of a feed. I'll hold you skin-to-skin to encourage nursing. I'll snack on oatmeal lactation cookies. I'll take fenugreek, a herb that boosts milk production and makes my skin smell like maple syrup.

* * *

A year ago, your dad lent out our baby swing to a colleague and by the fourth week of your life I need it back. For months I've been pestering him, but it was a low priority on the to-do list. Then today happened, when you and your sister took turns going in and out of hysterics. Something about motherhood or hormones, or just never having my body to myself, plunges me into a panic. Everything is both brighter and duller than it should be. My limbs jitter as though nitrogen is bubbling up in my arteries. I am both above my body, observing its descent into madness, and somewhere deep within.

We walk to the playground as a family, and my husband and I are

silent. Somehow the swing feels like a legitimate thing to stop speaking over.

Later that day you have a weigh-in at the doctor's office. Nine pounds and two ounces flash on the screen. You've gained six ounces in three days and a rush of self-righteousness floods through me. After the appointment I skip to the car, swinging you in your car seat like we are in a rousing chorus of *The Sound of Music*. I check my phone in the car and I have a text from Jen. *I was right about Ori's head*, she says. *My doctor is doing a neurosurgical consult with the team in Phoenix so we're going to drive down for an assessment.* My stomach heaves. How can a funny-shaped head result in a neurosurgical consult?

Just this morning your older sister fell on your head. It was my first time completely alone with both of you. I was changing your diaper on the floor, while your older sister jumped around, pulling covers over her head into a tent. I finished cleaning your bum and was rubbing ointment on a few dime-sized patches of diaper rash, when the background noise became a commotion in front of me, and a giant clump of rolled-up duvet slid off the bed and landed on your face. You began to scream and the duvet clump twisted and morphed into a monstrous creature that I heaved into the corner of the room. I snatched you up, praying I wasn't further damaging your spinal cord and contributing to any paralysis. Your sister unravelled herself, let out a piercing shriek, and ran out of the room. I tried to force-nurse you, watching and waiting for blood to pool and trickle from your eyes. I felt your head for cracks in your skull, imagining tiny lightning bolts in your cranium, fissures spreading to the fontanels. But you were fine. By the time your dad came home you were calm, still nursing, your eyes huge like they'd seen things. They seemed to say *Mom, did you know? The world isn't safe.*

Jen sends another text: *he's probably going to need skull surgery.* I start to reply, but then you stir in your car seat and I drive home instead, wondering how a surgeon can possibly slice into something so small, so newly formed.

* * *

In the fifth week of your life, every time I feed you, an aching river flows from the opposite breast. I notice things I normally wouldn't. An insect the shape and size of my thumb rests on the ceiling. A sequined bead glitters on the couch. Small orbs of dried milk from your sister's sippy cup stain the laminate floor. There are new freckles on my arm, and a freakishly long hair growing out of the mole on my right wrist. While you breathe and gulp, a tiny

bubble of milk forms on the nipple on the other breast, then slides off and falls like a raindrop on your thigh. Time moves sideways instead of forward.

I receive a text from Jen as I nurse: *Ori has a condition called Craniosynostosis*. This is when one or more of an infant's cranial sutures (cracks in the skull) fuse prematurely. He will require endoscopic surgery, a procedure to open the affected suture to enable normal brain growth, and he'll wear a helmet twenty-three hours a day for three to six months. If the helmet doesn't mold his head properly, he will require open skull surgery, a much lengthier process that requires an incision into the scalp and cranial bones to reshape the affected portion of the skull.

I am slow to reply to Jen and when I do my responses are banal lines like *oh god, I'm so sorry* and *that is so scary*. I can't figure out how to convey how stupidly helpless I feel. You are fussy and I channel my wasted desire into giving you a massage. I coat your skin with oil, and gently rub the rolls on your thighs and the thick trunk of your stomach. You become slick and slippery, like when you were first born and had a layer of creamy vernix caked on your back. You have a tiny birthmark the size of a grain of rice on your chest. It hurts to look at you. I can't get the image of a scalpel slicing into a baby's skull out of my mind.

* * *

In the sixth week of your life, your weigh-in goes surprisingly well. Your hunger has been satiated. My hunger continues to throb in my stomach like an internal wound. I eat large spoonfuls of peanut butter right out of the jar, heaping bowls of cereal, sandwiches piled high with shaved ham and thick slices of cheese. Sometimes I'm convinced it's emotional. It's a bottomless hunger—I snack all day. I have no idea what I've eaten, but the fridge is picked clean, lacking the usual clutter of leftovers. Nothing stays inside long enough to go bad these days.

An insidious voice in my head tells me to watch myself, that I'll never lose this pregnancy weight if I'm eating everything in sight. Meanwhile, Jen wonders how she will survive handing over her new baby to an anaesthesiologist, and then to a surgeon. How she will walk back to the waiting room and fill the hours while her three-month-old son is on an operating table. I'm disgusted with the lectures I give myself.

We fly to Saskatoon to visit my parents. I open their refrigerator every hour while I'm there, searching for something to sooth the trapped

feeling I have from being in my childhood home. More peanut butter out of the jar. Blueberry yogurt. Oreos stashed out of reach from the toddler.

I eat mindlessly when I feel trapped, and right now I miss my freedom. Not only with time, but with my body. You are more attached now than when you were inside me. It's another world out here, another planet. Colic. Your screams reverberate in the chamber of my cochlea. Even after your dad straps you in the car seat and takes you on a drive, I hear phantom screaming. We give you probiotics and gripe water. We jiggle and jostle and carry you all day.

My body has never felt so fragmented. My body is full of bad coffee, packaged cookies, and toast. I hold you in my lap after nursing, my nipples raw and shredded from your latching and unlatching. I now have over-supply from all the pumping, fenugreek, and lactation cookies. Every time you unlatch, I become a geyser, spraying everything within a two-foot radius.

At a picnic lunch by the river, I unclasp my nursing bra and instantly a powerful stream shoots from my nipple, covering the sandwiches and cucumbers and boiled eggs in a constellation of milk droplets.

* * *

During the seventh week of your life, the Toronto Blue Jays have a shot at making it into the World Series. Game five in the ALDS—Blue Jays against the Texas Rangers—has just started, and you inevitably begin to squirm, your lungs rested from nursing and ready for the evening's wail. I heave myself off the couch. No one pays much attention to us—this is our nightly ritual. I strap you into the carrier and begin my rounds, moving through the living room, past my family cradling beers and bowls of chips, their eyes fixated on the game. I march down the hall, hang a left to yank open the fridge door and grab a beer. I leave the fridge door open and continue through the kitchen with the intention of closing it on my next lap.

The game is full of suspense, and the living room is a cacophony of groans and cheers.

Ori's skull surgery is scheduled for tomorrow and I'm a bad friend. I can hardly manage my own care, let alone extend shoulders for friends to lean on. I hardly give him any thought hour-to-hour, day-to-day. I'm well versed in my own hell, which is not remotely unique or deserving of sympathy. It is self-inflicted. I *wanted* two children.

Once you're asleep, I bounce in place with my laptop propped open

on the kitchen counter, responding to an email from a friend who, weeks ago, sent me a congratulatory message on baby number two. Cheers from the living room keep us isolated, tucked away on our own island. Eventually I unravel your sleeping body from the carrier and put you down gently in the baby swing. You are a small alien, a UFO, oscillating safely in my waking dreams.

As I sit on the couch to watch the last few minutes of the baseball game another close friend texts me. *I miss you*, she writes. *I feel the distance between us. It's palpable.*

Friendships grow necrotic in time. There are those with babies and those without. Those in crisis and those in limbo. Everyone is grieving for time spent or time allotted. I don't know what to say to my friend. I used to hate people who didn't know what to say, but now I turn my phone off and toss it aside, watch the Blue Jays win six to three.

ANTI-GHAZAL FOR MOTHER | *Emily Skov-Nielsen*

Bald wound of a bedroom. The pit and the machines.
TV 24/7. Heat lightning. Sister Death next door.

My mind's scrambled eggs, mother slurs through the phone.
Dealing in hocus-pocus, in pharmacopoeias of grief.

Scorched, sweltering. Dark forest honey.
Night rain, black arches, the nun moth.

Her wings span the city, kiss us goodnight with
gentle collapse, trailing into deep sutured sleep.

Basalt, mafic lava, mother has been weeping for centuries.
Rapidly cooling, hardening, her well-honed tactics.

Leading her flock of Aristotelian winter swallows
encased in clay, sinking into swamp.

Leaving us, always, for that underland.
Divinely absent, inconceivably benumbed.

NOTHING HAPPENS
EVERYWHERE

| Shannan Mann

K has a distaste for multitasking that I couldn't quite grasp in the beginning. Someone in this house is not able to do anything without also doing another thing, he says. *Someone* being me. I am shortlisting writing contests to submit our poems for while Ted Lasso cracks some off-kilter American jokes to his British footballers. A cup of black coffee grows tepid by my knee. I have *Bluest Nude* by Ama Codjoe open in another window. Time to time, I check for new emails and scroll through Instagram. These last two acts are not intentional, really. Just something for my eyes and fingers to do while I wait for websites to load. He's probably been watching me do this digital dance for a while before he lets out an animated sigh. I blink away from my screen and look at him. Do you know how to breathe? he asks, a soft smile playing on his lips to ease up any tension such a question might elicit.

Despite the plethora of meditation apps (advertisements of which ironically keep popping up on my Instagram) and t-shirts urging us to keep calm and carry on, breathing—and doing *just one thing*—appears to be a lost art. Now, I'm not an advocate of the “good old times” when social media didn't exist and we couldn't look up cats wearing tuxedos and smoking a cigar with a split-second Google search. I don't think I even believe in the concept of “good old times.” Zadie Smith elucidates that the idea of the “good old times” for one set of people would, for her, mean not being able to vote, to study, or to marry the person she loves. Time, like math, is dispassionate. Which is not to say that it's a calculating, cold entity out to poison the few good years we've got left, leaving us with nothing but tin scraps of memory we can cut our hands on trying to salvage. No, but it is forever dissolving and forming anew, simultaneously. And the times we have now, replete as they are with doomscrolling and reaction videos, YouTube blogs and Snapchat filters, TikTok wars and Meta-heads—are just as good or bad as any other. But it's almost a logical, historical fact—scientifically verified at that—that our attention spans have shrivelled up.

And you have practiced meditation, K urges, for eight and a half years, right? He is right. Apparently. I did sit in a coven of chanters for two or so odd hours every morning between the ages of seventeen and twenty-four, mumbling mantra after mantra on a mala of one hundred and eight tulsi beads. I'm supposed to be an expert at *just doing one thing*. Instead, I'm

playing the proverbial headless chicken trying to attach a hundred heads onto its manic body.

Perhaps I feel I've lost too many years to the cult, I suggest. He rolls his dark eyes (and I realize that I love kissing his almost-unibrow). See, even while thinking one thing I can't *just* think one thing. That's bullshit and you know it, he says, you just can't be alone with yourself.

I was alone for so long, I whine in my best sad tween pop star twang. His bullshit-detecting meter maxes out.

This is how I find myself walking without AirPods and phone to pick up our kid from daycare that afternoon. When Justine told me that she went hiking in the Oregon mountains for over five hours, I asked her what music she listened to as she walked. Nothing, she replied, when I hike I just like to walk and hear the sounds around me. I found it sickeningly undoable. I am someone forever armed with my Spotify playlists whether it is a two-hour trek or a seven-minute stroll to the grocery store. I can't imagine just listening to *nothing*.

But you're not listening to *nothing*, K says before I leave. Even in complete silence, you're hearing your pulse. You finally let your mind breathe. Allow the ecosystem of your being a chance to rejuvenate, reseed, and flourish with something clear, beyond the noise our grind-obsessed digital culture hoses us down with.

So I listen to the screech of buses alongside the koels' call-and-response. I hear a grandmother beckoning a child, her accordion-voice coalescing with the toddler's bell-like plea to stay out longer. Car engines, street hawkers, the rustle of leaves—my brain is panicking a little at the lack of external input, but I breathe from belly to lungs to throat to nose to air. Sweat pools in all the dark spaces of my body as sunrays battle with the wind. Blown dust makes me cough.

Yet that same dust, the dirt of the earth creepy-crawling with worms and birdshit, is fertile ground for the flowering weeds that burst through the sidewalks, the tree trunks that root and rage out into the sky. Life defies bilateral categorization. Yin-yang works its magic because in reality there is always flow, the mixing of the high and low, and the balance achieved as the experiencer surfs in serenity.

Such serenity is often achieved after great strife. The serenity of being able to wade through a sea of social media and find positivity, a community, calls for change, incitements towards it, encouragement, and maybe even actionable plans. But even the not-quite Gen-Z'er in me finds

this to be a bit of a wormhole. How often have I missed out on a beautiful sunset because I'm liking pictures of a sunset? (A lot more than I'd like it to be.) How many times have I watched my daughter do something incredible with the 16:9 frame of my stupidly expensive iPhone camera in front of my face even though that incredible thing my daughter is doing is happening right behind that camera, *in real life, in real time*. This one's unforgivable, I think.

But then she waddles down the daycare stairs and I'm instinctively low-key lunging for my phone to freeze this moment, jail it in the iCloud. Except I realize that K's confiscated my magic-moment-locking machine and all I've got are my eyes and her bird-like laughter. Though I might not readily admit it to him upon our return home, it feels freeing to not feel some phantom pressing compulsion to make a keepsake out of every fleeting parcel of time. Isn't time *meant* to pass? Aren't we supposed to be learning the art of letting go?

No, I'm not advocating we permanently delete all our children's photos off our phones (though I do know more than a handful of friends who might be spared the hassle of oohing and aahing over my latest baby anecdote accompanied with a blurry, off-angle image that's truly only appealing to me). Yet some peace with impermanence might feel a bit exhilarating, right?

I used to be landlocked in an orthodox religious cult. Well, not literally landlocked. I moved around more than a cursor on the screen of a certain poet-mother I know. But for all intents and purposes, I was a contributing member of the Hare Krishnas across Canada, New Zealand, America, and India. Dear god.

There were mandatory morning classes we had to attend where different members of the community would go off about various problems in the world as they reflected and connected (oftentimes in a comically obscure way) with whatever religious text we were meant to be studying at the time.

The value of time was a big topic, coming in third to making money for the movement (through selling books to the ignorant public "by hook or by crook"—a real mantra they espoused) and not having sex (sorry to everyone who thought I was in one of the "fun" cults).

I look back at these freeze-framed moments (many stuck in my rage-addled head but also still all over my phone's 'Remember This' carousels) with a mix of bemusement and bitterness.

Time was indispensable currency. One thing the cult requires of its members is the chanting of sixteen rounds of the Hare Krishna mantra, which

might clock in at around two hours if you're not turbo-speed mumbling your way through it. A lot of people who are just at the boundary line of stepping over into the converted zone often say that they just don't have the *time* to chant all those rounds. And the answer we were supposed to give back? You'll actually have *more* time if you do this because all other distractions will diminish. You will lose your taste for things like going to the movies, eating out (at restaurants and other dark places), living a balanced functional life which includes work and family, bowling on Saturday afternoons, drinking and so on. And in a way, all of those things did happen. As people converted and chanted, their extracurricular interests dropped like stinkbugs. But what filled all the free time that now cooed in their laps like an excitable child? For me, and many other young women like me, it was hours and hours of gruelling "service." And much of this service involved selling books out on the streets, rain or shine or thunderstorm or shooting or protest or I'm-so-exhausted-I-think-I-couldn't-even-lift-a-knife-to-slit-my-wrists.

I laugh now thinking back to this. How did I not see it? A religious institution vilifies distractions in the age of social media as one of the singular drivers of our personal existential ruin while simultaneously using the same capitalistic hierarchies and values to funnel well-behaved young proselytizers on to the streets in order to make the religious institute boat-loads of money that the dim-witted, head-bowed, hands-folded book-pushers will never see a cent of.

Capitalism is sneaky like that. Even people who make a whole cult of not buying into it use the same tenets of capitalism to convince others that they too can join this cult that disparages capitalism and goes against the grain. But there is no other grain. There is no existential gluten-free option. Nothing escapes the time-eat-time world we exist within. Nothing has ever escaped it. We have always existed in a world scattered with as many choices as milkweed seeds in the wind come spring.

Around age twenty-four, I began trying to find a way through this mad wind. I became pregnant, miscarried, repented. The guru I'd pledged my life to had told me that my worth was in cooking and cleaning and learning to be a submissive member of the time-conscious cult. The miscarriage happened, he indicated, because sins had to be retributed for. I did not outwardly rebel. But something in me cracked. I remember reading about Levin's spiritual epiphany towards the end of *Anna Karenina*—my first foray back into the world of literature. This character had been as much a religious agnostic as a social and cultural one throughout the book.

But suddenly—as if discovering a new particle in the trenches of a gutted warzone—he comes to divinity. I found it ironic that as Levin came to his spirituality, I was losing mine. Well, depending on whom you asked. I was stepping away from the indoctrinated atmosphere that had more in common with a bullfighter ring than a pleasant meditation space. I receded from the constant beehive of gossip about ex-members or members rumoured to be entering that zone. I no longer flaunted my bead bag or book scores (how many books I'd sold, when, in how many hours, and how much money I had made for the Hare Krishnas).

The bigger I got with the baby, the quieter I felt inside. I felt that I was becoming as large as the planet itself, and against such magnitude, what could be sung or whispered. I did not feel like hiding, but I also had no desire to be put on display as a perfect religious married woman. I lingered on my sofa hearing Tolstoy's words unspool in and out of my conscious experience. I watched the garden outgrow its metal boxes. I mapped the moon across the mountains, going from sliver to whole. Sometimes, I just closed my eyes as the windiest city in the world tremored with its baby earthquakes and the trees leaned a little too close to the dirt.

The physical fullness of carrying Ana in my body allowed for this silence to feel natural. Somewhere between that time and the birth that threatened death, the unzipping of my marriage, the dance of divorce, my new relationship, moving back in with my mom, back to Canada from New Zealand, and moving for a few months back to India to be united with my beloved—I appear to have unpetalled myself. I am happy, almost ecstatic witnessing *the miracle* Levin grasped, but I am also *erratic*, dare I say, *manic* with the desire to do everything all at once. I feel afraid of silence. Anxious about things yet to come, future events that threaten pain, I crowd my mind with voices from the world that can soothe or at the very least distract me. Hanging from a precipice, I have a box full of bandages and think myself protected.

Just this morning, K quoted Don Paterson to me from his book of aphorisms: something something *we are the wounds of time*. How beautiful and cruel, to be thought of as the bleeding hole within the body of Time. Time, we learned from the countless classes on the *Bhagavad-gita* I attended in the cult, is a form of God. That famous quote Oppenheimer chimed after witnessing the first detonation of the nuclear bomb in 1945? That's a misquote of the Gita verse that goes: *kālo 'smi loka-kṣaya-kṛt pravṛddho / lokān samāhartum iha pravṛttauḥ*. Or: *Time I am, the great destroyer of the worlds, and I have*

come here to destroy all people. Kala is translated as *death* sometimes, but it really means *time*. Of course, Oppenheimer might be spiritually right. Death and time are synonyms in the realm of existence. With time, death arrives. Death obliterates our time. Is time meaningless then, or the most important resource we have? Isn't it wise of me to fill it with as much as I possibly can?

Time Magazine has this article about doing nothing, and that being one of the most important things you can do. When philosopher Brian O'Conner writes about leisure, I think about how we use the concept of "time off" to recharge enough to be able to do even more than we had done before. We rest in order to be able to redouble our efforts for filling time, for accomplishing, and conquering.

There is an embarrassment, it appears, within our current social world, in truly allowing for nothingness, for rest, solitude. This was evident in the cult, though naturally I did not truly pick up on it until I left. I remember dreading looking into the toilet seat and noticing blood. Back then, periods meant three days of horrific pain—something that almost all women in the cult experienced. Painful periods are a reality many women experience but it has become so ubiquitous that we might forget that merely basic biology does not necessitate such pain. Pain is always a symptom of something larger. For women, this symptom just has more categories to manifest within.

Overworked, stuffed into rooms like chickens before beheading, sleepless, eating a diet packed with apparently holy foods that consisted almost entirely of carbs (and many of us girls would hoard desserts from the evening dinners at the preaching centre as a pre-breakfast, a way to add, in the form of faux-chocolate carob cake, some external sweetness and sexiness into our bland, bleak lives). Of course the egg bidding farewell to my body would be enraged. *The fuck kind of a shitbole did you keep me locked up in, bitch?* I imagine those little bundles of potential screaming as they tore through my uterus and out my vagina into the toilet bowl of horror.

Okay, I'm dialling it up, but I need you to understand that being on your period usually meant *more* work, not less. In the guise of rest, we might not have to go outside to sell books on the street to unsuspecting college students or to working moms rushing to catch the train home, but we did have to cook, clean, make social media posts to advertise the next event, and do a litany of other such "restful" services.

But this is the cult, you might say. Cults are notorious for milking people.

And I'd say, sure, yes, but this aversion to rest exists in our world,

too, and that's where those people get it from. Unsurprisingly, the religious texts we pushed on the streets actually prized stillness, gentleness, silence, *slowness* as a virtue. The gift of not doing anything, of being with yourself, of being quiet against the heavy metal concert of the world. But those passages were never read in classes, never discussed at lunchtime. No one made up weird physical or mnemonic devices to memorize them. Because such things are what *truly* go against the grain. And they cannot be publicized in a space that prizes performance, rewards the hustle.

That space is a microcosm of our time-scant world. The promise of digital media, of social media, was the same as the promise of the sixteen rounds. You'll have more time, more convenience, more to enjoy, more to keep safe, keep close, more with less. By and large, the opposite has happened. Yes, we can look something up without a trip to the library. Yes, we can make connections with a retweet without stepping outside our homes or without getting to know our neighbours. But something crucial to the human experience is endangered. The *being* in the human. Just *being* open to whatever rivers and wonders and rains the real clouds might rivulet our way.

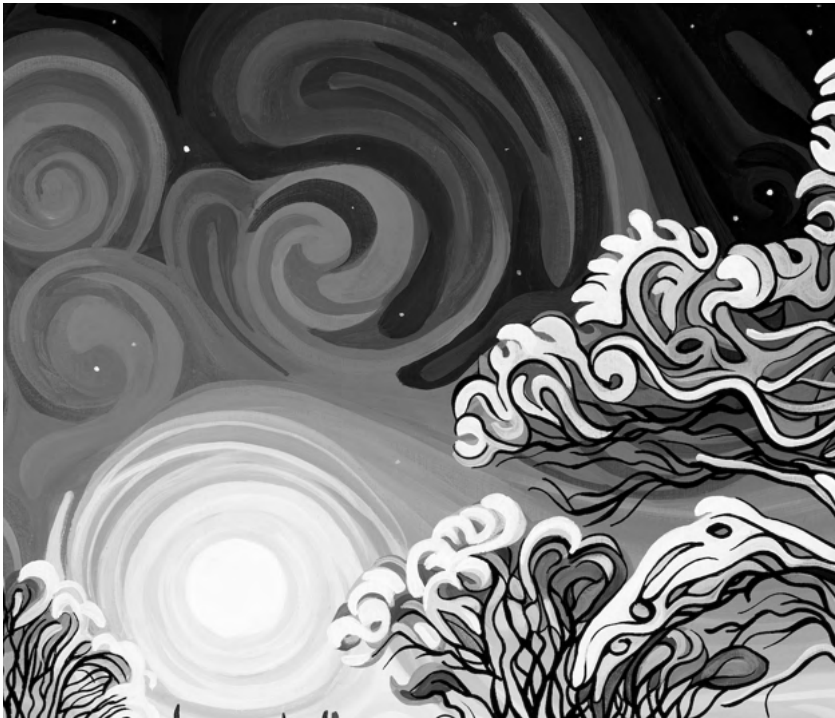
I return home with our daughter who runs to hug her dada. Some Mozart opera I won't pretend to know the name or number of is willowing into the sunlit, breeze-infused room. K, who is a lover of music, is also a worshipper of silence. Rilke, he reminds me, says, "Our task is to listen to the news that is always arriving out of silence." Back in our room, now filled with the garbled tri-lingual laughter of our crackling child, I'm not quite sure what to tell him about my first soundless walk in I-don't-know-how-long. Nor does he ask. He's probably forgotten he even confiscated my phone. Breathing in the humid air, I smile at him and mouth a *thank-you*. What for, he asks, genuinely confused. I don't have time to tell him because Ana is demanding our collective attention. The gratitude remains in the air and between us, silent and yet filled with the beauty of music and wildness, of nature and the way it conjures time through evoked memory, of birds that refuse to be captured.

but I keep finding myself
between a rock and a hard place.

I remember her
in Indian cotton with an elaborate headscarf,
earrings made of feathers and various beads,
blue eye shadow, and red Yardley lipstick,
and rings on nearly every finger,
long chains hanging clear to her waist,
and barefoot.

I remember her
set loose like fire in a strong wind.

I remember myself
as sacrifice,
as sunlight,
as a bird flying through the dome of a cathedral.



(Detail) #270-*Frozen Moonrise*
18" x 18"
Acrylic
2024

On Saturday morning Bert walked to the Nicely Farm. It took about an hour. He arrived shortly before seven. A very stout woman answered the door. She was wearing a white, sleeveless shift printed with little yellow flowers, which Bert decided must be buttercups. Her feet were tucked into pink scuff slippers. Just opening the door seemed to leave her a little breathless.

“Ivan!” She left Bert standing in the open door. The sound of boots on the stairs and Ivan appeared in the kitchen. He was still cinching his belt around his scrawny waist. There was something about him that made it seem like he was being gradually devoured.

The farm had one large and two small laying sheds. All the hens were white leghorns, Ivan explained as he unlatched the entrance to the first of the smaller sheds and drew open one of the wide doors. Bert could tell the shed was old. The wooden planks that comprised the walls and roof were grey and dry. The floor was sawdust. Clear, bare light bulbs dangled from the ceiling at intervals as bleak as condemned stars. The hens were briefly silent and stopped to gaze at them before resuming whatever they were doing—drinking from the various water troughs, pecking at the conveyor belt that carried feed around a raised, grated platform in the centre. The grates were stained with hen droppings.

It was difficult to pin down the odor. Ammonia, to be sure, but also a sickly, sweet scent that Bert could feel clinging to his clothes and skin like a layer of rancid butter. He thought of dying yolks. It was the smell of yellow steeped in urine.

The first shed housed about three hundred hens. These hens were only six months old. Their feathers were still as clean and white as church choir robes. Ivan showed Bert the circulation system for the water troughs and the automatic settings for the conveyor belt, which dispensed feed four times a day. Along the sides of the shed were the nesting boxes, each about the length of a coffin and divided into six compartments. They were positioned at waist height. The hens entered through openings in the back. When you lifted the lid, they burst out in a flurry of feathers and squawks. Their eggs lay nestled in cedar shavings, shining like Easter morning. Ivan showed Bert how to gather three in his left hand, one in his right, and then gently place them on the wire tray at the top of the rolling cart. As the top tray was filled, it was repositioned to the bottom and replaced with a fresh one until the cart was full.

“Keep your eye out for cracked eggs and toss them in here,” Ivan said, nodding toward the pail he had hung on the side of the cart. “Also, if you find any dead birds, toss them in there, too.”

“What kills them?” Bert asked.

“Disease. Heart attack. Or maybe egg bound. Who knows?” he shrugged.

“Egg bound?”

“Yeah. Can’t pass the egg. It’s too big. And sometimes, if they see blood, they’ll all attack that bird and peck it to death.”

Ivan and Bert unloaded the cart onto the truck. Bert noted it still had red 1972 licence plates. A year out of date.

“Doesn’t matter on private property. And you can drive here legal, too. Don’t even need your learner’s. Think you can drive this truck?”

“Maybe. Yeah. I think.”

They gathered up some more wire trays and walked to the second small barn. It was identical to the first except the hens were older. Nearly six years, Bert said. The odor was the same, only more so. The hens were a bedraggled lot. Some had patches without feathers. They were less skittish than the younger hens. One strutted up to Bert, bobbing its head and giving the cuff of his jeans a couple of pecks. Then it flew onto the cart.

“Shoo.” Ivan brushed it away.

The hens in these laying boxes did not burst out when you opened the lid as they had in the first barn. If you were not quick, they might give your hand a peck. Ivan scooped them up and tossed them as casually as volleyballs onto the sawdust floor. These birds yielded fewer eggs, but it took longer to gather them up.

“You girls are not long for this world,” Ivan said. “Shoo!”

The same hen flew onto the cart again. It did this several times. Each time Ivan brushed it away it would follow alongside him for a bit and then flap up onto the cart again. Finally, it settled on Bert’s shoulder. Bert didn’t mind.

“Looks like you got a friend.”

Bert climbed into the driver’s seat of the truck and drove with Ivan up the hill to the big barn. The stick shift came up from the floor of the cab. It was long and bent, and finding the gears was like searching for an underground stream with a divining rod. They lurched to the crest of the hill where the big shed came into view.

As they slammed shut the doors of the cab, Bert could hear the

cackling of the hens. Approaching the entrance, the sound achieved a kind of lunatic crescendo. As Ivan drew open the door it abruptly ceased. Here the hens were confined in two long batteries of cages. A pair crowded into each cage. One row of cages was at waist height and the other at eye level. They stretched their necks through the bars, like prisoners kneeling at the guillotine, and pecked at the feed that was distributed along conveyor belts. Below those were wire mesh shelves where the eggs rolled and settled. The hens drank water from little drip nipples that hung from pipes that ran the one-hundred-yard length of the barn. The floors of the cages were sloped to allow eggs to roll out. There was no bedding, no place to roost, and no windows yielding even a touch of natural light. Eggs extracted as efficiently as interrogators coercing confessions.

“How many?” Bert asked.

“Two thousand, give or take.”

The hens gradually resumed their chatter as Ivan and Bert set to work. Halfway down the first aisle Ivan beckoned Bert over and pointed to a dead bird. One of its eyes had been pecked out. Ivan removed the carcass and tossed it into the refuse bucket. As if on cue, the cackling of two thousand hens reached a fever pitch and then abruptly halted. Ivan lit a smoke. The barn was as quiet as a church. You could hear the sound of the cigarette paper burning.

By half past eleven they were in the storage shed where Bert learned where to arrange the eggs. There was a special rack for eggs stained with blood or grime. This rack was then lowered into a metal barrel. When you switched it on, it vibrated. Ivan handed Bert the bucket that contained cracked eggs and the carcass of the mutilated hen. He nodded to a rusty incinerator barrel.

“Lunchtime,” Ivan said. “In the afternoon you only have to collect from the small sheds again. Then sweep up in here. You should be done by three o’clock at the latest. I’ll meet you here at three.”

Bert retrieved the paper bag containing his lunch from where he’d left it on the porch. One of the windows was open. The sounds of a professional wrestling match were coming from the TV. He went back to the storage shed and washed his hands. Then he wandered down to the gate by the road and leaned on it as he ate his sandwiches.

Ivan came back at three o’clock and handed Bert a twenty-dollar bill.

“If you want the job, it’s every Saturday and Sunday,” Ivan said.

Twenty dollars was nearly double minimum wage for a day’s work. Bert had never made that much in a single day. He nodded.

“Right,” Ivan said. “I’ll see you next week.” They shook hands.

Bert seldom saw Ivan or his wife over the course of the summer except to receive his wages every second week on Sunday. He got the impression that Ivan was more interested in passing his weekends in peace than providing supervision. Usually, the windows of the farmhouse were open and Bert could hear the television. A couple of times, he saw Ivan drive away in the little station wagon with his plump wife squeezed into the passenger seat.

Bert found the long shed with the caged hens unsettling. The plumage of the caged birds was dull and sparse. They gazed at him like inmates of an asylum all infected with the same madness. It was routine to find dead birds. The small shed with the young hens was no trouble, though. Even the second small shed with the older hens was not so bad. At least there he sort of had a friend. The hen, which had so annoyed Ivan that first day, had become Bert’s companion. She usually perched on his shoulder. He gave her bits of fruit or vegetables that he brought along with his lunch. She was particularly fond of strawberries. For the sake of some company, Bert would chat with her. He named her Esther.

By August, Bert grew accustomed to bringing Esther outside with him as he ate his lunch. He sat on a stump in a little grove of oak trees that partly concealed them from view. After he had finished his sandwiches, he would sometimes read to her as she scratched in the dirt. Or if he had brought along his little transistor radio, they would listen together. Bert would sing along with the songs he knew. Esther liked to perch on his shoe as he tapped his foot to the rhythm.

The summer seemed reluctant to surrender. Even into October, the weather was unusually warm. Bert was getting busier with school and was considering giving Ivan his notice. He had saved a little money. He would soon take his driver’s test. Maybe buy a used car. But on the last Sunday of the month, Ivan offered him thirty dollars if he would show up Wednesday night for a special job.

“Wednesday is Halloween,” Bert said.

“Yeah. What? You going out trick-or-treating?”

“What’s the job?”

“We’re clearing out the hens in the second shed. Easy thirty bucks.”

“What happens to the hens?”

“Pet food. Meal for feed. Who cares.”

Bert thought of Esther.

The truck was already there when Bert arrived on Wednesday night. It was piled high with wire cages. Ivan and the driver stood nearby smoking as Bert approached. The driver had one of those taut, round bellies that some men get—as though their layers of fat had congealed into cold lard. His hands were as big as catcher’s mitts.

Ivan explained that the trick was to grab the hens one at a time in your right hand and transfer each hen to your left until you hold five. Grab a final hen and divide them into two groups of three in each hand. Pass them in threes to the driver who stuffs them into the cages, six to each compartment.

“Snug as cauliflower,” the driver laughed.

In the shed, Ivan had replaced all the clear bulbs with red ones. He said they helped to calm the hens. The interior glowed like Gehenna. Like it was illuminated by jack-o’-lanterns. Ivan opened the first nesting box. A little cloud of warmth rose up. He quickly scooped up six hens by their legs. He held out two bundles of three with the hens hanging upside down like mandrake roots. Bert did likewise, then walked back to the truck and passed his squirming bundles to the driver who stuffed them into one of the bottom cages.

“They’ll be alright?” Bert asked.

The driver laughed. “Half will be dead before I get to the slaughterhouse.”

Ivan came up behind them, his fists blooming with dangling hens.

“Let’s move it,” he said.

The job was nearly done when Esther finally appeared and lit onto Bert’s shoulder. By now every one of the nesting boxes had been flung open and all the easy pickings had been captured. About a dozen wide awake hens mounted a final resistance. They fled along the length of the sawdust aisles or fluttered onto the manure-stained grating until even these determined few were hunted down. Bert contrived to brush Esther from off his shoulder and out the doors of the shed. But Ivan snatched her up. She was among the final few to be crammed into the cages brimming with cackling birds.

Ivan and the driver walked up to the house. They stood under the porch lamp pouring over the papers on the clipboard that the driver had removed from the cab. Ivan called to his wife to bring them a pen.

There was nothing Bert could do for the rest of these hens, but maybe he could save Esther. He had noted the compartment into which she had been stuffed. But in the gloom, he could not be completely sure which

was Esther. Bert opened the cage and two hens burst out and flew off a few yards into the night. Another lit onto his shoulder.

“Go!” he said, taking her in both hands and tossing her toward the grove where they often had shared lunch. Esther walked back and perched on his shoe. He shoved her under the truck with his foot as Ivan and the driver returned. The driver heaved himself into the cab, gunned the engine, and rumbled off trailing a cloud of feathers.

“What the hell?” Ivan said.

Bert saw Esther lying on the road. One wing lay mangled and the other extended at a strange angle. She lifted up her head and dropped it again. Her body convulsed. Bert’s eyes went wide when he saw her expel an egg. Ivan walked to her and put the heel of his boot on her head and crushed it into the gravel. He picked her up by one leg, walked to the sorting shed, and tossed her into the incinerator.

Bert stood over the egg. It was perfectly formed but it had no shell. Just a milky translucent membrane. It quivered as Ivan returned, his footfalls nearing the spot. They both stood for a moment looking down at the egg. Then Ivan handed Bert three ten-dollar bills and said goodnight. Bert walked home in the dark. In the distance, fireworks burst in the night sky. Under the glow, he could sometimes make out a few white feathers caught in the grass by the side of the road.

Bruce pulled the car over somewhere near Kenora. “What is the fucking point of winter, anyway?” He leaned across Nat’s legs to the glove compartment for his wallet and used a Bank of Montreal credit card, scraping the lacy ice and fog from the inside of the windshield. Futile.

Nat’s mom had warned her that prairie winters were tough. Endless. Punishing. A hundred below zero. Nowhere to hide. Nothing to hold onto. All anyone can do is turn their face and body away from the torrents of wind gathering speed, swirling and darting, rising and falling. Close your eyes. Curse the sky. Wait for it to be over.

Nat didn’t care much about the ice or the cold or even winter, for that matter. She was with Bruce. Dependable, always on time, calls when he says he’s going to, Bruce. Bruce with his expensive Calvin Klein cologne and his nice family who didn’t ask questions except if she wanted second helpings at dinner and leftovers to take home. And when her mom died, they’d sent her flowers—nice ones. So when he asked, she’d said yes to Winnipeg and to seeing a hockey game. She hates hockey.

Nat had brought her mom’s camera, a Hasselblad. Bruce recognized it right away, grabbing it from her, clicking this and pushing that. “Careful,” she said.

“You *should* be careful with it.”

She would. She wasn’t going to take pictures at the game. It just made her feel better to have it.

Bruce thumped his fist on the dash. He was upset about having to take the Volvo wagon instead of the Jeep. The Volvo was far better than any of the cars her parents had ever owned. It didn’t have rust on the wheel wells. It didn’t belch grey exhaust or idle too high. In other words, the Volvo was in no way embarrassing, but she didn’t bother to explain this to him. Bruce was the first guy she’d dated that didn’t drive a pick-up truck.

“You mind if I smoke?” she said.

“No, but not in the car.” Bruce had quit smoking for the weekend to see if he could do it. If he needed to.

Nat zipped her coat to her chin careful not to catch the skin, pulling her toque over her ears before opening the door. It was stupid trying to smoke outside in snow like this, but Nat managed to get her cigarette lit. Her fingers were stiff. The smoke made her eyes water, the tears freezing in her lashes.

“Smoking is just something else you’ve done for that idiot,” Nat’s best friend forever, Frannie, had said the first time she’d seen her light up a menthol. “And his name is Bruce *Wayne*? Oh my god, Nat, I don’t care how rich he is, that is some kind of warning bell going off right there. What kind of eejit names their kid Bruce when their last name is Wayne? I hope you’re using protection. You don’t want to end up like Kim.”

No. No one wanted to end up like Kim.

Back in the car, Bruce revved the engine and put it into gear, turning back onto the highway. It should only take seven and a half hours to get to Winnipeg from Thunder Bay, but it was taking much longer. They slowed to a crawl because of black ice, and because the damn car kept fogging up.

“It’s totally my fault,” she said about the windshield. “You told me not to breathe.” It was an attempt to be funny—the only thing she could think to do when someone was upset. Take blame. Lighten the mood. Deflect.

When he’d picked her up his hair was disheveled, which Nat could have taken as a sign, but she was tired of thinking everything was a sign. Signs are all she’d been seeing since her mom died. She needed a break from signs, from thinking, from everything. She just wanted to do, be, feel.

Nat dug the camera from its case, holding it up to look at Bruce’s silhouette, his skin pale and luminous against the shadows of grey and white. He was just as handsome in profile as straight on. Not everyone is. His nose, a perfect slope. His jaw neither too strong, nor too soft. His cinnamon-coloured hair, a loose tangle. His left ear was pierced. Nat liked how the diamond stud sparkled, and wondered if it got hot when the sun shone on it. Could it, though? Could that little piece of silvery-white rock that cost more than Nat’s winter coat and boots—which she’d got at Zellers on Boxing Day in a sweaty panic, buying Sorels that were half a size too small and that numbed her feet whenever she walked too far—catch the sun’s heat? She didn’t take a picture. She liked taking the world in through tiny squares instead of all at once.

The first time Nat saw Bruce he was sitting in a corner in the church basement at First Baptist, one leg crossed over the other, wearing a caramel-coloured leather jacket that looked buttery soft, the collar up, twisting a ring on his pinky finger. The pastor was sitting next to him laughing. Were they friends? The only people Nat liked at church were the choir ladies, stuffed into their pleated robes like birds. They looked so joyful when they sang. And Ruthie, the organist, whose body swayed from side to side like a stalk of wheat in the wind.

Bruce wasn't like boys from the country. Those boys drove tractors. Slung manure with pitch forks. Their hands were always doing, moving, working, pulling calves from cows, twisting wire to mend fences, and sometimes, tightening fingers around the trigger of a gun. Kapow.

Bruce had long hair that curled at the back but not on the sides, and he shopped at Stegmann's—an expensive men's store on the south side of town. It was next to the Coney Island where Nat went with Gran for lunch on Sundays. She'd seen the sort of people who shopped there. Women with long wool coats and leather bags perched on their wrists. Businessmen with three-piece suits and glossy shoes. Even on weekends their idea of dressing casual meant khakis with a crease down the front and golf shirts with alligators on them. Bruce had been accepted at the seminary and would train to be a pastor later that fall.

Frannie had said Nat was dating up. So what if she was? She didn't want to marry a poor boy and live in a ramshackle in the middle of Nolulu with a well and a septic field and cows for neighbours. Not that she didn't like cows. Cows are fine. And so what if Bruce was out of her league? Maybe it was good for her to have a rich, good-looking boyfriend. Can't she have that? For a little while at least?

Bruce turned on the radio. There was one thing Nat didn't like about Bruce: his taste in music; his love for The Northern Pukes, as Frannie called them. Nat preferred the music her mom had been into: The Rolling Stones, The Doors, and The Guess Who. Nat's mom had met Burton Cummings when she was a teen. The story could be coaxed out of her after a few glasses of wine, which didn't happen often. Nat heard it for the first time when she was nine, tucked into her pyjamas, balancing on the arm of the sofa. Her mom's face flushed when she spoke, either from the wine or the memory, or both. It was like peering through a keyhole into a different life.

Nat had studied Burton's face on album covers, how his eyes twinkled. People often described people's eyes that way, but in this case it was true. There was a spark there. Nat liked his music, his voice (he plays the flute!) the fact that he was famous and from Winnipeg. A town so close to hers. Fame. Right there. Practically next door. Better than hockey or farms or cows or rich boyfriends any day. Bruce didn't have a moustache, but his eyes were brown.

It was impossible not to wonder what her mom would think of him and impossible to know for sure. What she did know was that she wouldn't have dared asked her mom about some of the things Bruce made her do. Like

giving blowjobs on the highway when he drove her home. She didn't even tell Frannie because Frannie would tell her to ditch the dirt bag. But that's only because Frannie hadn't found anyone of her own yet. If she had, she'd know that that's just what girls do—especially girls like her. Girls with hay and mud stuck to their blue jeans, dirt under their nails. Hair kissed by the sun. Bruce said she was a natural beauty. Said she didn't need war paint like his last girlfriend. Said it like it was a good thing.

The storm had cleared as they neared Winnipeg. The hockey game was just a game. Nat tried to pretend that she cared about the score and she did the wave and held Bruce's beer when he went to the can. That's the thing about hockey, or any game: someone always wins and someone always loses. Unless there's a tie. And even then. There's always sweat and fighting. Shouting.

"You know what really bugs me about hockey?" she said, turning to Bruce in the stands. "I don't get why they're called the Leafs. The plural of leaf is leaves. They should be called the Maple Leaves."

"It doesn't sound right."

It sounded right to Nat. But when you're a farm girl you have to figure out what works and what doesn't and that means going along with things that don't always make sense.

Nat pulled the camera from its case. She hadn't been interested at all in photography before and wondered now if it was something she would be good at. Funny how death changes things. She focused the lens and framed her subject.

She must work quickly or she'll lose the shot. But a photographer knows that the right light can make any shitty thing look good.

Click.

Did Burton Cummings's mom know he was special? Or was he just an ordinary kid who liked to sing? Did he even like to sing?

Click.

Maybe she'll become a famous photographer, step into her mother's footsteps and keep walking forward.

Click.

Or maybe she'll shove the camera in a closet and forget about it for twenty or thirty years. Sell it at a yard sale to a stranger.

Click.

Maybe she'll marry Bruce and have kids and they will divorce when the kids are in school and the two of them realize they never really had anything in common.

Click.

Or maybe she'll marry Bruce and they'll have kids and she'll be happy to become a pastor's wife. She'll join the choir and sing alto even though she could sing soprano. She has a good ear for music. She'll learn how to make coffee in the big percolators for church teas and bake lemon squares and date squares and she'll pinch the cheeks of babies and pray a lot about everything and for everyone except herself.

Click.

The thing about losing a parent when you're a grownup is that you can survive without them—you don't need them to drop off lunch or remind you to put lipstick in the corners of your mouth or have them tell you they are proud of you when you do something ordinary. You absolutely can live without them—you just don't want to.

Of course, the crustless sandwiches
but also, the fathomable tears.
The years of nursing, parenting, the travels,
lawn bowling, now dwindled to people:
other nurses, grown children, figures
in distant photos from Peru or the Yucatan,
a whole whack of seniors in jerseys.
The glamour pic is what first got us, the dead
in an '80s shot, hot as one was then in perm,
oversized earrings, a shiny, shoulder-padded gown.
The son's eulogy next, punctured by eternities of breath
to leash any wilder bereavements, and then,
inevitably, Hallelujah.
I didn't think I cared so much.
Also, I weep over cooking shows.
Either way, she'd died fast, even though 80,
so there was shock, a reeling.
Mourners remarked on her daughter's Botox, some
absent friends, the long-deceased cheater of a husband.
Over and again she was said to be good, a doler
out of hugs, a shaper of old Irish sayings, and the minister
revealed she had prayed not to make a fuss, and thus
had beat the diagnosis of weeks by dying in days instead.
I didn't know how to respond to that.
There were the tiniest lemon meringue tarts
and also the hours stretching out, springing back.

ADULT QUESTIONS

Would you rather have parents of dirt
or parents of the flames is the game we
play now in our middle-aged parlours.

Would you rather they were arrayed, clad
and drained in a box, or perhaps popped in a stove
and, within a few hours, cooled then crushed?

Would you rather they were dug and winched,
dropped within a plot while flowers and prayers
rain down and you could visit (in theory) the spot?

Or would you rather you got an urn of dust and bone-
bits and teeth you could keep on your mantelpiece
or cast into a stream in the equal ash of August?

This is not would you rather be a bear or a wallaby,
would you rather eat worms or drink your own pee, this is would
you rather them die or die and either way, there is no choice.



#269-Gentle Whispering Moon
36" x 36"
Acrylic
2024

They only let me into the Rosen-Vogel Jewish Home for the Elderly because of my husband, who was one of them. He had the good sense to drop dead while shovelling the walk sixteen years ago so he didn't have to deal with this shit. I'm the lone Catholic-Italian resident, though I'm not alone exactly, what with Meaghan, the Catholic-Irish nurse; Salvador, the janitor from Columbia, you *know* he's Catholic. And there are Filipinas all over the place, some of whom are Jehovah's Witnesses, but there are plenty of Catholics among them too. So no, I'm not alone. But I'm the only one who lives here but doesn't gum the matzah at this time of year. I'm the one who'd beg Meaghan to sneak in a sweet roll, so I can gnaw it in my room with my rented teeth. To hell with their kashrut. They can vacuum the crumbs when I'm asleep and my hearing aid is in the drawer.

When Irving married me it was a sensation, but nowadays you've got to set yourself on fire to make anyone pay attention—the other girls talk about their Jewish sons marrying Korean girls who work at the bank, Jewish boys marrying Arab princesses, Jewish boys marrying Jamaican boys. Now everything happens. Not that I disapprove. What do I care? Let them all make each other miserable the way I made Irving miserable. But people forget that it was something of a scandal for us then and took some getting used to. I just want a little credit. Irving and I, we were misery pioneers of the melting pot variety.

Most years, Passover turns this place upside down like the Queen is coming. The residents aren't all so strict with the orthodoxy, but the staff has to cater to the strict ones, and every year Rabbi Whatshisberg comes by with a big book and his red ears to look at the kitchen and talk to the staff about how this is the time of the Jews' liberation, so everyone should be equally stressed out. It means a big deep clean the week before, which isn't so bad, with scrubbing on the walls, and vacuuming the couch cushions, and those industrial carpet cleaners that look like a big metal detector, like someone scanning for loose change. Which is funny, because nobody around here carries money—what for? Maybe someone could drop an earring.

The whole place smells like bleach, which makes us sneeze, though if we're lucky this all coincides with the first nice spring days and they can open some windows. Last year, they had every window open one day while they were cleaning, with all of us sitting with our lap blankets on the patio

like a row of begonias, and then the next day we had two inches of snow and a wind that could peel the skin right off your head.

The Passover seder itself is nice. At dinner they do some prayers and tell a story, sometimes a group of kids from a Jewish school comes in to sing a song, and everybody gets chatty because they remember how when they were young this happened or that happened, and you can't help but have a warm feeling. You nibble on these hors d'oeuvres which aren't too bad—a little sweet, a little salt, and the horseradish that would clear your sinuses if they gave us more than a toenail's worth—and then you have your piece of chicken or pot roast just like usual.

When we were newlyweds Irving and I would go to his parents' house for the Passover seder and with all the people and the different preparations his mother wouldn't have time to snipe at me, so even I have some nice memories. Irving's father was in furniture, so they were comfortable, and he didn't mind me. His mother was another story, though. She was the daughter of some big shot rabbi from Lithuania, and she never approved of me. Irving's sister and two brothers all married "within the faith," as they say, and she'd dote on the other daughters-in-law, especially once the grandchildren started to appear. But me, I got prune face. Like I said, it was a scandal.

The Passover at the Rosen-Vogel, if it were just for a day or two, it would be pleasant. A few decorations, a few unusual foods, a visit from the kids, and then back to our regular business of staring at each other and watching TV. But for a week it goes on, with the matzah crackers and the prunes on the table. Old age does a number on your digestive system, I can tell you, and then for a week they torture it with this stuff, like they want to empty out a few rooms for the spring.

Meaghan was good to me, though. She lives near a Portuguese bakery that has sweet bread rolls that would make you bless the Virgin Mary. But she couldn't bring them too fresh because the smell would attract attention. So she'd buy them on her way home from work and bring one for me the next day. Usually she worked from 3:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m., so I'd skip lunch and wait in my room for her to come with the goods, and I'd spend a lovely afternoon picking at it with my back to the door in case one of the staff came in to check on me. If Meaghan could manage it twice during the Passover week, I'd get through ok.

But this year was the year of the virus and they put such a lockdown on the place you had to stay in your room all the time. No visitors,

no social programming, not even a lecture from Rabbi Whathisberg. We'd seen some stories about it on TV, and we knew sure enough it was coming, but everything carried on as normal. Then, on a Thursday afternoon I was sitting with Ruthie Kahn in the social hall while the cleaning staff purged the dining room of any trace of bagels or pound cake. We were talking about one of our shows and whether or not the actor with the wavy hair would go bald and fat like Richard Dreyfuss as he got older, or if he'd stay trim and handsome like Clint Eastwood. "Not that we'll be around to find out," Ruthie said. That's why I like her. She's got more bite than most of the rest of them here. Maybe because she's from Montréal.

Then one of the nurse's aides, Lucia, came over to say, "I'm sorry, ladies, but everyone has to go to their room now. I will take you." Smiling she said this, apologetic, like it was a little bit her fault.

Ruthie is in a wheelchair on account of her arthritis but I toddle along with a walker still, so I hauled my ass up and walked alongside her as Lucia brought us to the elevator. Around here you never know with people. We complain to each other about our knees and about our digestion, but we don't talk much about the more serious business that scares us, our kidneys and our hearts, so you don't know if any day someone's off to the hospital wing and not coming back. What I'm saying is that this is the last time I saw Ruthie, but it didn't really come as a surprise. It's a shame, she was good company.

I can tell you about my room, it's not bad. It's two rooms, really, one with the bed and the bathroom attached, and then a sitting room with my own TV and a couch for visitors and lots of shelf space for photographs and little decorations and things I couldn't part with from our house. Where I am now is the section called "assisted living," which means that they keep an eye on you, and they feed you in the dining room, but you're still free to come and go as you please, at least usually. My Irving made a living while he was living, and he donated to the right organizations, and so I don't have to lie down on a bench in my own filth like they do in some places. I know what they're like, Christ, just shoot me and get it over with. Let me just say that whatever crap Irving gave me while he was alive, he's made it up by putting enough aside that I don't have to worry now. My oldest son, Eric, keeps an eye on the financial statements and every once in a while his wife brings me a new blouse. They even drive down from Richmond Hill to show me their teenagers from time to time, my grandchildren, and once or twice a year for a bit of glamour my younger son, Jules, flies in from Los Angeles smelling of oranges. What I'm saying is it could be worse.

But no visit from Jules this year. Once the virus hit, what could you do? You go into your room and you stay there. Somebody would bring in a tray for the meals, maybe a snack in the afternoon, but they're wearing masks so you can't talk to them really. You can see in their eyes they're watching you to see if you're getting sick. Which told me that some of us were getting sick, otherwise they wouldn't be so concerned.

One of the girls, Maribel, had a little mole above her eyebrow which is how I knew it was her when she'd come in. I'd say, "Is that Maribel?" and she say, "Yes, Mrs. Engelman," and I'd say, "Why do you look so worried, Maribel? It's fine in here, come sit down. Stay a while." She sat down once on the high-backed chair I brought from our living room, the one that Irving used to smoke his pipe in during the two-year period when he thought that he would become a pipe-smoker. Boy that was terrible. Now of course, when someone really plunks down on it, one of my grandkids for example, I think I can still get a whiff of that pipe and it gives me a nice feeling, but Maribel barely left an impression on the cushion she sat down so lightly on the edge, her fingers fidgeting in her lap.

"How's everybody doing, Maribel?"

"It's very hard right now, Mrs. Engelman. But don't worry."

"I haven't seen Meaghan lately."

"She's a real nurse, so she's helping with the residents who are sick."

I leaned in and whispered, "Are a lot of us getting sick?" Maribel's eyes went back and forth, as if she were worried someone might overhear her answer.

"Some. But it's not just the COVID. Some of them have other problems and because everyone's locked in . . ." She trailed off with a little shrug, but I knew what she meant.

That was the most I could get out of her, and she was relieved when I told her I'd see her tomorrow. Otherwise, there's just the television and a few magazines. And the little phone I carry that lets me call my sons when they'll talk to me. Once or twice I even spoke to the grandchildren, but they sounded so miserable it broke my heart to hear them. I was so bored I thought about getting the virus just so I would have something to do. But I'm not stupid. I don't want to be one of those poor elderly people who end up dying from this thing, one of those numbers lumped in with all of those poor people in the city-run group homes, and the bus drivers, and warehouse workers. Call me selfish, but I want my own number. When I die, I want to be the only one that day.

Later, a man in a space suit came into my room to empty the garbage cans and wipe down the counters with disinfectant.

“Is that you, Salvatore?”

“No, ma’am, it’s Mino. I’m new.”

He stood there, waiting for me to stop talking, so he could get back to it, but even under the shield and the mask I could see the fear on his face, his eyebrows raised like he was about to cry. It was the saddest housecleaning I’d ever seen, and I’m including when we sorted all of Irving’s suits after the funeral—some for the boys, one or two ties for the grandkids, and the rest for goodwill. I said, “Mino, are you okay in there? You look peaked.”

He said, “I don’t want to make you sick,” and the muffled sound of his voice was a tough blow. The Filipinos have this nice politeness in the way they talk to us, even the men. They call us “Ma’am,” but it sounds like “Mum,” and I don’t mind saying I like it.

“How are you going to make me sick if you’re wrapped up in that thing?” I asked, pretending to be relaxed.

“I have to ride the bus, and there are a lot of sick people at my other job.”

“All right, Mino. You do your business.” I started to get up from my chair, mostly because I knew he’d have to drop his rags to hold my elbow. “But the next time you come you’ll sit for a minute and tell me something about your family. You hear me? Next time I want to hear a little story. Do you have kids?”

“Yes, a little son.”

“What’s he called?”

“He’s Charlie, Ma’am.”

“All right, so next time you come to clean I won’t let you go until you tell me a story about Charlie, ok?”

I couldn’t tell who was alive and who was sick. They kept us in the dark, and Mino didn’t seem to talk to the others the way he talked to me, so he couldn’t tell me much except things like, “They brought a lady to the hospital today, but they said it’s because of her kidneys,” or “three of the PSWs had to call in sick today so everyone is very rushed.” It was better than nothing. I learned about Charlie, who was eight years old and trying to learn fractions from his computer. Poor thing. Imagine.

There was plenty of bad news on the TV, and even the reporters had weird faces so that I’d turn the channel and watch one dumb sitcom or another just to occupy my mind. After a while they would let us come down

to the lobby a few at a time, but we had to ride the elevator by ourselves, and we had to wear these masks, so that we couldn't hear each other. It was almost better back on my couch. The weather was still raw and there was nothing to do. We're in death's waiting room over here, reading magazines, watching garbage on the television, waiting for the appointment but not sure when we'll get called.

Somewhere in there Passover must have started because the bread disappeared and the matzah started coming. For me that was the last straw. I was having my turn in the lobby, and it was chilly outside, but I could see people out walking with just their jackets. I put on a sweater and made plans.

Sometimes Meaghan was around the lobby, darting this way and that, trying to be friendly with us while she rushed off to whoever really needed her. I put my finger up for her and gave a raspy cough, which got her attention all right. When she came over, I pulled her closer and then winked. "Meaghan, dear, that Portuguese bakery near your house, is it open still?"

She looked around, she knew what I was getting at. "I think so, but honestly I haven't been there in a long time."

I patted her hand. "They've been running you ragged, my dear."

She let herself release a big sigh. She must have had nice thick red hair when she was younger, but it was straying out of her ponytail from all the worrying she was doing. "I think we're through the worst of it now, but it's still scary. And the staff . . ."

"There's not enough of you."

"Exactly."

I paused a second. "So that bakery, though. How far is it?"

"Oh, no, Mrs. Engleman, it's far. You'd need to take the bus. I'll try to check in after my shift tonight."

"It's all right dear, don't you worry about me. I have a backup plan."

Meaghan looked at me funny, but then someone else called her and she didn't have time to pursue it. That meant I had to wait for Mino.

"Mino, where do you get those lunches? They look delicious."

"Oh, there's a Filipino bakery nearby. But I can't bring it inside during the holiday, Ma'am. They don't even let me eat in the kitchen."

"I know, it can be strict around here. How far is it to where you get your lunch?"

"It's just around the corner. I don't mind the walk."

"I don't blame you. What kind of bread do they have?" I asked, seeing if he'd take the hint, but he's just a man after all.

“Oh, lots of kinds. My favourite is the star bread, *putok*.”

“Putok?”

“Yes, that’s right. It’s sweet.”

“Is there any chance you could sneak a little roll in for an old lady?”

“After the holiday, sure, no problem.”

“What about *before* the holiday? I’m sick of those dry crackers they’ve been giving me all week.”

Mino made a sympathetic face, but he was scared. He scratched his ears and adjusted his mask. “I don’t want to get in trouble, Ma’am. I need this job, my other job closed, so this is all I have.”

“Ok, ok, don’t think any more about it, dearie.”

I wonder if he thought I would try to send someone else out—maybe one of my sons—to fetch something for me, but I wasn’t going to wait for that kind of charity. As soon as Mino went back to his vacuum I stood up and buttoned up my coat. If this is the holiday of freedom for everyone else around here, it was time for this old lady to get a little taste.

When the automatic doors opened there was a blast of chilly air that made my eyes tear, but I kept going until I was under the awning outside. I was worried that someone would come and try to stop me, but I guess the idea was so outlandish, and the staff so distracted, that I just slipped out. Anyhow I’m still supposed to be in one of the “assisted living apartments,” which means I’m supposed to be able to come and go as I please. Virus or no virus.

After the awning, there’s a short crescent driveway before you get onto the street, so I got a good start. The breeze kept up, but the sun was bright, a good spring day, and I hadn’t heard the wind in the leaves in I don’t know how long. Of course the sidewalk was under some kind of construction, and I couldn’t lift my walker over the broken up pieces of cement. So I veered into the street just as a man on a motor scooter zoomed by with some huge crate on his back and a face mask like a burglar. I heard him yell, but it wasn’t in any language I knew, so I kept moving. I had twenty dollars in my purse, tissues aplenty, face cream, and a little tube of hand sanitizer.

I locked my elbows and started up the middle of the road. To hell with the minivan trying to parallel park, to hell with the garbage truck. The horns started in right away, but they can all wait for me to pass. I’m not dead yet, you sons of bitches. I’m going to make it to the end of this street.

The coroner waved his arms to shoo the chickadees pecking the exposed flesh of the disembodied thigh. Omnivores, suddenly not so cute. How many times has he watched his wife with an outstretched arm holding cubes of suet in her palm? “They’ll come,” she’d said, “if I’m really, really still.”

After a call from local police, the coroner had driven his Chevy truck to the private forested property, the nearest neighbour a mile away. His breath, translucent clouds, rose in bursts in the frigid February air. He tugged on his black, wool cap, snapped on his latex gloves, and zipped his black winter jacket marked “CORONER,” a light-reflective badge Velcroed to his back. His boots crunched through layers of undisturbed snow to a cordoned-off area marked with yellow police tape.

Inside was a ten-by-twelve sunken area blackened with a heap of ash in the middle, charred logs along the periphery. At first glance, it looked like the remnants of a bonfire, but evidence revealed a very different story.

An aluminum ladder lay at the edge of a now cold fire, a shotgun, its fired shell, and a note left in the deceased’s trailer all pointing to suicide. Unpaid land taxes. Threats of property possession. He’d built a funeral pyre. Had he wanted to leave on his own terms, consumed quickly? His dog, his only companion and family, perhaps his only *raison d’être*, had died months earlier.

His plan had almost worked if not for Newton’s Third Law: For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. The bullet had shot forward, the stock bucking backward. When his lifeless weight collapsed into the flames, his lower body and ladder had landed outside the fire’s perimeter.

A Labrador Retriever from a farm on the same road had brought home a bone. His owner, mistaking it for a “deer” bone, threw it onto their wood pile. But when the dog brought home another gift and left it on the front porch, the owner called the police to report the human foot encased in a shoe.

In rural Ontario, the long, biting months of winter deplete energy stores. Deer scratch through snow nibbling unharvested corn in farmer fields. A fox might pounce on a distracted squirrel traversing the terrain toward their stash of acorns in another tree. Coyotes howl and yip during evening hunts.

Eat or starve. Consume or be consumed. The realities of a complex food web.

He would have disappeared if given more time with the coyotes and other critters who began to chew, claw, and peck at the remains in the ash-speckled snow.

No one had reported the sound of gunfire. No one reported the pluming smoke in the sky. No tire marks had led down the long laneway blanketed by snow. An overstuffed mailbox by the road: the only clue that someone lived on the property.

Late in the evening when the coroner arrived home, his two mutts, tails wagging, greeted him at the door. After the obligatory head scratches, he poured himself a scotch, neat the way he liked it, and made his way to his office where he sat in his leather chair and jiggled the mouse to wake his computer. A bluish glow illuminated his face as he typed a report destined to disappear into a database scavenged by statisticians.

And that night, when he climbed into bed, he snuggled close to his wife, breathing in her lavender soap. His fingers reached out to caress his favourite place, that curve where waist meets hip.

LAWSON'S FATHER ALDEN ROY'S
DYIN TRANSFORMATION | *Cory Lavender*

When after deer
to this day
I can hear im say
you got to learn to think like one.

Fateful trip in behind Broad River
off from the pack scourin for a lost knife.
Hunter's moon climbin over his arch of skin.
Half-light. No clue some fool's on his trail

real shit excuse ready to fire at wind
like that could stinguish a twig's snap
under the cloven edge of the even-toed
from footsteps clunkin. Unless—no

unless Father in that wicked thick goin
tuned in so, so, so hands n feet hardened
to hooves n one thing another, big ears
pointy blades of grass swivellin this way

n that, pelt of prey on n sniffin wild
in all directions. Fella shot im
swore he heard a snort like a buck
takin fright, shouldered his rifle.

Father's life branchin out
the earth's to soak up
our blood reachin
out to us.

COLLEEN MCGEE ON HARD TIMES

Depression? Got dark like a sinkhole
of debt swallowed the family whole.
Farm hauled out from under us, fields
the auctioned-off oxen never broke again.

Moved to Brooklyn
—soon as we stepped in the door
bedbugs crawled half-starved
from newsprint-papered walls.

Had to get it fumigated—wasn't fit.
Women stayed down Aunt Bessie's.
The men put up in that red barn
out back Dad kept chickens in.

Smoked the bugs out, but not a rat
—never seen the likes!
When they started killing the hens
Father said, "Those rogues bode war"

—that low tone he'd only use
to sing scary hymns to the drone
of Mom on the organ we drug with,
like saving it would somehow save us.

INTERSTELLAR ALIGNMENT WITH GREAT-GREAT-GRAMMY ZWICKER

I contemplate the one
photo of us two
—born 1893
it's Xmas or your birthday
up at Queens Manor in the early 1980s.

I'm sixish, bow-tied, wide-eyed.
Face dress-shirt white. You're
not much bigger than me.

Agèd tawny hand encloses baby bicep.

Dad snaps the Kodak: his boy
and his mother's grandmother,
my grandmother's
grandmother: Great
-Great-Grammy Zwicker, born a Lavender.

Oh, Avis
then your granddaughter married Grandpa.
Ronald Lavender, grandson of Lazarus
was a brother of your father's—imagine
my surprise to learn of the Lavender
lineage on Dad's maternal side.

See, Jack Sweley
12-year-old “Black Loyalist,” freeborn
Jamaican “apprentice” to shipwright
Robert Lavender, Red Coats captain
crosses from NYC to Port Roseway
after Brits lose to Patriots in 1783.

Only, Robert dies in 1785. Sweley
arrives in Lunenburg, becomes

the well-connected Johann Lavender.
Marries Susanna Sukay, who sadly dies
after delivering John Jr. in 1789.

Susanna: *your* great-grandmother, Miss Avis!
Starlight, star bright, I wish I knew
all you might've known of her.

1836: John Jr. marries Barbara Carver
(Irish lass with a boy out of wedlock)
your grandmother,
 my grandmother's
 grandmother's
 grandmother.

And the priest made sure to note
she was marrying a Black man
at St. John's Anglican!

Star light, star bright
to dwell in your gold leaf halo's
 circumference of influence
—I want to extol history's gravity
extend remembrance, exalt—my stars
 any room brightens
whatever quadrant you enter, great
-granddaughter of Johann whose great
-great-great-great-grandson Peter
—my Dad—knew none of this
capturing our gold-flecked likenesses
 in a flash
 circa '83:
 you and me.

* * *

Great-Great-Grammy Avis
 what I heard is you smoked
hand-rolled “asthma cigarettes”—smelled

just like marijuana. Sweet Mary Jane.
Ganja. *Weed*.

Gawd, I was anxious
that first time we met—a trace
flits across synapses, draws us into
constellation.

*Busting buds into crumbs
corona colas burst supernova
between my fingers and my thumbs . . .*

Way less antsy now
break up this Blue Haze, some
Tangerine Dream, that Sour Diesel
relish musty tang, feel the crystalline
adhesive tingle.

Enter a white moth
orbits the desk lamp. Sticky-sweet
granules line a creased leaf
as mosquitoes trip
a spider's sick silk trap.

Lick the glue roll it up spark
skunky lung gunk and respire.
Smoke crawls
over my tongue
slinks down spiral stairs, laces
capillaries. Seafoam
curls from my mouth-chimney
spills down to toes twinkle, twinkle
retrograde against the tidal slog
of years to reach your location
hallowed coordinates
my destination.

* * *

*The web revolves.
It's the golden hour.
You are. Your era.*

Miss Avis's eight eyes on me.

At your fingernail's dull prick
plants a microchip, all I want
boils down to: board the great
grandmothership, grip sable ribbon
you unwind through the labyrinth.
The onus on us to atone, at once.

*A verdant iridescence
emerald glow
emanates
endorphins
lead me along
a portrait-lined, coffin-wide corridor.*

Avis Eldora

High Priestess of the Golden Tone
come find me—head home
from Toronto by whirlwind, big-city nanny
riding cloud nine, mad pinching cheeks
dressed to the nines, special “cigarettes”
the gift of the gab, your honeyed throat.

Tonight, I swear on my grandmother's grave,
your granddaughter Shirley Lavender's grave—
I can smell your perfume
under this potent smoke's
lemony cloak.

A simple flyer: *MISSING*—orange, blue eyes, answers to *Madame Pêchident*. The space below featured a photograph of a goldfish looping around a plastic aquarium castle.

Responds to “glub-lub-glululub.”

The footnotes provided a pronunciation guide.

She pulled the flyer from the telephone pole and slipped it into her pocket.

* * *

Dana worked on a traffic island, with all sides hemmed in by HOV lanes and tarmac. The work kept her hands smelling of quarters, and she spent the long hours watching traffic buzz to greater destinations. There was little point in picturing herself in those fleeting vehicles; she'd already used her vacation days to navigate TiVo, and besides, people took vacations with Someone Else. Dana's Someone Else had long gone, a vanishing act in the night. He hadn't bothered with goodbye, and she hadn't bothered with flyers.

The day was a Saturday, and the radio, which was not a local station, boasted nothing new, nor spoke of fish. It was neither summer nor Christmas, and traffic, in spite of the pileup some three miles from the toll ramp, was mild. Dana stacked quarters in intervals of five and sometimes rolled the extras into paper tubes and mostly thought about seagulls. They'd be heading north soon, drawn by warmer weather and the promise of abandoned beach picnics. Bad news for a goldfish on the run.

A small blue sports car pulled beneath Dana's window. The driver, whose long limbs barely fit behind the steering wheel, was clearly in a state of quarter-life crisis. He looked uncomfortable, but that may have had less to do with his car's capacity and more to do with his flushed face. The girl in the passenger seat ran a thumb beneath her lower lip. Dana vacillated between averting her gaze and glaring as she leaned out the window and said, “Two-seventy-five, please.”

The man passed her a fistful of bills. “Keep the change.”

Dana dropped the three limp dollar bills into the drawer. “Gee, thanks.”

The man laughed—or maybe the girl beside him had choked?—as

the blue car buzzed through the toll booth. Dana grabbed the bottle of hand sanitizer beneath her desk. It was mostly empty.

She had once ridden in the passenger seat of a similar blue sports car, had once come home every night to find it parked in her driveway. She had once done things in that blue sports car, secret things she may not have done had the car been, say, red, or a four-door. It was always the car's blueness, she told herself, that reddened her ears when those memories cropped up—the way the car's smallness required her to fold herself in creative ways.

Dana wrote down a description of the car on her wall calendar for three days from then, when she decided it would return with an angry driver and empty passenger seat. Her predictions were almost always right.

* * *

Mom made meatloaf for dinner again. Dana suspected her mother's bimonthly meatloaf Sundays were continued punishment for the one and only week sixteen-year-old Dana had been vegan, a pursuit that was quickly abandoned after her mother insisted she buy her own groceries. Dana's mother denied claims of both punishments, and every fall she would purchase another half a cow from Dana's uncle and insist Dana help her eat it.

"How's work?" her mother said as she heaped more meatloaf onto Dana's plate. "Have you made manager yet?"

Three years prior, when a spiraling Dana landed her toll booth job, she had told her mother she worked at Dick's Sporting Goods, as being suddenly single and working in a sweltering toll booth seemed like too much shame to bear for one Sunday dinner. Dana's mother refused to shop at Dick's for linguistic reasons, so the odds of Dana's mother never showing up to check on her daughter were in Dana's favor. She promised herself that she would eventually correct her mother, but who knew, maybe she really would get a clerk job at Dick's Sporting Goods. Why overcorrect?

Dana looked for a dog to slip her meatloaf to, but her mother's collection of Shih Tzu's was absent.

"They have," she said. "In fact, I am now Chief Manager, which means I get to boss all of the general managers around."

Dana's mother clasped her hands and nearly speared herself with the serving fork. "That's wonderful! Does that mean you're in charge of the swimsuits? Because I was at Macy's the other day looking for a new bathing

suit for your cousin Kenny's wedding in Florida this summer and I swear they were all just *strings*. Could you imagine all these girls, wandering around the beach in nothing but *strings*?"

"Sounds stylistically challenging."

"It's no wonder there are so few families nowadays—why buy the cow when you can get the milk for free?"

Dana nearly choked on a mouthful of mashed potatoes. She swallowed hard and smiled.

"Sorry—I have to be elected Prime Manager before I can pick swimsuits, and that's a whole campaign process, and then all of the general managers vote, blah, blah, et cetera. Maybe next year."

"Where am I supposed to get a decent swimsuit before Kenny's wedding?"

Dana dropped a slab of meatloaf on the floor and hoped one of the dogs would find it before her mom did. "The Internet?"

"So the hackers can get my credit card information? Dana, dear, do you even *watch* the news?"

"No, why? Are the boys coming home from 'Nam?"

Dana's mother buttered a roll with unnecessary aggression. "I'm praying for you, dear."

"Carl would've laughed." Dana paused and glanced toward the head of the table for her mother's spindly, skeletal boyfriend. "Where's Carl?"

Dana's mother pursed her lips. "Isn't it about time you found yourself a husband?"

Dana's fingers itched toward her pocket, where the flyer for the missing goldfish was still tucked away, near the key to her car that was not blue. How did a goldfish go missing, just vanish from a bowl as cleanly and silently as a blue car rolling down a driveway in the night?

"Sure, Mom. I'll work on it."

* * *

Actual Robert, so named because Dana had called their former coworker Robert for six months before learning his name was Ryan, wandered up to the toll booth at quarter past four. Dana had previously suspected Actual Robert had a crush on her due to his consistently early arrival times, but two years had gone by with no moves made by either party. Dana liked Actual Robert, liked that he was always where he was supposed to be when he was

supposed to be there. She liked that he arrived early and armed with reviews for taco trucks he'd tried, liked that he did not own a blue car.

"What's the day shift like?" he said. He crammed himself into the spare seat behind her and lodged his knees somewhere between her gallbladder and her kidneys.

"I did win the Beanie Baby bracket that one year, so."

Beanie Baby Bracket = most accurate prediction of Beanie Baby sightings on dashboards in a single calendar year.

"C'mon, D. I'm trying to have a conversation with you."

"C'mon, A. R. The day shift is boring just like the night shift is boring." She attempted to turn, failed, and settled for a side eye. "Don't tell me the night shift is full of Batmobiles and men in bloody trench coats."

Actual Robert pursed his lips and tried to pull his legs to his chest. "I did see a guy with a buck in the backseat of his car, once. Looking out the window like it was going for a ride."

Dana almost laughed. "Was it still alive? Was it, like, the guy's pet or something?"

"Nah, it was dead."

A movement in the corner of her eye caught her attention, and she scrambled over Actual Robert's legs to get to the window. Outside, the blue sports car had returned—or rather *a* blue sports car. This driver was older, and his hands did not sweat as he passed Dana his change.

The car left at a reasonable speed. Dana frowned and reached for her calendar.

"Something wrong?"

"No, I just, you know—predicted a certain blue car would come back today. And it didn't, so."

"That's what you do all day? Predict when people will come back?"

"Or never come back. Which is more common." Dana reached for her calendar and drew a red X across the date.

Actual Robert flipped through the calendar's previous months. "Why would you care if you see any of these people again?" he said. "I mean, it passes the time, but—why?"

She shrugged. "Sometimes it's nice to see things come full circle."

He smiled, and for a brief second, Dana thought he might have actually been cute. She perched half on the register, so she could face him. "Have you heard about the goldfish?"

* * *

The following Wednesday, five days after the first flyer appeared, Dana found another advert tucked among the clusters of band and festival announcements on the telephone pole outside the Rite Aid. This one offered a reward—*One secret of the finder's choosing and Fun Facts About Goldfish: A Beginner's Guide (in paperback)*. Dana pulled the flyer from the pole and placed it in her pocket.

She'd gone to the pharmacy for a prescription—one of those things she hadn't taken in years, like Xanax, or birth control, but that her doctor kept prescribing and insurance kept covering. Plump birds had watched her all the way to the pharmacy, waiting for treats. Inside the Rite Aid, the two teenagers were pitching boxes of condoms at each other. Maybe the goldfish owner would be here too, searching among the shelves for their lost treasure.

Dana ducked as she crossed the line of fire—the condoms had become tampons, which had more mass, hurt more on impact. The pharmacist at the back counter looked like he had spent the morning memorizing the names of prescriptions that would kill him fastest. He took his sweet time looking for Dana's pills.

Dana tapped her fingers on the counter. The weather was getting warmer, which meant more seagulls had started moving inland in search of spare fries and pre-chewed gum. Dana's father used to pitch rocks at them, before he died.

"What was the prescription you were looking for?" the pharmacist said.

"Um."

She couldn't remember how old she had been when Carl showed up and held her hand, so they could feed the seagulls like pigeons, or ducks. Too old to have her hand held. Too aware of her mother behind them, struggling to smile, to have any fun.

"So you're supposed to take one of these every twenty-four hours, but probably at night, since—"

Maybe Carl had gone in search of the goldfish, for the reward. Maybe he wanted to know a deadly secret, or how to propose to a woman after a decade of dating, or how to lose a goldfish.

"Do you have any questions?" The look on the pharmacist's face suggested asking questions would be unwise.

Dana pocketed her prescription and leaned across the counter. "Have you seen the person putting up the missing goldfish flyers?"

The pharmacist frowned.

"Never mind."

It wasn't like a goldfish could go missing anyway.

* * *

Three blue sports cars passed through the toll booth within the week: a woman, a teenager, an elderly man with a dog in the passenger seat. When Dana washed the quarter smell from her hands at night, she found bloody half-moons in her palms from her fingernails.

Seagulls began to haunt the highway between her toll booth and Lake Michigan, and on Friday, another flyer appeared on the pump at the gas station by her house. “Urgent,” it read. “Missing goldfish. Dearly missed.” Dana had taken it down, but she did not place it with the others. Somehow, it didn’t feel right.

Last night, her cat dragged an old sock that was not Dana’s from beneath the couch. Afterward, she lay in the backseat of her car, sprawled in all that open space, limbs straight as boards, and thought about throwing quarters at seagulls.

* * *

No one, so far, had heard about the goldfish, nor had Dana seen her mother’s boyfriend since the last Sunday dinner they shared together some—Dana ran the numbers—twelve days ago.

“Those clothes are going to come out grey.”

Dana’s mother stood in the doorway of the laundry room and tsked as Dana tossed the colours in with the whites.

“The colours never ran in *my* washing machine,” Dana said, which might have been true if she ever repaired her washer and stopped using her mother’s.

“Schools don’t teach girls the basic housekeeping skills anymore, do they? If all those single women out there would just learn—”

Dana slammed the door on the washer and splashed detergent into the dispenser. “Right, Mom, John left because I’m not domesticated enough.”

“Well,” her mother said. She put her hands on her hips and studied a bottle of bleach on a tall shelf. “Maybe if you had *married* him before having *you-know-what*, he wouldn’t have left so *suddenly*—”

Dana’s hands trembled as she set the detergent back on its shelf. “And what about Carl? I haven’t seen him around in a while. Maybe if you had *married* him he wouldn’t have eaten your food for ten years and bailed.”

Her mother’s face flushed. “Carl is away on a fishing trip.”

“For two weeks?”

Her mother set her jaw and said nothing.

“So I should expect to see him at dinner this Sunday?”

Her mother adjusted her blouse. “Carl is an adult, he can do what he wants.”

Dana set the wash cycle to sanitize.

“I’ll see you and *Carl* on Sunday,” Dana said. She brushed past her mother and paused in the doorway. “And for the record, I’m sick to death of your stupid meatloaf.”

* * *

Dana propped her head in her hand and watched the goldfish swim around the edges of its taut plastic bag. She had purchased it that morning on her way to work.

“Make sure it has blue eyes,” she told the clerk.

Now she smoothed out her collection of flyers and prodded the bag with one nail-bitten finger.

“Madame Pêchident,” she said.

The fish burbled.

Seagulls clustered on the arm of the toll booth, and Dana wondered, if she reached out, if they would peck holes into her empty hands. A tap on the window drew her attention. Below, a blue sports car sat waiting. Dana held her breath and ducked so she might peer into the dark interior.

The driver was young—quarter-life crisis material. He did not smile, but Dana recognized him as he offered a five and said, “Change please.” Beside him, a familiar passenger slept with her knees curled to her chest.

Dana counted out the two-twenty-five owed while the driver draped his jacket over his sleeping passenger. A long road trip, Dana decided, to see the girl’s parents, and maybe, if they had time, to visit Mount Rushmore. She imagined parental small talk about the choice of car and the long ride, and the slight pull of disappointment on the mother’s face as the girl whispered to her, “I hope to marry him,” while they carried dessert to the table. They probably ate meatloaf together. It was probably dry.

The blue car pulled away, and Dana pictured the driver parking it in the garage of a tiny home with nice flowerbeds, because parking it in the driveway would make escaping too easy, and besides, there was nowhere else he wanted to be the next morning but right there, right beside his passenger.

Dana turned to the fish and said, "I'm hungry."
She bundled the flyers, placed them in her pockets.
"Let's get out of here."

* * *

Dana's mother did not serve meatloaf, and the head of the table stayed empty. Dana placed the goldfish on the table between them, and they watched its lazy movements as they ate. Her mother didn't question it.

"I dried your clothes after you left," her mother said.

"Did the colours run?"

"No."

Dana poked at a green bean, then nudged the goldfish's bag with the handle of her fork. "Good lasagna," she said.

"It was your father's favourite." She drew a breath and tilted her head to watch the fish. "I—miss him."

"Carl, you mean?"

Her mother did not look up. "No."

"Me too." Dana frowned. "I keep seeing seagulls everywhere, and it reminds me of that time we went to the beach to have that picnic—"

Her mother laughed. "Yes, yes."

They fell silent, and both reached for the goldfish. What kind of truths could the owner of a lost goldfish offer them in exchange for this imposter? What secrets could Dana possibly need answered? Some blue cars came back and others did not, some goldfish went missing and some stayed right where they were supposed to be. And some were perfect dupes for the originals, as close as if the first had never gone missing at all. Better, even. Dana retracted her hand, let her mother warm the plastic with her palms.

Her mother chuckled. "Normally I would never allow an animal at the table, but—" She prodded the bag. "I've grown kind of fond of the little guy."

"Yeah." Dana nodded, slowly, and started to reach for her pocket. "Do you have anything we could keep him in?"

Her mother directed her to a cupboard in the kitchen, where she claimed to have a wide-mouthed jar. Dana went in search of it and, as she watched her mother from the doorway, cooing at the goldfish, reached into her pocket, and pitched the flyers in the trash.



#271-Celestial Chill
18" x 18"
Acrylic
2024

Lovers

What if there is a violence in all of us?
The wind, a biting tooth against the front door
of the cottage. Under the stairwell,
something came undone
and I gathered it off the floor. Even then,
I knew how to find the long trail
through the ravine where language doesn't follow,
only fossils, the dark pressed
from our eyes. October, mid-afternoon,
the light on the basin, ruddy.
We were reading into the open window,
but Glück died the night before.
We tousled our clothes
under the bed. A glossy light
leafed the curtains and we moved
as lovers move. Days or months passed,
I couldn't say for certain because each hour
was the same: a burial site
between the apple orchards, their branches
lowered down to offer
what could only be taken in a dream.

Glass

That year, everything I touched
broke. The wind came off two legs,
crawled across the little town made
from apples and bricks, and tried to make
a repair. Above the fields, nighthawks
darkened, moved branch to branch, shades
of other women's hair, blood, the islands blurred out
by sleet. It wasn't October,
but a time made from two panes of glass
pressed together. In the space between,
I spoke to myself but could not hear.

Oak

Inside the cottage was a voice
that was not my voice but something closer
to well water or root. Meanwhile,
I had arranged poems on the floor
and come back to find them rearranged
by tide. The ceiling of rough axed beams shook
inside us. It had to do with proximity,
you said. We walked down the old road
toward the orchards, but
nothing was domestic. Even the well
had turned to fish scales. Inside,
what looked like water wasn't. Wanting
was easy. Above, oak leaves hung
like little keys to open a door.

Tide

Something had begun to float
in the tight, wet space between
the foundation and a deep blue-green.
It could have been a woman
tiptoeing across the field again,
her heart liquified. The pointed teeth
of fence posts rotted in red mud.
Every night, a tidal wind
woke you. Every night, I slept. Sunk,
as if pushed under a little black boat.

POETIC OUTCROPS | Sean Howard

(from *Geology of Nova Scotia*,
by Martha Hickman Hild and Sandra Barr)

1. *Blue Beach*

Waves, 'ancient sc-
roll ...' (Butterfly,
practiced
eye.) Kids *fresh*
out of school? (
Navies, *oak*
forest ...) Fossils, *geo-*
logic *thyme*. Blue
Beach, *slick*
thought

2. *Victoria Park, Truro*

Merder! 'Step into
History ...' (*Brit-*
annia—bin
laden.) War, *simple*
tons ... (Lab, *pave*
men.) Lost
Empire? *English* (
"fork left ..."), *the*
sun that ever
sets. (Materialism, *ven-*
eer real.) Marble
sick: Queen
Vic

3. *St. Peters Battery*

The magma
charters. (Stage
coaches.) Child's-
play? *Constantly driven* ... (
Schooled—farm
salmon.) *Every*
morning, the double
back! (Subject/object,
photo syn-
thesis?) Faust—*sp-*
ace of spades ... (
Wall St.:
Pluto's Cave.) Dreams, the
dead *see!* 'Poetry'?
Mari-

Time

4. *Finlay Point*

Body parts? 'Plaster, wall-
board, paint ...' (Sem-
ent.) Global-
listics. ('Shopping therapy'—
auto repair?) *Examining*
the Swamp! Con-
sumer, body & mine. (As the
gods reseed.) Thought
? *Watered*

light

I dream of making a movie
composed of breathing
images. It would start with a cricket
scratching its wings together
and then jump to a still
of the Pacific Ocean at dusk.
The world would sort of unfurl.
An extended shot of two pennies
flattened by a rusty train car
before sheets of steam
float into tortured orbit. It'd be like
a Kelly Reichardt movie: almost silent
except in the language
of rivers and ice and songbirds
and stars. No Michelle Williams
either, but her sense of quiet
desperation conveyed
in a lizard slow to scurry
across a dusty rock
before showing a half-filled
glass of water. The sound-
track would be provided
by NASA and the song
of the stars would accumulate
over the two and a half hours
until the sonic pressure
seemed to signal
an impending explosion
even in the final black screen.
I would measure the movie's
success by the sound
of lost breath
when, at the very end,
the credits rolled
themselves into a poem

that suggested the images
were designed to accrete
into a metaphor
for the shudder
a father will try to cover
before he begins
to uncontrollably weep.



(Detail) #268-Moonlit Forest Glow
30" x 30"
Acrylic
2023

2024
Kloppenburg Hybrid
Grain Contest
Award Winners

First Prize (\$1000)

"Frost" – Lauren Griffin

"[Assorted Fragments from the Post-Information Transitional
Period (Bin 4)]" – Graeme Dyck

Second Prize (\$750)

"Ghost Tones" – Tazi Rodrigues

"A broken corona" – kerry doyle

Third Prize (\$500)

"arc" – Serena Lukas Bhandar

"Hornworms" – Liz Huntly

Honourable Mentions

"Curriculum Vitae A Herstory of Dis Ease" – Liz Huntly

"Darkness" – dee Hobsbawn-Smith

"Unbecoming" – Elizabeth Nash

Grain is grateful for financial support from The Cheryl & Henry
Kloppenburg Foundation. And thank you to judges Michael Trussler
and Chelene Knight, and to everyone who entered!

Judges' Comments

Michael Trussler

It's fairly simple to create a hybrid text: a wrecking bar, blowtorch, camera, a keen sense of the lyric—what it provides and what it lacks—not to forget metaphysical duct tape and dust: these are some of the most rudimentary tools. But it also means to aim for the *sui generis*, and I believe the winning entries succeed. Going over all the entries, I was delighted to see how adventurous many writers are, not simply in terms of formal experimentation, but how vividly they explore places in the heart and mind and some other mode of being that's elsewhere. Certainly, the various entries are intellectually demanding, rigorous, and fortunately quite baffling on occasions, too—but what brings all the entries together, perhaps surprisingly, is their tenderness. It seems that the desire to move beyond a single form, to yoke different kinds of writing, thought, and image together, has at its core the need to understand the fragility and weird particularity of our times.

First Place – “[Assorted Fragments from the Post-Information Transitional Period (Bin 4)]”

Hallucinogenic philosophy, richer than chocolate, as earnest as a ferris wheel, by turns hilarious and compassionate. Also gnostic and wonderful fun. This intricately experimental piece blends earnest intellectual exploration with parody, very often in the same sentence. A *mélange* of styles—verse, music score, prose, diagram—that asserts that boundaries exist for the discipline involved in transgressing them.

Second Place – “A broken corona”

A wonderfully complicated concrete poetry-encyclopedia-image text that stays with you. Meaning embedded inside a cascade of more meanings. Philosophically adventurous and very engaging, this piece contains both immediacy and distance, precision and abstraction. This text understands that statements are really questions and questions tip into what can no longer be said. It's time to forget what you thought you knew and learn to bend.

Third Place – “arc”

An erasure poem epic in scope that poignantly blends ecological concerns with long grief. Geological lyricism that manages gentleness alongside dexterous word-play. The essence of defamiliarization. Somehow this piece manages to create colours that we've sensed but never seen. This work shows the tectonic landscape that lives beneath words, words taken together or individually and when these plates shift, history is revealed, its impossible shards. More resilient: language as geology as metamorphosis.

Chelene Knight

What a wonderful and immersive experience it was to read through this year's submissions. It's always a difficult task to select the winning pieces, but still a joyful experience.

First Place – “Frost”

“Frost” is an exquisite poem filled with intentionally vivid imagery and metaphor. Personification breathes life into every element, making the verses pulse. It is masterful in its use of enjambment. The lines flow seamlessly from one to the next, much like the uninterrupted rhythm of life itself. “My breath clouds/ the looming apple-sliced/ moon spitting/ her star seeds”—these lines stand out as a perfect example of the poem's brilliance. Here, the poet paints a picture of the moon not as a distant celestial body, but as a living being, actively involved in the act of creation. This poem reminds me what is possible with poetry and that it can elevate the ordinary into the extraordinary. It speaks to the heart of what it means to be alive, to be connected to the world, and to find wonder in the simplest of things.

Second Place – “Ghost Tones”

This prose piece stands out as a truly unique work, a testament to the author's exceptional talents in the realm of language and storytelling. “Ghost Tones” distinguishes itself with the author's discerning gaze, which explores the depths of human experience. The imagery crafted is nothing short of vivid and evocative, allowing readers to inhabit the story's world with remarkable clarity. One of the most notable aspects is its exploration of identity. The author navigates the intricacies of this complex theme with deftness. The work is also firmly grounded in its sense of place, rendering the setting as a character in itself. It is a carefully crafted braid, each strand woven with precision. It's engaging and thought-provoking.

Third Place – “Hornworms”

This prose poem is an exploration of the mysteries that surround life after death. “Hornworms” seamlessly melds imagination, honesty, and speculation into a harmonious chunk of prose. The concrete imagery woven throughout the poem is a feast. Each sentence effortlessly leads to the next, a journey that feels both familiar and entirely new. This prose poem is a gift of introspection and exploration. It encourages us to ponder the great mysteries of existence with an open heart and an open mind. It's a beautiful rendition of questioning what happens after we die, and it does so with grace and eloquence.

[ASSORTED FRAGMENTS FROM THE POST-INFORMATION TRANSITIONAL PERIOD (BIN 4)]

| *Graeme Dyck*

[Transcription Begins]

[Leatherbound Commentary on the Doctrines of Noether, poor condition]

[...] provenance of the original dogma remains clouded; certainly, it appeared near the end of the information age, given the references to other intellects of that period, and the history told by those who entrusted to me the fragile papers.

[...] is the culmination of many decades of travel in which I sought out scattered folk who still held knowledge (passed down from teachers of the last age) of the figures and ideas that appear in this text. I have assembled these accounts into a comprehensive study of the Doctrines of Noether, in the hope that students of the old mystics might better penetrate their difficult symbolisms and thereby [...] means to survive this era of [...]

The First Doctrine

Noether's first doctrine is the simplest and most profound. Once the terminology has been grasped, one immediately perceives how elegantly it provides a revelatory metaphysics. The terminology is, however, no simple matter, for it is from a world now alien—a bizarre time of countless written texts, hermetic specialisation, and [...] technological amputations [...]

So begins Noether's demonstration of the first Doctrine:

Let \mathbb{C} and \mathbb{G} be groups¹

Suppose $\circ: \mathbb{C} \rightarrow \mathbb{G}$ is a homomorphism²

¹ Group is perhaps the most eccentric term in the Doctrine. It refers to a kind of whole, contained within itself and operating on internal consistencies by which its parts shift and interact in regular patterns. It is an autopoietic unit in which each part is balanced by its opposite and in which there is a stable centre that is its own reverse (compare the Crowleyan principle $2 = 0$, or the heart sutra. Form is emptiness, emptiness is form). The human system is one such unit—in Jungian fashion, each thought is balanced by a shadow, each intake by its outgive, each organ by its counterpressure (cf. Frater Artaud), all atop the archetypal core. Indeed, Noether and Jung maintained a long and fruitful partnership through their co-invention of cybernetics.

² That is, there is a projection (\circ) from one system (\mathbb{C}) toward another (\mathbb{G}) of a faithful image of the whole of \mathbb{C} —the patterns of the projected image accurately reflect the structural features of \mathbb{C} . An autopoietic unit encounters others and produces patterns in them arising from translation of its own internal principles. Egoic consciousness and personality emerge as projections of the human system into itself or beyond itself (into the Not-Self). Since distinct systems cannot directly interact (by the principle of structural closure), it follows that all interactions between them occur through projection (At times disastrous, as after the snap-back homomorphism of our brutalised planet into the human).

[Journal Scrap - See Bin 2]

Our towering firs have grown black velvet bark, above a glowing undergrowth of savage wire and neon tubes (strange flowers of our time). I've touched the treebark - like a skin formed on drying paint it breaks, ruptures thick green fluid, pastel and opaque. The whole trunk falls in a slurry of lime and ebony.

I weep to think what Transformations still await on the future's squirming borderland. (Metal, Flesh, Electricity)

Our bodies are broken;
We have trampled the grace of stability.

Let \mathcal{C} / \circ be the quotient of \mathcal{C} by K , the kernel of \circ ³ and let $\circ(\mathcal{C})$ be the image of \mathcal{C} in \mathcal{G} .

Define $\bullet: \mathcal{C} / \circ \rightarrow \circ(\mathcal{C})$ by $\bullet(Kx) = \circ(x)$

It can be shown that \bullet is well-defined and a homomorphism.⁴

If x is in $\circ(\mathcal{C})$, then there is a Ky in \mathcal{C} / \circ where $\bullet(Ky) = \circ(y) = x$, so \bullet is surjective.

[Scrawled on the back of a CSA Manifest]

Spring Evening

Autumn comes, clandestine
in the evening haze and rain.

Brass light streaking from a low sun
on the gold horizon -
Sunset copper and verdigris.

Denouement may break at any time

³ The kernel of \circ is that part of the original group \mathcal{C} which collapses into the $2 = 0$, the auto-reverse and core of the image. Projection in most cases entails a reduction of the cybernetic unit, a compactification of its image-space so as to be comprehensible to the other under the constraints of information transfer. This compression of the self in the process of image creation may not occur, however, in the case that the projecting self is equivalent to its individuated state (the quotient group \mathcal{C} / \circ , in Noether's terms). In the individuated state, the self has already been reduced to its minimal structure, extraneous subsystems streamlined.

⁴ The new projection \bullet inherits its well-formed structure from \circ —that is, the individuated self presents equivalently in its image.

[Partial page. Tin pan alley tune, composer unknown]

Suppose $\bullet(Kx) = \bullet(Ky)$. Then $\circ(x) = \circ(y)$, $\circ(xy^{-1}) = e$, xy^{-1} is in K , so $Kx = Ky$

Therefore \bullet is injective, so a bijection.⁵

It follows that \mathbb{C} / \circ is isomorphic to $\circ(\mathbb{C})$ ⁶

Thus Noether proves in the first doctrine (alternatively titled First Isomorphism Theorem) that the self, reduced to itself (the individuated quotient) is in fact the image of its image, equivalent to its image. So there is no outside-image⁷; the body is the product and projection of its image—it is an image of fixed form.⁸ In a sense, the overly complicated pre-individuated self can be considered an elaboration of the deeper cybernetic system's image content.⁹ Consequently, the control of this total feedback system cannot proceed unidirectionally or under any assumption of subject/object boundaries—the first real glimmer of the *philosopher's*

⁵ It is a bijection, so the projection operates in both directions (There is a long, dark-sanded beach, punctured by cracked concrete artefacts—greyblue tides creep in and out in shivering rivulets).

⁶ The individuated self is equivalent to its image (You find your face carved in a concrete slab. Carved by the slow throbb of the water's mouth).

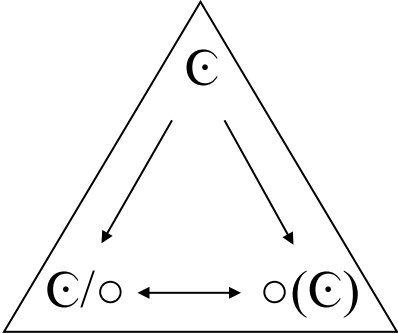
⁷ No outside-image, but this is not merely the "ineluctable modality of the visible"; A secret teaching carried on by Frater J. Derrida, leader of an infamous UFO cult across the Atlantic.

⁸ This doctrine survived in part, handed down to Noether's student, the mystic Ramsey Dukes. He asserted (SSOTBME) that some images are fluid and mobile, and we designate these 'mental' or 'imaginary,' while slower, more persistent images are considered 'matter.'

⁹ Hence the primacy of Jung's archetypes (Deep appendages of the hot-blooded Cenozoic, mega-annum dreams of rodent-to-mammoth-to-denouement).

stone of the great Mediaeval alchemists. Fashioning of the world-self depends on a cybernetic facility with Image.¹⁰ Our bodies are a dream of the Earth.

First Isomorphism Theorem



[Ephemera, Candy wrapper]

[...] The towering academy has succeeded only in irrelevance to your questions of living-in-the-world and the existential conditions of being... instead, have our smooth, chocolate-draped caramel, hand-made with centuries-old technique [...]

Do you hear, dear listener, the horrors this doctrine speaks? What Transformations might have been averted were it properly understood in its time (before our organs were warped beyond return)? Had we but heard the dangerous fragility of our (and the Earth's) image-system.¹¹

[...]

While more involved, Noether's second Doctrine provides even better resources against the Transformational/intellectual calamities that swelled from the last age's

[...]

¹⁰ Some teachers vehemently protest this interpretation of Noether's mathematics, insisting instead it is a set of baroquely coded internet protocols – a ridiculous and unbelievable proposition (by then, DSP was already instinctual, taken up by the hypothalamus).

¹¹ I met a woman named Mary-Winn. She owned a small diner in an old-world dump, serving the best it had to offer (I will not be myself for much longer). The occult force of the printing press (discipline, consciousness) fell long ago to other powers.
Towering bleached-bone graveyard of a god!

[Grocery list, back of a stained receipt]

oranges
drought
climate change
(I remember this song)
and tomatoes
how long do we have?
(almost forgot, I have to)
and milk, I think
(this place is full of ants)
and AI my god
(and TVs)
it's so dry
my eyes are killing me

[...] well-founded anxieties [...]

[unclear]

[Transcription Ends]

To listen to fish, I tie cinder blocks to coarse yellow rope and sink acoustic receivers into boreal lakes in North-western Ontario. To listen to Portuguese, I dissolve into the language when I'm with my girlfriend's family & let words sink into me like salt—or I tap a small yellow square on my phone and play call-and-response with the automated lessons. I stitch the fishes' bellies after I insert their acoustic tags, pull thread tight against their skin between my hands. My father says I'm not really learning Portuguese. His evidence: the stillness in my hands when I speak & the softness of my voice, though he and my girlfriend are the most gentle-mannered people I know.

CALL: -----

RESPONSE: 2022-08-24 08:39:47

CALL: where are you? I can't see.

RESPONSE: here, here, here

The first fish project I worked on was in the slippery time of early pandemic. I still have never held a whitefish, though I traced their trails through Lake 658 over and over again. The songs sent by their tags reach the receivers, which turn the notes into timestamped, three-dimensional positions that let me follow the fish from afar. On a Winnipeg balcony down the street from my family, I tracked their movement clumsily & waded muddy paths through data. The fishes' home ranges appeared in the corner of my laptop, usually in Ontario, sometimes misprojected onto Ecuador or Belize. Once—desperate for help—I showed a collaborator my screen over Zoom. *It's really a different language*, he said, peering at the code. When the Assiniboine froze flat and glasslike through the city, I woke slowly, walked long/ing/ly on riverine paths, followed mustelid prints where they were pressed into snow. Blue sky pounded against our footprints, the light scalding white for the few hours it arrived midday. Here was something tangible amid the foam of fish data I hadn't seen collected. Here was cold snow I could ball in my hands after years away: Victoria, Montréal, Thunder Bay. Always near islands. The river hissed up from its slits.

STANDARD OPERATING PROTOCOL

When you download acoustic data, check to make sure that each number is associated with a real fish. (*Call: is there an IT 134.0144 in the crowd?*) Acoustic signals can collide with each other, or with rocks and other benthic features, giving rise to ghosts in the data. (*Response: ghost, ghost, ghost.*) Memories can collide with each other, too, rewriting neuronal pathways. (*Call: what's the difference between an ecosystem and a brain?*) In the spaces between your new vocabulary, you might hear sounds that aren't really there.

(*Response: ghost, ghost, ghost.*)

The tags are the size of an eraser, a finger, a Northern redbelly dace. In grad school, my main study lake strains against the long gravel road that cleaves forest toward camp, flanks ringed by white pines and bedrock. The small metal fishing boat—silver where red paint's lost to sun—nods against the wooden dock. By midsummer, the moss that quilts the forest floor will grow flush with blueberries. In spring, the senior fish biologist and I set up a folding table lakeside with the surgical cradle and boxes of blue gloves. We trace scalpel along trout on their sunken ventral midlines, insert the tags, line three sutures along their exposed bodies. We've listened to the tags in the lab before: placed them, one by one, into a beaker filled with tap water connected to a teal box that looks like an old stereo and waited for the music. There is early evidence to suggest that lake trout vocalize to communicate, at least sometimes—at least maybe in the dark, discretely on their echoed spawning shoals. For now we only listen to them with our own sounds.

pink flush // pink blush against the forest, body turned in /
side out under scalpel. open your sides // open your side
ways let the water come in let the water
flow over you, dripping with song.

My grandparents are from an ecological hotspot in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, a stopover for fish and birds and mammals migrating across the wide marine sweep. The lakes I study are nestled deep in forest three hours from the geographic centre of the continent, their watersheds relatively isolated, their species few and cold. My grandparents followed anadromous salmonids' paths backward—salt to fresh water. But there are some species that exist in both places:

- yellow perch
- Northern pike
- rainbow trout



This is not my first time learning Portuguese. It is the first time I've been able to eat breakfast in Portuguese, the first time I've made it through several virtual lessons, the first time I've had somebody to speak with. When we were younger, my sibling and I rolled words between us on road trips to see our cousins, who also don't speak Portuguese. We have started and stopped and started and stopped and started. (*Call: lua, estrela, céu.*) (*Response: how do I make these sounds?*) Once my uncle visited from the same island as my grandparents and couldn't believe how long the road trips can be here, the flat middle of the continent rolled out many times over the length of São Miguel. I remember understanding him, though we didn't share a language. Later, when a Brazilian classmate taught me some basic words—*eu sou, eu não falo*, my last name collapsing into sand—I wondered if I really had understood anything of my uncle, the words now turned blubberthick in my mouth. I tried to remember how my grandfather spoke.

*collide, collide, collide. Detect & remove
the ghosts.*

My father once drove me to a job on Lake Superior, or at least to the dock where I caught the boat to the island where I would spend the summer learning the names of all the plants so I could recite them back when tourists visited the lighthouse at the island's tip. *White cedar, saxifrage, witches' thimble.* Rain tumbled onto the windshield. Every so often, Dad pointed to town signs near railways where he and my avô had worked, or a place where he'd visited his father. *Aspen, devil's club, forget-me-nots.* It was one of the few times we've talked about his family since my avô passed away twenty years ago. The forest separated into filmy layers outside the window: first the rain, then the trees, then this small opening—a clearing where we overlap a little through the last three generations, boots rimmed with boreal soil. Far from the sea. And intertwined in it all, the long history of the land and its people, this land where we stay as uninvited guests.

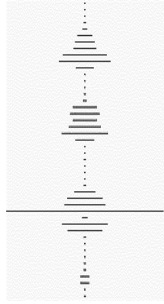
Stay somewhere long enough and you start to speak it: the birches, the wide-walled room, IP Spot & Moose Pond. Tadpole Bay, Fire Rock, the hill along the big lake. Pull geography // into your throat.

I have never been to Portugal. I barely remember Britain, where my mother's family is from. I have inherited almost no ecological knowledge from my grandparents, neither here nor in their homelands. (Am I a place-based person because or in spite of this?) I did not inherit my father's first language, though now that I speak some with my girlfriend, he tells us Lusophone jokes that circle my head like a bullfinch, never quite landing. The words are too unfamiliar in his voice.

What I have inherited is a responsibility: to the land to which they moved, to the land where I move, to the trout who sing out to me. To the calls that stream back and forth, sometimes with language & sometimes full enough with sound. What I have inherited is a responsibility to listen.

CALL: Can you see me now? I'm right here.

RESPONSE: Down in the middle of the lake?



CALL:

RESPONSE: Aquí, aqua, água.

Darling—

have me now then not at all,
our vertex will not come again. Take this
point of intersection as an end and kiss
in the certainty that boundaries will not fail.

(This is the geometry of denial
contrived to rule over ellipsis;
progress, we learn, is linear
but bliss
a slip into ever variable.)

A tangent, without part; a breathless way
for us to pace out the measure of this want.

Let us not know what world knows, the stochastic
process ever turning. Forget place, forget day,
forget what near random chance could make of

this crossing, this kiss, desire chiasmic.

This crossing, this kiss, desire chiasmic

defies linearity *and we*
in inclination drawn acutely,
measure curves along bodies, conic
hyperbola deepen, sighs imabic
enrapt along the threshold of degree.

Hold our curvature; forget Euclid; see
how disparate lines fall aching into arc.

Or unbend *there your hand was cupped and held*
let go *where earth fell, your arms gathered me*
and commit to angles dimensionless.

Though in bows of want are planes unparallelled,
worlds are murdered by etymology:

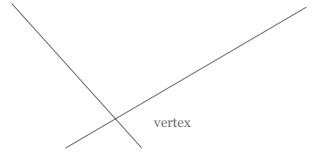
ank anguere ankylos,
— strangle this.

Marginalia

Corona: a sonnet cycle wherein the last line of the first
sonnet becomes
the first line of the second, and so on until the cycle/circle
is complete
Petrarchan vs. Shakespearean = argument vs. epigram

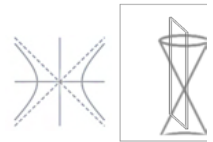
Ch. 1 Definition 1. A point is **that**
which has no part

I Def 2. A line is a breathless
(**breathless?**) length connecting
points



I Def 13. A **boundary** is that
which is an extremity of anything.

stochastic process: **random variables**
determined within a **realm of**
probability and as a **function of time**

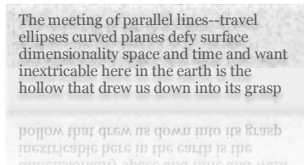


Hyperbola equation $\frac{x^2}{a^2} - \frac{y^2}{b^2}$

Etymology of Angle (space, difference between intersecting lines) two threads:
1. Proto-Indo-European ank (to bend)
Latin Angulus (corner) cognate of Greek ankylos (bent, crooked)
2. Latin Anguere, derived from
Germanic anguere (narrow, throttle, strangle) from PIE angʰ (painful,
construction)
Note: angʰ along another path leads to anguish, torment (also see angst, anxiety)

Etymology stochastic (1600s randomly
determined)
Greek
• stokhos (a fixed target, to aim at such)
• stokhazesthai: aim at, guess
• stokhastikos: conjecturing
linked to PIE stogh/stegh (to sting/prick)

I Def 8. A plane angle is the inclination
to one another of two lines in a plane
which **meet one another and do**
not lie in a straight line.



Etymology: Volta PIE weH (to turn)
Greek (to take a turn, to walk)
Volta, from the Italian. In music, dance a time
A dance, a turning
Used by poets, like Petrarch, to indicate a turn in argument,
perspective, understanding
Also used to indicate a repetition

ank anguere ankylos

—strangle this
in your trajectory. Along surface measure
the line's cut, its breadth no greater than
parting. (My Parthian shot, wholly missed.)

*Or did we move together? Elements
swept high, held in the sphere of another,
older order? Is one light, one water?
And in embrace, the corona?*

*This is
the geometry of desire, proven
by diffraction: all matter in essence
is motion; love bound to chance condition.
What probability the boundary is pieced by an
incline of shade, your shape in absence?*

Incline of shade, your shape in absence
disrupts all world around. A deep pitched ache,

the weight of your body in the still wake
of leaving, holds me in abeyance.

I am in awe—struck through with circumstance.
Into the hollow our bodies made, the light breaks
Breathless to converge within, refract and make
of sight and sound strange echoes of our presence.

But rather this: a world remade suddenly,
provisionally, refrigured by want of you.

And more than want.

Filaments of memory
sustained in light and air—ephemeral
and actual—lines cast and re-cast, through
time and world and greening elemental.

Common Notion
5: The whole is
greater than the
part.



1 Def 5: A surface is that which has length and breadth only.

3 Proposition 3. If a straight line
passing through the center of a
circle bisects a straight line not
passing through the center, then it
also cuts it at right angles; and if
it cuts it at right angles, then it
also bisects it.

Etiymology: Corona (a crown, a wreath, a garland)

PIE siker (to turn, to bend)
Derived from the Greek korone (that which curved or
bowed)

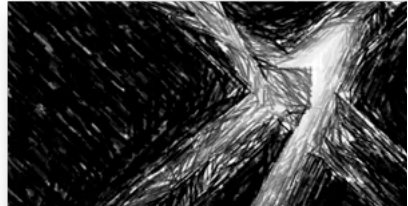
A pervasive, permissive word found in myriad
discourses, such as anatomy, biology, botany, virology,
archeology, geology, astronomy, and meteorology



Lunar corona: an optic phenomenon caused
by diffraction of the moon's light on water
droplets or ice crystals in clouds. Diffraction
is a bending of waves (such as sound or light
waves) around obstacles. Visible diffraction
like the corona is possible because of the
similarity in measurement of the distance
between water droplets and the wavelengths
of the moon's light.

Refraction occurs at the boundary of substances when a
wave (sound, light) moves from one substance into another,
and the velocity of the wave is different than that of the
media it enters. Refraction ensures the waves continuing
beyond the threshold through a kind of liminal oscillation
(the light bends, but in bending remains itself). An angle of
survival, Eurydice.

ἄλλοτρεπὴ ἐπιπέδου
(the light bends, but in bending remains itself) ἡ γὰρ ἀκτὴ τοῦ
πλάσματος ἐπιπέδου ἀλλοτρεπῶς ἀλλοτρεπῶς ἀλλοτρεπῶς
ἀλλοτρεπῶς ἀλλοτρεπῶς ἀλλοτρεπῶς ἀλλοτρεπῶς ἀλλοτρεπῶς



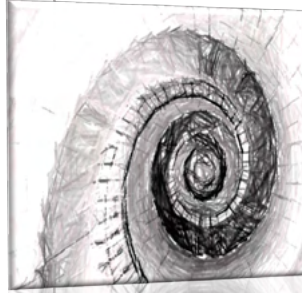
Time and world and greening elemental
set fragments—joy, grief, longing—into pattern
strange-familiar.

And perhaps the way is fractal
each step an iteration and referral
each choice not choice but recursion,
and going back or on no more than
turning thresholds of the self-similar.

Oh for Euclidian simplicity
and for when

we could have stepped forward once
only, blamed fate or gods' duplicity,
but at the crisis gladly kissed and gone
on, lightly to our ends. Fear ambivalence
darling

—Orpheus looked back, walk on.



Fractals—ever-recurring,
recursive patterns of self-
similarity across all scales.
The parts are the same (or
nearly) as the whole.
In nature, trees, rivers, ice,
snow, coastlines. Fractal
geometry forgets Euclid,
takes the natural realm as
its guide, acknowledges the
fragmented, the difference
in self-similarity, the rough
magic of recursion

magic of recursion
in self-similarity, the rough
fragmented, the difference
in nature's acknowledgment the

1 Def 14. A figure is that which is contained
by any boundary or boundaries.

prologue:

pen gorge ake
 ally current
 .
 .
 cause dam the ake .
 flood

[alt: black-and-white photograph of five wooden buildings on the shore of a threadlike lake that coasts flatly on a 2-degree angle across the middle of the scene. a snow-spread mountain ridge rises from the far side, illusioned thick and skyless by the two dimensions. a pole on the left hoists an indeterminate flag, pre-canadian but otherwise a mystery of nations. captions of a future-flung voice describe a “small settler town” and “ancient Stoney Nakoda worksites. scattered scrubbrush obscures the land as visual cacophony, but it is the buildings—and those who dwell in them—who do not belong in this scene, who block the water from full view. water is power. water is destroyer. water is spirit. water is life.]

old ruins pop
 destin

[alt: video of ghost-green over steel-blue, sliced by beige. flat, like a flag. resolves to romanesco floret-forest over scallop-cratered moonscape, interrupted by a belt of pale skin. another voice:
So you can see that the water clearly has no curvature. And the water surface is completely flat.
 earth over water. stone turns to sand turns to silt turns to lakebed. then back to stone again, over mountain, over bedrock, over mantle, over core. and above, skies full of yet other waters, willed to whet erosion’s hunger.

what is the world but a closed loop? what is matter but transient and indestructible?
 what is a flood but water re-colonizing the earth?]

[alt: stone beneath surface. surface bubbling, buckling, broke-swollen from wind and whatever else. *Okay, here we are at Lake mînîwakâ. In Alberta.* vision pans toward far, then cuts off, halted for now.]

The Earth my yard.
part I:

[alt: Okay, here we are at Lake mîniwakâ. In Alberta. And as you can see we're just less than a foot above the water's surface here. rocks below waters. glaciers feeding lacustrine lovers from their hands. look up, too distant, indistinct. lake waters like albuminary fluid, like a brittle lithosphere about ready to crack. And if we zoom in across the lake, the coastline across the lake clearly comes into focus. So you can see that the water clearly has no curvature. And the water surface is completely flat.]

tidal movements roiling surge

line of sight

perfect susceptible

land mark

show the Earth

Mountain lake tree shore

document

If I were gradient mirage

cloudy cooler visible

[alt: serene motion of mîniwakâ rising up to meet the lens. first, tree-wall over spilled silver-blue. bald patches of sandstrewn earth speak of de- and re-forestation, de- and re-territorialization of earth to Stoney Nakoda to settler-Crowned lands. serene, but halting, almost afraid. so close to the water, the stripes and scars of varying blue compress to a scape of waves like scuffs. eventually, the far shore is obscured. eventually, all is obscured.]

effect me

Clarity

feels found crouch down really close

futile fun

a relative lake.

[alt: cubist screened capture of dust-sucked skies behind sunglow summits behind statuesque city behind festive forest line. Another example from Anchorage, Alaska is Denali. At 130 miles away on the ball earth the 20,320 foot summit should be leaning away from the observer, and almost half covered by 9,220 feet of curved earth. zoom in, as if it will enhance. what's missing in this photograph? But just like Sultana, Denali is always seen standing straight up, and visible from base to summit.]

Anchor to Denali

trivial
babl less it feels
to line obstruct away real real real .
every a puzzle.
direction
simultaneously ,

just, hilarious.

[alt: All the movies about space and all the other movies, they all in some way push that globe model. The globe, the image of the Beast. Heliocentrism has nothing to do with science! The idea that the sun is the centre was thought up by occultists. Jesuit priests. The Vatican. It's not, it has nothing to do with science. And they say that the earth orbits the sun going 66,600 miles an hour. And if you Google how fast does the earth orbit the sun they tell you 18.5 miles per second.

[bong noise]

Hold on, I'm taking a hit.]

non form art cess
ail
count the tail
er ie .
what is normal
nebul nefar inscru purpo .
stop.

F Ear is syn lie angelic calyptic
 new desirable of old
 antagonist
 the truth

[alt: The finger pointing at the now defunct NASA will then turn to finger pointing at the government, who directed the whole thing. This is where we run into some dangerous ground involving things like the Ark of the Covenant, the Holy Grail, and the Ring of Power.]

assass nation able ants, trees, mode piracy Ken
 construct their real . sacre ex it rip context
 doctrine strict rest arts con
 soter fiction destiny
 "hey" a F Ear i we ive divine
 d thus is real

imperative ever ossi f dox
 ie d

[alt: To be clear, and I can't stress this enough, do not start conversations with the word 'flat earth.' two figures faced forefront, tense-fixed, trepidary. not mirrors nor oppo but piss-ember and weed ash, gorged leech and squashed leech; odd-couple incubus + house hippo.

the first rule of flat earth club is the spanish inquisition]

roof to the world.

Flat Earth wrap up

penetra te

rhetoric

rhetoric

rhetoric

skeptic

vessel

ne ko

[alt: Indoctrination is the way they like to run this world. It's the way that they keep their lie going. It's the way that they have passed their lie along as science, when it is nothing more than a belief. They have a biased foundation built on a lie and now they know they're stuck. children.]

true

legit

iso

, xeno

[alt: Heliocentrism is simply modern-day sun worship masquerading as a science]

script

vide

[alt: Anyone that is voluntarily wearing a mask at this stage is a mindless drone who couldn't think for themselves if their life depended on it.]

There are hornworms lurking amongst the tomato plants, rippling green & fat as my thumb. I'm inclined to kill them when I find them, but my husband captures two in a glass jar with a mesh cover. He's convinced that we can feed them & observe their metamorphosis—chrysalis to giant, mottled moth. A science experiment for the benefit of the kids. We fill the jar with lush stalks of tomato plants & a sturdy branch on which the hornworms might cocoon. They set to eating & pooping at an alarming rate, chomping through leaves as fast as we can replenish them & leaving inches of goopy green droppings in the bottom of the jar. Alas, the hornworms do not love this new environment. After a few days they burrow into the heaping pile of their own shit & die. This prompts many questions from my five-year-old. What happens to them next? Where does a hornworm go after it dies? Perhaps they come back as something else—a pair of sisterly cows, a couple of squawking crows. This speculation helps him deal with the more pressing question of what happens to us after we die. On this he likes to speculate too—we'll come back as a family of frogs, or a herd of goats. One day, while driving to the grocery store, he imagines we'll come back as car seats. "Then we can all drive around together," he says. I don't have the courage to tell him we probably don't all come back together. Probably not even as our whole selves. Maybe a bit of his carbon recycled in a grass root, his iron taken up by a fruiting tree. A breathful of his air passed from lung to lung to lung. Maybe his soft heart nestled into the prayerfold of a grasshopper's wings. His soul in the thrumming body of a hummingbird. Maybe even a little of his bone dust gets woven into the fabric of a car seat. He has bigger questions. What came before the first thing? What happens after everything dies, after the sun burns out. I don't know, I tell him. Maybe nothing. Maybe it begins all over again. Maybe we all come back as hornworms in a glass jar.

CONTRIBUTORS' BIOS

Tanja Bartel is a recently retired English teacher who holds an MFA from the University of British Columbia. *Everyone at This Party*, her debut collection, was published in 2020 (Goose Lane/icehouse poetry). One of these poems rode BC buses and SkyTrains for a year as part of Poetry in Transit. Others have appeared in *Geist*, *Grain*, *CV2*, *The Antigoneish Review*, and *The Puritan*, and in the anthology, *We Are One: Poems of the Pandemic*. She lives in Maple Ridge, BC.

Serena Lukas Bhandar is a witch of Punjabi Sikh and Welsh ancestry, as well as an MA student in English at the University of Calgary pursuing a creative thesis on ancestral transfeminine folklore. Find more of her at serenabhandar.com or [@shewhoserenaades](https://www.instagram.com/shewhoserenaades).

Morgan Dennis is a Toronto-based writer whose work is forthcoming or has appeared in *The New Quarterly*, *The Antigoneish Review*, *Prairie Fire*, the *Washington Post*, and elsewhere. He is completing a collection of short fiction.

kerry doyle teaches nonfiction in the Writing Department at York University. After time dedicated solely to teaching, kerry has returned to her own writing. She was one of the winners in *Geist's* most recent Erasure contest. kerry is drawn to the space between traditional poetic forms and experimentations and to the hinterlands of lyric expression in both poetry and prose. kerry lives in Tkaronto/Toronto with her daughter, partner, and their clutch of cats.

Graeme Dyck is a Saskatchewan woolgatherer who works with words, sound, ink, numbers, philosophy, and whatever else he happens on. He has a BMus, a BSc in Mathematics, and a certificate in jazz from the University of Saskatchewan, and is currently completing an MA in electroacoustic composition at the University of Birmingham, UK.

Lauren Griffin (she/her) is a writer and actor from Treaty 6 Territory, residing in a small town outside of Saskatoon. Described by her teachers as “a lover of language,” Lauren graduated from the University of Saskatchewan with a BFA in Drama and minors in Psychology and English. Recently, Lauren received the Guild Prize for her piece “Excavation,” published in *Freelance Magazine*.

Adrienne Gruber (she/her) is an award-winning author of three books of poetry. Her first book of essays, *Monsters, Martyrs, and Marionettes: Essays on Motherhood* is forthcoming with Book*hug in 2024. She lives with her partner and their three daughters on Nexw̓lélex̓m (Bowen Island), the traditional territory of the Squamish peoples.

Sean Howard is the author of six collections of poetry, most recently *Trinity: Tribute Sequences for Robert Graves* (Gaspereau Press, 2022) and *U recovered: 9/11 Poems* (Gaspereau Press, 2021). His poetry has been widely published in Canada, the UK, the US, Ireland, and elsewhere, and featured in *The Best of the Best Canadian Poetry in English* (Tightrope Books, 2017). Sean is adjunct professor of political science at Cape Breton University, researching nuclear

disarmament and the politics of war commemoration, and contributes a monthly “War & Peace” column to *The Cape Breton Spectator*.

Liz Huntly (she/her) resides on the traditional lands of the Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee, where she farms and runs a small artisan bakery with her husband and three feral offspring. She was longlisted for the 2023 *Room Magazine* Short Fiction Contest.

Meghan Kemp-Gee is the author of *The Animal in the Room* (Coach House Books, 2023), as well as the poetry chapbooks *What I Meant to Ask* and *Things to Buy in New Brunswick*. She also co-created the webcomic *Contested Strip*, recently adapted as a graphic novel, *One More Year*. She is a PhD candidate at the University of New Brunswick and currently resides in North Vancouver, BC.

Cory Lavender is a poet of African Nova Scotian and European descent, living in Mi'kma'ki. His chapbooks are *Lawson Roy's Revelation* (Gaspereau Press, 2018) and *Ballad of Bernie “Bear” Roy* (knife | fork | book, 2020). A full-length collection of poems, *Come One Thing Another*, is forthcoming with Gaspereau Press in 2024.

Michael J. Leeb is a Métis visual artist, writer, poet, and historian of Chippewa Cree/German heritage. Michael was a regular contributor to *On | Site Review*, has been regularly published in *The Nashwaak Review*, and also in *Existere*, *Red Ink*, *Barzakh*, *Grain*, *Lemon Theory*, and the *Canadian Journal of Native Studies*. Michael's book of poetry, *Spirit of Place: Earth, Wind, Sky, Water*, was published by Eschia Books (2016). Michael received

a travel grant from the Canada Council for the Arts in 2018 to attend the THINAir: International Writer's Festival in Winnipeg, MB. Michael was a finalist for the Eliza So Fellowship in 2019. Michael's poetry was recently included in the anthology *Reimagining Fire: The Future of Energy* published by Durvile Books (2023).

Heather Simeney MacLeod is Red River Métis and a member of the Métis Nation British Columbia. Heather has published four books of poetry. The most recent, *The Little Yellow House*, with McGill University Press. Heather works in the Department of Literatures, Languages, and Performing Arts at Thompson Rivers University. She resides upon the unceded territory of the Secwepemc Nation. Heather is the mother of a making-mischief boy of six years and an equally making-mischief cat. Her most recent poems have appeared in *PRISM international* and *Room*.

Shannan Mann is the Founding Editor of *ONLYPOEMS*. She has been awarded or placed for the Palette Love & Eros Prize, Rattle Poetry Prize, Auburn Witness Prize, Foster Poetry Prize, Peatsmoke Summer Contest and Pacific Spirit Poetry Prize, among others. Her poems appear in *Poetry Daily*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Poet Lore*, *Gulf Coast*, *The Literary Review of Canada*, *EPOCH*, *december*, and elsewhere. She is the Poet Laureate's pick for *Exile*. Her essays appear in *Tolka Journal* and *Going Down Swinging*, which have been awarded the Alta Lind Cook Prize and the Irene Adler Essay Prize. She also translates Sanskrit poetry.

Rebecca McKee's work has received the Iowa Chapbook Prize and has appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *apt*, and elsewhere. When she isn't writing, she can be found burrowing into spreadsheets and herding three-legged cats. She lives in Oklahoma with her husband.

Josiah Nelson holds an MFA from the University of Saskatchewan, where he teaches creative writing. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Hunger Mountain*, *The Nashwaak Review*, *Palette Poetry*, *Poetry Pause*, *Queen's Quarterly*, and *The Rumpus*. He placed third in *Fractured Lit's* Monsters, Mystery, and Mayhem contest and has been nominated for Best of the Net. He lives in Saskatoon.

Catherine Owen has published sixteen collections of poetry and prose, including her latest, *Riven* (ECW, 2020) and her next, *Moving to Delilah* (Freehand Books, 2024). A Vancouverite, she now lives in Edmonton where she edits, reviews, runs the performance series 94th Street Trobairitz, and hosts her podcast *Ms Lyric's Poetry Outlaws*.

Stephanie Reddoch is a retired educator. She lives in rural Eastern Ontario with her husband and menagerie of rescued animals. She's published in *Prairie Fire*, *Ekphrastic Review*, *Emerge Literary*, *White Wall Review*, and *Sweet Literary*. You can find Stephanie on X at [@brut11](#).

Natalie Rice is the author of *Scorch* (Gaspereau Press, 2023). Her poems have also appeared in journals such as *The Trumpeter*, *Event Magazine*, *The Dalhousie Review*, *The Malahat Review*, *Contemporary Verse 2*, *Terrain.org*,

and several others. She lives in Nova Scotia.

Tazi Rodrigues (she/her) is a writer and biologist who studies movement and fresh water in both disciplines. A second-generation settler from Winnipeg, she currently lives on the unceded land of the Anishinaabe Algonquin Nation. Her writing has recently appeared in *Canthius*, *CV2*, and *flo.*, and her lighthouse-island chapbook, *I Followed the Coasts*, was published by JackPine Press in 2021.

Rebekah Skochinski (she/her) lives in a small northern city, and spent a lot of time travelling to the prairies as a teenager. She's been an editor with an arts and culture magazine and has previously worked in radio and television. Her fiction has appeared in literary journals like *The New Quarterly*, *Taddle Creek*, *The Humber Literary Review* as well as being shortlisted for several contests. Most recently her story, "Eggshells," won first place in *Room Magazine's* 2023 Fiction Contest. She is currently working on several novels at once, against her better judgement.

Emily Skov-Nielsen is the author of *The Knowing Animals* (Brick Books) and is currently agonizing over her second manuscript. After working for *The Fiddlehead* for six years, she now works as a librarian in the Kennebecasis Valley.

Adam Sol is the Blake C. Goldring Professor at Victoria College, University of Toronto. His latest book, *Broken Dawn Blessings* (ECW, 2021) won the Vine Award and the Canadian Jewish Literary Award for Poetry. He has published four other books of poetry,

and one collection of essays, *How a Poem Moves: A Field Guide for Readers*. He lives in Toronto with his wife, Rabbi Yael Splansky.

Misha Solomon is a homosexual poet in and of Tiohtià:ke/Montréal. He is the author of two chapbooks, *FLORALS* (above/ground press, 2020) and *Full Sentences* (Turret House Press, 2022), and his work has recently appeared or is forthcoming in *Best Canadian Poetry 2024, & Change*, *The Antigoniish Review*, *The Fiddlehead*, and *PRISM international*.

David M. Wallace is the author of the novel *The Little Brudders of Misericorde* (Tidewater Press, 2022). For more than twenty years he was a secondary school teacher in the Burnaby School District. An avid bicyclist and guitar enthusiast, he lives in Montréal where he writes songs, stories, and poetry, and daily walks his daughter's dog, Voltaire.

Hong Kong born and North America raised, **Kenton K. Yee's** recent poems appear (or will soon) in *Plume Poetry*, *Threepenny Review*, *TAB Journal*, *I-70 Review*, *Hawaii Pacific Review*, *Terrain.org*, *Sugar House Review*, *Passages North*, *McNeese Review*, and *Rattle*, among others. Kenton holds a PhD in physics from UCLA and law and business degrees from Stanford. Kenton writes from Northern California.

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