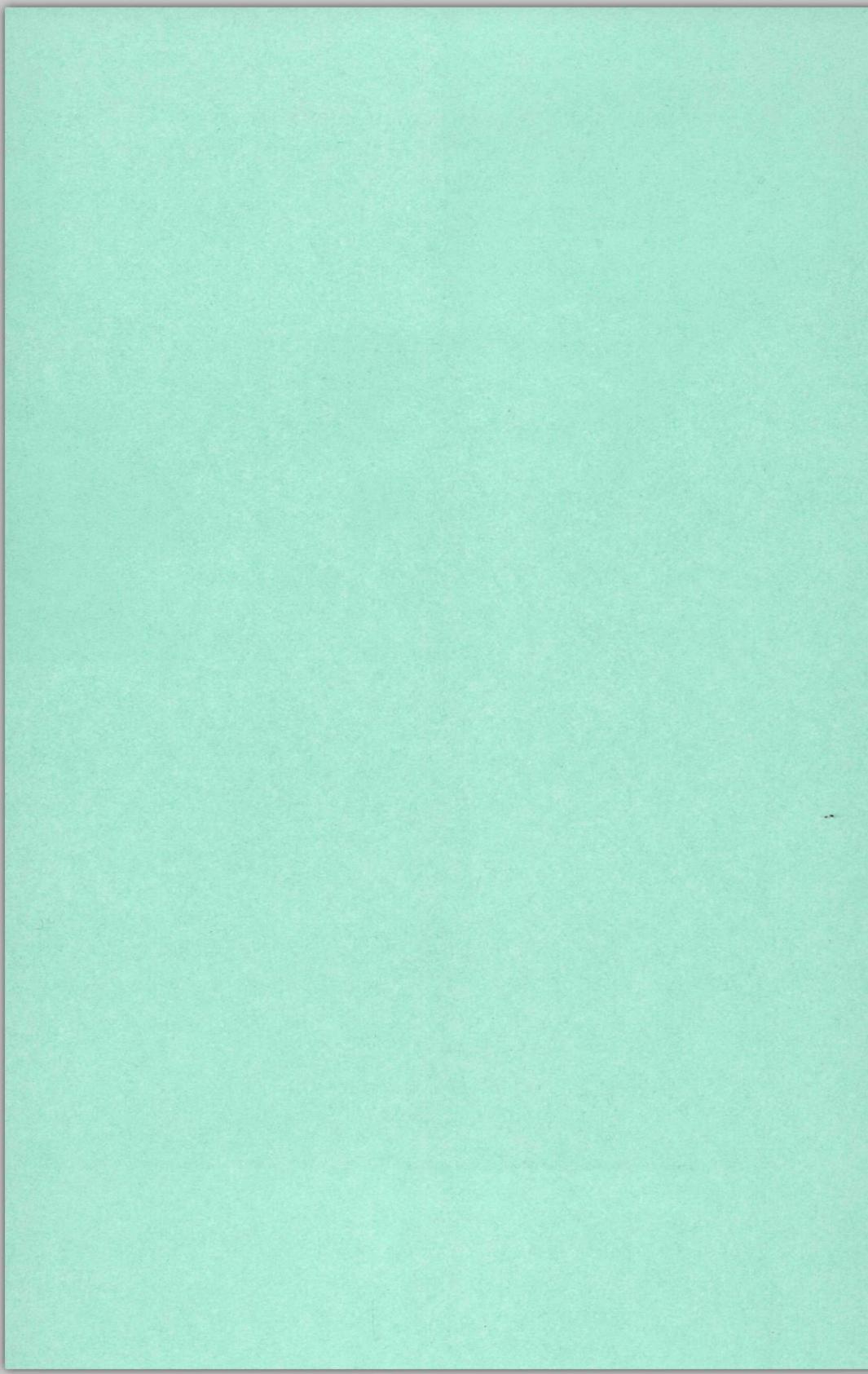


**PRISM**  
international

DREAMS  
FALL 2018



# PRISM international

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## **2018 EARLE BIRNEY PRIZE FOR POETRY**

*PRISM international* is proud to announce the 2018 Earle Birney Prize for Poetry. This prize is presented annually to one outstanding poet selected from our outgoing Poetry Editor's volume. This year's winner is Lydia Kwa for her poem "Letter to My Former Selves," which first appeared in *PRISM* 56.1: *Liminal*.

Earle Birney established UBC's MFA Program in Creative Writing in 1965—the first university writing program in Canada. The Earle Birney Prize, awarded annually and worth \$500, is *PRISM*'s only in-house prize. Special thanks to Mme. Justice Wailan Low for her generous ongoing support.

## **THE GROUSE GRIND LIT PRIZE FOR V. SHORT FORMS**

### GRAND PRIZE

"Birdhouse" by Gregory Brown

### FIRST RUNNER-UP

"Melt" by Spencer Lucas Oakes

### SECOND RUNNER-UP

"Calgary" by Jon Flieger

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THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA



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# PRISM digital archive

*PRISM international* is proud to announce the launch of our digital archives! With the generous support of the British Columbia Arts Council, we have digitized over 200 back issues, bringing 56 years of literary history online. Joyce Carol Oates, Michael Ondaatje, and Seamus Heaney are just a few names from *PRISM*'s long legacy. Digitization of our archives is an important step in preserving and promoting influential literature, and we are excited to share our publication history with readers worldwide.

The searchable archives are free for anyone to access, and can be reached through <https://open.library.ubc.ca/collections/prism>

**PRISM**  
digital archive



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*Keneilwe Mokoena*

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## DREAMSCAPES



*The Dreamscape series explores the multidimensionality of dream states. The multi-layers of space, texture, and self intersect and recreate a visualization of subconscious dreams. The work evokes a sense of nostalgia and reveals the intimate and surreal relationship between Self and Space.*

## LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Dear Reader,

We are thrilled to offer you *PRISM's* DREAMS issue: a collection of stories and poems from emerging and established writers who invite you to question reality, to embrace the unfamiliar, to venture into the dreamscape, the inbetween. DREAMS pushes the boundaries of lived and imagined realities. We are answering a call, we are talking to those who came before us, and dreaming a world for those yet to come.

In this issue, we explore the non-linearity of dreamscapes in three sections. In RISE, the writers dream their realities upstream, tether lines between a present and a returning. In EDGES, we have one foot in reality and one in a dreamworld, uncertain of which is which. Lines are blurred, gender deconstructed, paradigms burned to the ground. In RIPPLE, the beginning and end of the dream journey, the writers reach through generations, cast queer spells, and stage quiet revolutions with infinite echoes.

DREAMS are radical. To dream is to create an opening within yourself, to dare to say no, or yes, to wish for other, better, more. So when you finish the last page, go back to the beginning, experience the worlds these writers have created as never-ending, as existing now and in the future, as living and dreaming in all directions at once.

Yours,

Jessica Johns & Jasmine Sealy

**RISE**

*Michelle Poirier Brown*

---

## WAKE

YOU DREAM ME STILL. Racialized, de-racialized, de-colonized. You ask if I have or use a “pre-colonial mind.” You suggest edits to my biography, tell me my stated identity doesn’t exist, and that you know this because you are getting a phd in indigenous lit. You ask me flat out if I’m queer, if you can tick off another box on the grant application.

You dream we are friends, and I become someone you get to say you met for tea in the village. You dream we are friends, and you tell me you’ve taken oranges to the tent city because, of course, that is something I would want to know.

In your dreams, I am often too much, more often not enough. Because of your dreams, you find me repellent, take a prurient interest in my childhood. Your dreams make it hard for me to wake up. I dream I am drowning. I have this dream while I’m awake.

I remember the time we met on the phone, your rude awakening when I showed up at your door. I was still asleep. I checked my shoes to make sure they were clean. As if that had to be the problem.

There was the year you told me it would be best if I chose a different week to rent a cabin, that my daughters were two children too many. You stood beside me on the river bank as I watched the children float by in inner tubes, one of mine vibrant with excitement, the other grinning with fear. I think you dreamed I would never tell.

The grief from that one dreamed me for a long while.

The past is a dream that streams around me, my voice rising through it like bubbles void of vibration, their only sound an almost inaudible pop when they reach the surface. What you cannot see of me fills my lungs.

Always I am waking. I turn up in strange clothes, new words in my mouth, people I no longer know smile as if I remember. I look for others, also awake. Mostly go home alone.

Always I am swimming, cold and asleep, upstream. Bear dips a paw into the stream, flips me breathless against the sky. Wake, he says. Wake.

Dallas Hunt

---

## STRETCHMARKS // SUNDOGS

i dream that  
the sun is my  
fat-bodied kin

glowing, their smile

blanching earth yellow  
beach sands,  
setting my chubby cheeks  
ablaze

we embrace,

swollen,  
sweaty, full  
of love,  
malevolent light  
languishing &  
strolling  
across chunky  
appendages

stretchmarks & sundogs,

accomplices  
in bulbous joy,  
me reeling as  
pîsim's luminous  
touch  
collides  
with my  
perfectly  
un-moisturized  
skin

they smile

and,  
beneath p̄sim's grin,  
mouth piquing,  
crowded  
by freckles and  
insurgent  
moles,  
i smile with them.

*Elizabeth Mitchell*

---

## BLACK GIRL DREAMS

a wooden boat on which to lay—  
soaks in sun, soft sounds of waves  
brush beneath her.

books. some worn, yellowed dears.  
others crisp breaths. her mother gifted  
her keys to new worlds

& she's been collecting  
keys since. she opens portals  
to healing streams.

she gifts herself words  
as a gardener tending  
a beloved patch of wildflowers.

she believes herself beautiful—  
mind fierce & full  
of cherishable things.

wolves wither  
under the glare of her eyes  
& do not harm her.

rain touches her forehead,  
slides through her curls—free  
falls down her neck.

sunlight fills the places harm entered.  
rainbows pour from her palms—  
taste of new beginnings & forgiveness.

her body is her own safe harbour  
where she gifts herself

permission to dream  
permission to be

*Sara Tilley*

---

## CRYSTAL

IT'S BEEN NEARLY A YEAR since they ended it, and all Carrie can think about is Phantom Baby. Phantom Baby doesn't cry, it goes "boo." Phantom Baby doesn't need to be changed, it changes you.

The baby is made of mist, but the mist is like coral, porous and hollow, and its nooks and crannies have sponged up real baby's blood, so that this blood-baby thingy is red but gauzy, wet but nothing, and it floats. It follows Carrie, sometimes from very far away, sometimes hiding behind buildings so that she can't see it anymore, though she can still feel the tug—a twinge in the weak side of her left wrist, not dissimilar to the ache, in poor weather, of a badly-set broken bone.

Phantom Baby came in a dream at first, one or two days after they were done. Carrie wasn't sleeping in the house. She'd given him a week to get his things out. She was at her friend's place, her old friend from childhood, her only real pre-Martin friend, Ginny, who was back in town for just that one summer out of the whole decade beforehand, so it seemed like The Universe had Carrie cradled to Its Universal Teats even as her sternum cracked with so much crying. Literal heartbreak! It

actually made cracking sounds, like the river ice in springtime in Dawson City, where they had lived together once, Martin and Carrie, True Love Forever, the kind everyone else is jealous and suspicious of.

Carrie left Newfoundland two months ago. She knows that he left, too. London. He's really doing it, now that he doesn't have her weighing him down. In the old days, he'd joke about the tattoo he was planning to get—an anchor, with Carrie's name on it.

Martin, in London. She tries not to care. She only knows because of Facebook. Not because they're Friends—he removed her—but because they have Friends in common, and when he Comments on a Friend's Post it will sometimes show up in her Feed, like a hand reaching out of the computer screen and dumping a cold glass of water on her. Today, someone Shared this photo of him with his girlfriend. She's short, and young, with no detectable thickening of her anatomy. Martin is smoking, looking straight at the camera with a neutral expression, while GF turns to look up at him, her mouth half-opened as if she's about to say something, or maybe kiss him, or like she's his baby bird and he'll regurgitate a worm for her. She sees only Martin, and he only sees us. The two of them are wearing black on a British bridge, overlooking the British water.

In that dream Carrie had, in Ginny's parents' spare bed, one of those first dark nights a year ago when she dove gratefully into sleep like Ophelia—get at me, Death!—she dreamt that she and Martin were on a bus, though he looked not like himself but like a younger man with lighter hair, a teenager. They were on the bus nearing the house where she used to live as a girl. They had bags of shopping at their feet—Value Village—and her wrist was very itchy. Carrie scratched. No matter how diligent, she couldn't get rid of the itch in her wrist, her left wrist, on the soft part, underneath. A rash began to bloom, red as blood in a sponge, dark and serious. On skin so pale as hers you could see it extra clearly: the silhouette of a fetus in classic fetal position rising up on her wrist, on the tender underside part, red and itchy, bubbled like a sponge of blood, growing more and more pronounced as the seconds passed, about two inches long between the furthest points of its half-formed anatomy.

"Holy shit," she said in the dream. She grabbed Martin's arm. "We're pregnant. Isn't it beautiful?" The red fetus-rash-thing winked a pre-eye, eye-nub, head-of-a-matchstick at her and opened its economic slash of a pre-mouth right below its two tiny pinholes of pre-nostriils. It smiled, and said its name was Crystal.

Martin's stand-in was uncomfortable. He wouldn't look Crystal in the "eye." He put his headphones on—it was Pulp—and even though they were expensive, earmuff ones, the music now underscored everything. He got off the bus, and Carrie followed him. The breeze picked up. Crystal began to blow away. She was light as a feather, so small, a mere two inches from top to tail. Carrie ran after her and called for Martin to run too—"grab the baby, the baby's going to float away, Martin"—but he had gone inside and she could see him through the window at the table. Her mother, aged thirty or so in the dream, was feeding him lasagna. There was a tugging on Carrie's wrist. A vein, snaking up! One had come loose, snagged in her scratching. The vein tugged right out of her wrist and up into the sky, a kite-string from Carrie to her floating daughter.

Crystal loved the wind. She sucked it greedily into her little half-lungs. She was a sponge for it, expanding quickly like one of those vitamin-looking capsules you put in a pail of water as a child to grow a foamy dinosaur. Crystal swelled in the wind till she took up the whole sky and the sun shone through her like stained glass. She was so beautiful. Her cells grew bigger and bigger until they were a cathedral ceiling of crimson wonders, a bisected, glowing pomegranate of perfection, and it was easier to see the space between each cell, and between each thing within each cell, all that space that's in all of us but which is easier to see if you are a huge balloon-Phantom Baby-fetus-thing that never really existed, and that appears in a dream.

The Baby is often there in the daytime, too. When in public, Carrie pretends not to notice. No one else notices. Phantom Baby is exceptionally bright for a thing of her age. She'd never appear when someone else might see, not unless Carrie ran into Martin, which hadn't happened, not even randomly, all year. A miracle, really, considering St. John's. Now that she's in Calgary and he's in the UK, Carrie guesses she'll never see Martin again, though you never know. The art world, in his words, is "pretty fucking small."

All year, Carrie has lived with sadness. It's understandable, though her friends are getting restless. They encourage her to try online dating, swing dancing, gym membership. She doesn't know how to cut the cord without letting her blood out. And why cut it? Her sadness has a concrete form, better than the amorphous cloud she's seen swallow some in similar situations. Phantom Baby is better than a nameless, shapeless grief, unacknowledged until it ferments into cancer. Phantom Baby is an impossibility, yes, but even so she laughs, her laugh is on the wind, it's

in the songs of birds, a distraction. She helps Carrie fall into the cotton batting feeling of forgetting.

There are some days that she doesn't think of him at all, and others when she conjures him up on purpose, dwelling on the way things might have been, *if only, if only*, like a tongue rooting at the raw hole of a recent wisdom tooth extraction. Her life was once so caught up with his. They used to be a thing together, a single unit, even in her dreams. It's hard, now, to remember the happy, early years. All tinged with the stuff at the end. Maybe that's the kind of thing where you have to wait to be old.

Phantom Baby is usually about a foot long. Real baby size. But when she laughs her impossible laugh and gulps the wind and begins to swell and fill the whole sky with her cells again, like in the dream, Carrie knows that a migraine is coming. The size of her baby is a weather vane. As the months kept on and the lawyers were called, the papers were drawn, and everything became quite final, Carrie found it too sad to think of Crystal with a name anymore, like she was a real baby who'd really existed, so Carrie just thought of her as Phantom Baby now, at least most of the time. When she's tired, or in a lot of pain, she occasionally slips, and thinks "Crystal" to herself. She can feel Phantom Baby, can feel the tug, even while she's in the studio, or in the shower, at the grocery store, while cooking or out walking the unfamiliar city blocks, and of course while sitting and crying alone. She could feel Phantom Baby all the while, this whole year, tug-tug-tugging on the vein, her kite-string. No matter how far Carrie follows, Phantom Baby still keeps tugging. All the way across the country. *How far are we to go?*

It was a little over a year ago that he'd brought up getting pregnant, after a long while of not talking about it. They'd had sex that afternoon and were lying on the bed and hugging. A freeze-dried moment. Martin was tracing up and down her arm with his fingers and giving her little kisses on the hairline. He said they should start planning out when they'd have their kid, for real, because soon it would be too late for Carrie to do it, and if they were going to Calgary this coming year it should be conceived either in the next two months to make it old enough to travel, or they should wait to conceive until halfway through her residency so that she wouldn't be so pregnant they'd be worried about flying home. Even though Martin hated Newfoundland and everything about it, he wanted his child to be born there. He'd been thinking about it a lot, it seemed, and she was happy that he wanted it, really wanted it, and wanted her still, even though sometimes things got weird and hard and

she didn't know what was wrong and he hit his head on the walls and said she was making him want to kill himself. An ultimatum: "If you want to make it so we never have sex, that's fine. Let's just be honest about it. I'm done. I still love you, I'm still in love with you, but if you want to have sex with me again you're going to have to do the work to make it happen."

A kiss was not an acceptable beginning move. He'd screw his mouth into a tidy fortress of teeth. Sometimes when drunk he'd mimic her, grabbing her by the neck, slamming his mouth into hers, ramming the tongue in. "You think that's sexy?" Or, when she didn't try so hard: "You know how many numbers I get every shift? You're killing me. I have to fuck, you know, or I'm going to explode. No, you don't know, do you? That's the problem."

She nearly always came. She never faked. She loved having sex with him and she wanted to have it more, not less. She said this sometimes, or wrote him letters, longhand, to that effect. "Prove it, then." When she tried to dress in slutty things, she was too nervous about it and he'd say she was just doing it for his sake and not because she was a genuinely sexual person. Then he'd shut himself in his office with a case of beer and his video games and smoke in there all night, even though he'd promised he wouldn't smoke in the house. When the costumes did work, he'd often rip the thing to shreds on the first go so that she couldn't wear it again—cheap mail-order crap—and later he'd be put off that she didn't wear the hot outfit and wanted to have sex with him naked, or starting off in regular clothes. There was a specific thing he wanted, but he wouldn't say what. "If you have to talk about it, it's not erotic." He thought it would be a healthy step if more people were involved. She did claim she was bi. His theory was asexual. Was she really a dyke? It was okay if she was, they'd have a threesome. Or he could just watch. Orgy? Go poly? Why does that make her cry? "I've never met anyone as fucked up as you about fucking, Carrie, you know that?"

She wanted to have sex, but it wasn't dirty enough. She wanted to have sex, but just with Martin. She was happy to have sex just with him, alone. He'd say "I don't know what's wrong with you," and she wouldn't know what to say back. This was when he was drinking. He only said these things late at night after drinking and then he couldn't stop, monologues he'd later have no memory of. He'd come home at six a.m. and wake her up to say all kinds of things about how miserable he was. He'd say she was just like her mother, and he didn't mean the migraines, he meant she was the spit of her, repressed and frigid and stuck. Martin would tell

her that no one else would've stayed with her this long, as fundamentally broken as she was, and Carrie would thank him for being so patient, so very patient with all her shortcomings and flaws. He'd say, "How'd I get the shit luck to fall in love with you anyway? How'd I get the shit luck?" And she'd apologize. She meant it. Sometimes he'd threaten to hit her if she wouldn't hit him first. "Just punch me in the face, just fucking punch me or I swear to God I'll kick the shit out of you." She wouldn't, and he never did, either. When it got to that point, she'd retreat to the bathroom to sob with the door closed, letting Martin spew his thoughts, snort his drugs, and pound his head into the wall until he felt like passing out.

Hit him? She guessed. Bought a riding crop for Christmas, wrapped it with a note that said to report to his French Teacher, he'd failed his *examen de vocabulaire*. She thought this was a way she could meet him where he needed to be met. The character would help. She'd get some use from her theatre degree, for once. Martin didn't even take the crop out of the box. "I'm not into that shit." She never saw it again. Shame freezing her up. He stayed out more and more and she got more and more sad. They touched each other less, and even their lives touched less, overlapping a little in the afternoon when she was finishing up in the studio for the day and he was starting to wake up. That was no time to try. Martin was tired. Hung over? It was his hour for email and coffee, a game of hockey on the Xbox. Then he had to iron his clothes for the upscale waiting job he hated, downtown. It was never the right time to say "Let's fuck."

And then? A pull at the wrist. Phantom Baby leads Carrie back to that particular day last year. A frozen day, trapped in amber, a perfect golden day when she thought she was wrong about everything because of the good sex they'd had, just regular sex that arose out of a little kiss, as it used to very easily, and then the hugging in the bed and the baby that Martin began to talk about again, in practical terms, like they were saving up for South America. If he hadn't made getting pregnant real again, it would've hurt less, she thinks, when some days later she found the letter—well, Facebook Letter—open on his laptop by the couch, where he'd fallen asleep with his hand down his pants. A letter to some person about her vulva and its virtues, its tastiness and addictiveness. When can he eat it again? There were a few moments of stillness, then, another little amber moment where nothing happened. He was passed out and pale with drinking, his shirt off and his mouth open, his hand on his cock. The Profile Pic showed a green wig, fake lashes, black corset. A classic Selfie,

the duck-face shot from above to cartoonishly enlarge the eyes while still including crucial cleavage—the type of shot that'd usually get Martin ranting, pacing up and down the living room kicking a book across the floor, skewering whatever friend of his was idiot enough to take that kind of picture of themselves and post it on the internet.

Carrie stood with her hand over her mouth for a while, and then she watched that hand shake him awake. She watched from way up high somewhere while he quickly flipped things. What was he supposed to do, she was fucking killing him. He was drunk and maybe coked up. It was eight in the morning. He said that even though she made him want to fucking slit his wrists he'd have stayed with her until the end. "I'd be miserable for the rest of my life for you." There were a lot more things he said, but those are the things that float to the surface now, when she thinks about it.

Carrie knows that out of all the many things he said, some were true, and some were meant to hurt her. She never knew which was which, and in the end it didn't matter. He said it all. She agreed with him. Some feminist! There were these ruts in her brain, old tracks laid down since girlhood. Carrie apologized for her incurable frigidity, the catalyst for Martin's conquest. She felt bad for him, for his belief in his own worthlessness, his own neural ruts, worn smooth as bobsled runs, that made him act this way. She knew she had to leave him, and she only had the strength to do it because of Ginny, who'd come back just this one summer to housesit for her newly-retired, newly-globetrotting parents. Ginny was an angel sent to hold Carrie while everything was swept away, as in a floodplain situation. Half her adult life was gone in that one moment, eight years and a bit, the million I love you's, the home they made, the work they made together; Carrie had to tie it all up and put it outside and cut it off and smush it because she could see now that she didn't really know Martin, and that if she did come to know him, the real him, then maybe she wouldn't actually love him. She didn't know this man, Martin, anymore.

They say it takes seven years for a lover to fully make their way out of a person's system. Some Facebook linky-thingy told her that. Carrie can't wait that long. She mostly feels nothing, but sometimes she has these unbearable waves of sadness when she thinks about him, or sees some Post about his book or his art show or his girlfriend's ultrasound. Carrie can well up if she sees someone put their hand on the back of their lover's neck, or if Nick Cave comes on shuffle, or if her cabbie smells of

Ivory soap, tobacco, and artificial cinnamon. Those small candy hearts. It doesn't take much. A wave of terrible loss smacks into her and knocks her breath out. Then come the tears, in snotty torrents which are hard to stop. Self-worth bottomed out. Cannot look in mirror, trouble going to supermarket. Meals eaten over sink, for easier cleanup.

She finds herself scratching sometimes, her under-wrist getting red and puffy with the suffering, but it feels good to feel something relatively simple. A pain that is just scratches. Concentrate! Feel the teensy heartbeat. Scratch out the shape of her, focus in. Scratch in time to the wee breath. It is the breath of the last thing in this world made by the both of them—one last fucked up, fictitious collaboration. She wants Crystal to follow her forever, fluttering in the treetops, but she also wants to cut that vein-string. A deft snip with psychic vibrations or legitimate scissors, whatever works.

Carrie wants to rest. She wants out of the city. Too loud. She wants some pure dark place, some cave, a spongy forest floor, somewhere without stars, or, okay, maybe a few stars, but nothing else. No human structures on the dark landscape, no people. No memories of people, no unborn small people, and no fully grown adults. Not even the thought that there could be people, somewhere. No sound. No sense of time. There's no one else, and there never has been, and there never will be. There's not even a you, not really, just a pure animal state, but one without a startle response, because there's nothing to be afraid of. No predators, no illness, no aging, no hunger, no worry. No self-awareness. No physical body. Release? Relief. A tiny perfect world of dark and stillness, like the period at the end of a lengthy sentence.

*jaye simpson*

---

## THE RAVEN RETURNED

the raven returned  
carrying the sunset  
on their wings  
pulling the wind  
through the long grass  
of the plains

the raven returned  
when the children  
awoke  
their bodies milk  
hungry smelling  
of freshly crushed cinnamon

the raven returned  
our languages  
of love  
love that raised the grass  
invited the children  
into existence  
love that brought  
sage, cedar, salt  
& tobacco back

the raven returned  
as the wild strawberries ripened  
across the sunset plains  
sweet grass dancing  
with the children  
born from the sweat lodge

the raven returned  
these young ones  
with song & dance

words never heard before  
ceremony in their souls  
crying with laughter

the raven returned  
having heard the music  
the song & dance  
the children's faces  
sticky from strawberries  
their tummies filled

the raven returned  
one early evening  
croaked a hello  
salt water ocean cleansing  
the wounds of old

the raven returned  
bringing with them  
dreams of tomorrow  
futures built by the children  
their laughter & love

the raven returning  
the call of the Ceremonies

the raven returning  
the call of the children

the raven returning

## A BAD DREAM BENT ENDS WET

A bubble is a globe in an envelope;  
a dream is a bubble bursting.  
An open envelope is an exit door  
that leads to an unknown world:  
we'll turn our backs into dirty windows.

Smoke can be trapped inside a bubble  
but a kiss cannot, it gets caught up.  
You dream of more, always keep  
a jam wedged, stare at a thing that  
isn't there. An exit door is  
  
an open lung.

*Gregory Brown*

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## BIRDHOUSE

Pre-meeting chirrup, caw-caw. New face, old face, coffee, cigarettes. Make a circle, little nest. *What would you do if you only had one year left to live?* The addicts share out, one by one. I'd spend it with my kids, one guy says. I'd take my moms to Disneyland. Me too, me too. Definitely go travelling with my family. And on and on. Joanie's already tired of this shit, the pep and preening. Three straight days: Everybody putting on their brightest feathers. Forgive, forgive. Love, love. Blah, blah, blah. She can feel the heat in her chest, the roil of bile rising up her throat, she wants to cut these motherfuckers down, show them how un-special their love. How wrong. She's seen the scars on her roommate's arms. Heard Kevin O. confess to picking through his OD'ing girlfriend's sweatpants, scoring a twoonie and a couple of crushed cigarettes. Nobody here who hasn't fucked over, been fucked over. Joanie's in her head. Time flies, but where? Then: This woman, Vola, is saying, I'd make birdhouses. *Birdhouses?* Yeah, Vola says. *You a bird lover?* No, Vola says, I don't really like birds. Scattered laughter. Vola says, I just think it'd be a nice thing to do. A small, nice thing. Vola looks down in her lap as she says this, clasping her hands. Now it's Joanie's turn to speak, but she's not sure anymore. She's forgotten something important about herself. It's flown the coop. She's thinking about a thing her parents told her when she was five or six, a lie to get her out of the house: Throw salt on a bird and its wings won't work. Let you pick it up, take it home, love it. Joanie's trying to remember: Did it work?

## DEAR FRIEND

the women in my bloodline have passed down:

thick thighs  
long lives  
small hands  
big cheeks  
and an overworked amygdala.

dear friend,

i am sorry that i met you before i knew the definition of intergenerational trauma. please tell me that my handed down survival doesn't scare you as much as it scares me; i have been dreaming of a version of me that doesn't take every full moon as an opportunity to collapse inwards.

kokum tells me  
that we come from  
a family of dreamers.

dear friend,

there was a time before a time when i didn't spend hours counting the steps i need to take down the sidewalk. there was a time before a time when the number didn't have to be divisible by four. there was a time before a time.

i read once that *déjà vu* is you returning  
to a place you've been before—  
it's supposed to tell you  
you're on the right path.

dear friend,

in the privacy of my own thoughts, i have shown myself gentleness—i have lost the words in my language that explain the concept of wanting to run because i'm too comfortable. i don't think we have a verb that describes the urge to leave before they leave us.

i read somewhere else that déjà vu  
is just your brain telling you  
you're experiencing something new  
but you're processing it as something  
familiar.

dear friend,  
lay yourself in the centre of the alfalfa field and let the flat prairie sky  
float clouds pass you. *forget forget forget* that i said i have a recurring  
nightmare of you leaving me.

i don't know what theory I accept:  
brain malfunction or premonition.  
i just know that i have dreams that come true.  
i have felt the grasps of my grandmothers  
sending stories in the form of feeling  
like a familiar stranger in a new place.

dear friend,  
i never knew that surviving is different than living. last night through  
my open window the northern lights whispered that i have been  
spending too much time focused on getting by. i need to stop holding  
onto the words of dancing ghosts.

these gifts from my mother's passed-down generations  
sometimes feel more like a burden  
but it's hard to see between the lines;  
when i was little i knew the names for the trees  
before anyone introduced us.

dear friend,  
thank you for witnessing me put myself back together at the waxing  
gibbous.

*Dizz Tate*

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## FEAST

HER FATHER LEFT HER MOTHER and this was normal, it seemed, among her friends in the city, though not necessarily in that order, it could be the mother just as often or even more likely it was both. She has followed her father in a way, having just left home, too. She lives in a converted office block with a hundred other students, all nervously developing drinking and smoking habits to the best of their abilities. She has found that stories of parental pain are like party tricks. Her flatmate's father had a whole family, ready-to-go, on the side, but a girl downstairs had it worse, there was some complication with a sister-in-law. Still, once shared, no one seems to care much about their parents' divorces, if they are happening or happened long ago. There are more pressing concerns and betrayals to deal with as they swap around their filters and papers to build shaky cigarettes. She supposes she should not care either. Her name is Milfred. This choice alone is enough to harshen any relationship with her mother. Her friends and her father call her Fred. Her mother refuses to.

She moved to the city to study writing. On the first day of class, they were asked to describe the city in metaphor. Amongst the rubble, light

scattered on water, a pile of jewels in a cave. Milfred said it was like a scrunched-up napkin holding a particularly luminous sneeze.

"That's technically a simile," said one boy, the one who, at first, she had liked the best, due to the sheer shock of his hair. It rose off his head like a Minnie Mouse bow, and he strung his hands through it all through class. She had even found herself imagining the hair at night, a bit drunk off three-pound white wine, having watched her flatmate coax another boy into her room through the promise of introducing him to her pet hamster. It was a foolproof move.

Milfred listened to the bed creak, the hamster running, endlessly impressive and ignored, in her squeaky wheel. She imagined the boy's hair. She loved that a lot of hair would be called a shock of hair, as if its mere existence was enough to pierce the observer with a mild electrocution. She wrote this down and blushed. She imagined her teacher in her head, leaning forward on his clasped hands, opening it up to the room, *Is anyone else seeing a sexual subtext here?*

She calls her mother on her way to class.

"Julia speaking," she says.

"Mum, I know it's you, I called you," says Milfred.

"Who's speaking?"

"Mum," says Milfred.

"Well, how am I to know if you don't announce yourself, Milfred?"

"My name comes up on the phone," says Milfred, her teeth already clenching. She blows smoke, marching up the hill, white wine stinging the front of her brain.

"Are you smoking? Your breath sounds volcanic."

"No," says Milfred. There is no point in lying, her mother would not care in the slightest. Still, she enjoys the slight power gained back by the falsity. "I've never had a cigarette in my life. I find them abhorrent and disgusting and selfish, due to the dangers of second-hand smoking."

"Why do you ring me so much, sweetie? Do you need money?"

"If I needed money, I'd ask Dad."

There is a sweet little silence. Her mother starts to hum.

"Have you spoken to him lately?" asks her mother.

"Sure," says Milfred. She adds, quickly, "But I call you way more!"

"How lucky I am," says her mother. "How is he?"

"He's started curing meat," says Milfred. "He's set it up in the shed in the communal garden. He says the neighbours are young and don't mind as long as he gives them ten percent of any meat-turning profits."

"Well, hasn't he evolved into a whole new man?"

"I suppose."

"Not missing anything, really, is he?" There is a crack, a rivulet in her mother's voice that seems to seep down the phone, drippy and unappealing.

"I miss you," says Milfred. Her mother hangs up.

Milfred marches up the rest of the hill to her writing class, which takes place in what was once a greenhouse for the university's failing botany program. It turned out writing was much more lucrative than flowers, at least at an undergraduate level. She can see the greenhouse in the distance, catching the autumn sunlight so it seems almost aflame.

Her father had left her mother for no particular reason, it seemed, not because there was another woman or man. He just preferred to live life within his own orbit. She can understand why this would be almost harder than anything for her mother, to have been left for nothing, to know that a void could be preferable to the space she took up in the world. Her father didn't talk about it much, but he had taken up many hobbies. She calls him for equilibrium, climbing the hill.

"Father!" she shouts.

"Daughter!" he shouts back. "Two days in a row? You okay?"

"Fine," she says.

"You give your mother this special treatment, Freddie?"

"Never," she says. "How's the meat?"

"I've started using juniper," he says. "It's great in the herb mix. Gives it a real zest. The latest batch will be ready by the weekend for you."

"I can hardly wait," she says.

"You going into writing class now?" he asks. "Got any good dreams to report?"

She had made the mistake of telling him that her teacher recommended they keep a dream journal, and he now asked her to tell a dream every phone call. She mostly made them up, but she had, in fact, had a good dream the previous night. She had been wandering through a field of still-closed corn when she came across a clearing. There was a large oak table set for a feast, but the feast was all birds, bodies of birds, glazed and plucked. There were condiment dishes full of feathers and tiny bird eyeballs. There were no plates or glasses, just little bird legs laid in evenly spaced increments along the table like cutlery.

Her father chuckles. "There's a lot going on there," he says. "The corn's interesting. Maybe you're feeling a husk of your former self?"

She sighs. She had forgotten the cornfield. She did not think this to be an important aspect to her dream. But dreams were like lies, she thought, their meaning was all in the delivery. "Bye, Daddio," she says.

She sees the shock-haired boy skulking around near the greenhouse door, one hand tucked up to his forehead, squinting at her against the sun. She shakes her mother and father's voices away and steps forward into her own radiance. She is wearing a ratty green T-shirt that belonged to her first boyfriend. It is large and shapeless as a sack, a muddy green. Still, even though her and this particular boyfriend never got further than somewhat heated and clumsy kissing, she still felt good in his clothes that she had surreptitiously managed to steal, like she was putting on a whole other person. He had also loved her, which was pleasant to remember was possible. She once cried to him at a house party, drunk in another parent's bedroom, photos of another family strung around the room. She said she felt her father had broken his promise to her as well as to her mother. Her boyfriend wound his tongue between her lips and she pushed him off, hot tears coming out so quickly and ridiculously that they seemed to be on some kind of feedback loop, running both up and down her face.

"Well, let's make a replacement promise," he said. "You promise to love me and I'll promise to love you, and then we'll prove they don't all break."

He said this with such simpering pride that she would have burst out laughing if she hadn't been so busy crying. She said, "I promise." She dumped him the next week.

After that, her encounters became seedier and more desperate. She had a friend who she circled the local pubs with, the carpeted kind, the ones so sticky they seemed to salivate. They drank vodka cokes until closing time, when suddenly a gaggle of boys and strange men would surround them, and they took their pick and drove somewhere. She enjoyed this part, the teasing and the control, as she felt a hand tucked into the fold of her waist, the cove at her back. Sometimes, it went further, sometimes not. When she allowed it, and found herself in car parks or fields, lights from passing cars wafting over her, she somehow separated herself from her body. The moment transformed, as though whatever was happening to her occurred behind a wall and she was far away from herself, her body an insignificant speck on the lightless landscape. She would turn silent, smoking cigarettes on the hoods of cars after, waiting for her friend who always took longer. As soon as they were home, in their childhood beds, in their mother's kitchens, it was fine, they screamed with laughter

for days at their antics, everyone becoming more beautiful, every joke funnier, the runs through the fields, the hums of the motorway, the sun rising in the sky, these were all markers of a youth lived well. Milfred enjoyed this, she came to depend on it, this storytelling as separation. She knew how to do it, keenly well, from years of watching her mother. Her thoughts mainly occurred in third person.

She reaches the boy. He smiles at her. "Hey, you know, that city simile was pretty good, for a simile," he says.

"What have you got against similes?" she says. She watches his hair shiver in the wind, feels it in herself, cutting right through like a jagged line.

"There's a line, somewhere," he says.

He rummages in his bag, pulls out a book. She wonders how planned this moment is, enjoys the probability of being considered quite carefully.

*"Similes are a crock. There's no more time for similes. There used to be that kind of time, but no more. You shouldn't see what you're seeing thinking it looks like something else. They haven't left us with much but the things that are left should be seen as they are."*

He finishes, a little breathless, perhaps not having considered how long it would take to read. He blushes. She smiles at him. She likes the lines. She tucks them away inside herself.

"What's that from?"

"It's called the Last Generation," he says, his voice finding its time again, she thinks, knowing the answers. "It's this lady called Joy Williams. She wrote it like thirty years ago, but look at us, still here, generating."

Lady, thinks Milfred, with a little twinge of pain.

"I'm not generating too much," says Milfred.

He stretches his arms. He is wearing a long-sleeve black shirt and a thin, dark green scarf. The scarf, she thinks, is too much.

"You can't be self-deprecating if you want to be a writer," he says.

"I thought that was the point," she says. "Self-loathing is my poetry."

He laughs. "You know, I think we've actually got it pretty good. We're the only generation with one foot in and out of the internet. We've got such a good angle to write from. Like, who else is going to be able to nail Tinder in a story? Not even someone from five years ago is going to get the whole enterprise from a personal standpoint."

"Yeah, but who wants to read a story about Tinder?"

He raises his hand.

She scuffs her trainer on the pavement. Inside the greenhouse await the other budding authors, pens poised, surrounded by the dying succulents and failed cross-seedling experiments of the botanists who were given up on.

“Do you want to get out of here?” she asks him. The sun dips behind a cloud. His face is suddenly thrown into clarity, his patched stubble, chapped lips. His eyes are somewhat bugged, swollen. His eyebrows look disconcertingly alive. The extravagant hair sends an exquisite half-shadow across his face, so he looks like a person split in two. The sun pops out again.

“Yeah, all right then,” he says.

They walk into a pub near campus, strung with spider webs for Halloween. The bartender has cat ears pinned to the front of her beehive, which is spray-painted an impressive purple. They go through the awkward fumblings of ordering. They settle on Guinness, which the bartender pours with exceeding style, swooping the glass beneath the stream, tilting it frozen, allowing it to settle.

They find a table tucked in the corner, a sketched portrait above them of a farmer and a pitchfork, and a signed autograph from Cilla Black.

“To Cilla,” says Milfred, raising her pint. She looks in it. She looks in his. The perfectly drawn clover of his has been deformed into a masterpiece of phallic imagery in hers.

“I think this is for you,” she says.

“I know the bartender,” he shrugs.

“Oh yeah?”

“From Tinder,” he says. “That defining trope of our generation.”

She remembers the last story he shared in class. There had been a scene in some detail of a blowjob he once received beneath an underpass in Bangkok that turned into a solo, contemplative jaunt through the city, ending with him buying some noodles. The blowjob only received a paragraph, the noodles a page. Milfred had marked this as “asymmetrical.”

“What else do you think we should be writing about then?” asks Milfred, sipping her pint. She feels it stick to her upper lip and wipes it with her wrist. She thinks of those weird “Got Milk?” ads she had seen growing up, how they used the slogans as jokes at lunchtimes, along with answering the phone by saying “Wazzzzzzzzzzup?” like the Budweiser commercials. It disconcerts her to think that American advertising had

managed to singe its way so unironically into her young humour. She suddenly feels ancient. She looks over to the only other person in the pub, an old man with a pint of fizzing lager and a whisky with a single ice cube in it, untouched.

"Oh, you know, all the old stuff," he says. "Like, love, or whatever. But we shouldn't be afraid to mention the stuff that's really happening, going through our heads. The way we're starting to see people as disposable. Like, people dying, people kicked out of their homes, and we don't care, so long as we can drink and pretend to get angry about it." He bumps his glass on the table. "I get the irony," he says.

She looks at him. He has grown red in the face, and she has a sudden overwhelming desire to reach out and smooth the lumps out of it.

He clears his throat into the silence. "What are you working on at the moment?" he asks, politely.

"A story about my parents getting divorced," she says.

He rolls his eyes.

"The nuclear family exploded a long time ago," he says, and tips his pint to touch hers.

She visits her mother in her new place on the outskirts of the city. The train journey takes an hour and she reads the same poem over and over. There has been a shooting in a nightclub, and this poem has gone viral, and she mutters it to herself, her whole body tight as she reads about the shootings, and then the poem, and back again.

She only stops occasionally to glance out of the window at the houses spread out beneath her, their zig-zag roofs, the chimneys and antennas. The sky is a blank blue stripe, forceful and remote, like a horizon pressed down by a child's harsh blue crayon. She watches the pigeons gossip on the rooftops. It is the week before Christmas, and the air outside is harsh and cold. Christmas music plays at the stations, floating into Milfred between stops.

Milfred gets confused at the station. There are two exits and she waits at the wrong one, her phone dead. When she moves to the other exit, her mother has driven off to find her, so they miss each other again. It is half an hour before her mother tries the first exit again, honking the horn and making Milfred jump back into the world.

"For god's sake," says her mother. "When have you ever gone out of the other exit? Didn't you see everyone else from the train coming out this way? The road's closed back there."

"Sorry," says Milfred.

"We were never very in sync, were we, sweetie?" says her mother.  
"Give me a kiss."

She is already driving, and the transaction is awkward, Milfred leaning over, strained by her seatbelt, to plant a fluttery breath on her mother's cheek. She catches her mother's smell, the deepness of her attachment to it, and she feels suddenly as though she has fallen down a dark well. She is very aware of her own heart beating. Her mother used to hold her in her lap after she bathed her, sing to her while the talcum powder sunk in to her skin. *For every loved child, a child broken, bagged.* She is thinking of the poem again.

"Are you okay, Milfred?"

She has started crying without noticing.

"Oh, darling," her mother says, impatiently. "I thought you sounded like you were doing so well."

"I am doing so well!" snorts Milfred, hunting in the glove compartment for a Kleenex.

"Is it your time of the month?"

"Only misogynists say that!" says Milfred.

Her mother hoots. "Don't get your tampon in a twist," she says. Milfred leans her head against the dashboard.

They sip tea in her mother's new kitchen. Her flat came, like her father's, readily decorated, and Milfred tries not to be bothered by the fact that neither of them has changed a thing, not even to put up a photo, a fridge magnet.

"When are you bringing this boyfriend to meet me then?" asks her mother.

"Never," says Milfred. "We're not involving families in our relationship. It's better to be just the two of us, you know, against the world."

Her mother lifts her teabag in and out of her tea. Her mother only drinks Sleepytime tea since her father left her and she drinks it all day long.

"That doesn't sound like you," she says.

"I'm discovering myself afresh," says Milfred.

She thinks of the shock-haired boy who has become her boyfriend. Each time she thinks of him, she shakes, but just a little. When he told her he loved her, a few weeks ago, she became unbearably sweaty, goose bumps rising on her arms. He said it so lightly, without any sign of joy or pain, that she knew he delivered it as a line delivered in a play or a story. Her own words stayed choked in her throat, she felt them so keenly and exquisitely that she thought she might vomit if she said them. Eventually, she went ahead and said them anyway, and they carried on drinking and teasing, as though nothing had changed.

He thought everything she wrote in class was about him, whether human or animal, inanimate or animate. One story she shared was about a woman with bad dandruff walking in the snow, the one place she felt true and safe. The story had a magical realist tilt, or at least what she hoped someone in her class would refer to as a magical realist tilt. She hummed, *Carrington, Marquez*, as she wrote the way the woman separated from herself, not prettily or gracefully, but flaking, scabbing, until she turned to snow herself. The night after the workshop, her boyfriend said to her in bed, “I’m not trying to be cold to you, you know, I just have a lot of different aspects to my life.” He blew the dandruff from Milfred’s roots, spooned her more tightly. “I love you,” she said, to make him roll over. She no longer wanted to vomit, saying it. It quickly lost that essential power, like a song listened to too many times. Snow slapped at the window, and she stared at it for a long time while he snored.

“Discovering afresh sounds fun,” says her mother. “Almost tempting. Do you think I should sign up for a dating website?”

Milfred chews on her thumbnail. The sleeve of her sweatshirt falls down her arm, revealing the birthmark on her wrist. Her mother reaches across to touch it, but Milfred is too far away, and her manicured nails miss by inches. Milfred feels the swat of the air pass between them.

“Tell me the ketchup story,” she says.

“You were three or four,” says her mother. “You wouldn’t eat anything without ketchup all over it. Ketchup soup, you called it, it’s all you wanted. Of course, you spilt it everywhere, all the time.” Milfred smiles. “I can’t remember, what was the story?”

“You don’t remember?” asks Milfred, incredulous. She points at the birthmark. “You said if I spilt ketchup one more time, I’d never be allowed it again. And I put my wrist in the ketchup by mistake and you said, *you said*, when you washed it, the birthmark just appeared. After four years. The ketchup stain.” She resents the story in her own voice.

There were holes in it, that was for sure. "It wasn't there before and then it was," she adds, defiantly.

"Oh yes," says her mother. "But you always had that birthmark, darling."

Milfred glares at her, glares at the mark on her wrist, irritated that her mother has taken some belief in magic that against all odds had managed to last so long. Still, she supposed she was being unfair. Her mother had made her body. Why wouldn't she want her signature upon it? It was inescapable, this ownership. She had tried to write a story once in which the mother died, but found she could not.

"Let's have a glass of wine with lunch," says Milfred, standing up. The clock on the oven flashes 12:03. Milfred fetches a half-drunk bottle of white from the fridge and her mother spreads out a ready-made cheese board, the tiny wedges wrapped individually with cling film on a plastic board printed to look like wood. She warms tomato soup on the stove, and they sip wine quickly so by the time the soup is hot and poured in their bowls, they have moved onto the second bottle. The oven flashes 12:20. Milfred wonders how long she must stay, what excuse she can make.

"You went quiet, when I said about the dating website," her mother says.

"Yes," says Milfred.

"You don't think I deserve your happiness," she says. Milfred bites her lips. Was she feeling happiness? She thinks of her boyfriend, coming home drunk the night before, hours late. He stumbled in and lay on top of her, his skin hot to touch. He quickly got up again, and she watched him, sleep-ruffled, as he lifted open her window and the whole room seemed to rise to the height of his shoulders.

"I didn't say that," says Milfred.

"I thought we could do it together," she says. "You're meant to be the writer. You could help me with the profile."

"No," says Milfred.

Her mother rolls her eyes. Milfred is crying again accidentally.

"You care too much about things that don't matter and too little about the things that do," says her mother, and this time, by leaning half her body across the table, she manages to grip Milfred's marked wrist. It is aggressive, the touch far from tender.

"You'll end up penniless," says her mother.

Later, on the train journey home, Milfred writes, *I'd rather end up penniless than broken like you*. Then she crosses out the “like you” in order to sound wise and not just sullen and hurt.

She takes the boyfriend to meet her father, just after Valentine’s Day. He has consented to this, despite their rules to keep their lives separate. She suggested her mother, first, but he shook his head. “Mothers are too much,” he said.

Her father shows them his meat-making operation in the shed, taking a long time to explain its component parts. There are two giant Tupperwares with industrial lights shining on them in order to cure the meat. She watches the fillets of purple beef turn gracefully in their spotlights. The floor of the shed is lined with bags of herbs: rosemary, juniper, thyme. Her father opens up each of the sacks for them to bend their heads into so they can breathe in the scents. Milfred is happy, here with her father and his eccentricities. They chatter in their old ways, using their hands too much.

They drink bottles of beer in the tiny kitchen around the stainless steel table, chewing on strips of cured, smoky meat. When her boyfriend begins talking about the advantages of using local butchers as opposed to online retailers in terms of ethics and carbon footprint, Milfred goes to the bathroom. She peers in the small cabinet above the sink, at the travel-sized shaving cream, the single rusted razor. A toothbrush, aggressively worn, a lonely rose in a pint glass. She feels something inside herself curl up and begin to rock at these markers of singularity. They leave soon after. She waits for her boyfriend to ask her what is wrong.

As they march off to the train station, the boyfriend’s arm loose around her, he says, “You know, it’s funny.”

“What?” she asks.

“You made him sound so much stranger than he really was,” he says. “The way you told stories about him.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, he’s just a normal guy,” he says. “A *nice*, normal guy,” he adds, hurriedly, seeing her face drop.

It is the coldest March on record, and Milfred goes to see her mother every weekend. Her boyfriend is busy. He is running a twenty-four-hour

playwriting marathon, he is putting on poetry nights, he is attending lectures and protests. He is happy.

"My mother needs me," says Milfred to him on the phone. She is wearing a book on her chest like a bib. A program on pageant children and their mothers plays on the television.

"Goodness, how could a mother dress their child that way?" says her mother. It is the third episode they have watched in a row. Her mother has said this ten times already.

"She's very depressed," Milfred stage-whispers down the phone to her boyfriend, and her mother glares at her.

"Sucks to be you," says her boyfriend, before hanging up.

Her mother has started dating a vicar, who she sees only on weeknights, due to Milfred's insistent presence on the sofa on weekends. One Saturday night, they embark on a hair transformation, and her mother prattles endlessly about the vicar while Milfred pulls her hair through a holed skullcap. The smell of the peroxide blue dye beside them swivels up their nostrils. Her mother will do Milfred's hair afterwards, and Milfred will enjoy once they have dried their hair, seeing their matched highlights bright as if lit by wires.

"Oh, darling, he's fabulous," says her mother. "Not at all stuffy like you think a vicar would be. No, he took me to one of the nicest restaurants in town the other night, not even a chain place, no, it's a stand-alone one."

"What did you eat?"

"What did I eat? Darling, you're no good at this girlfriend talk. But since you asked, we had oak-smoked salmon for starter, sharing, you know, and then I had the roast cod, it came on this sort of bean thing, and he had mussels marinere. I should have got that, but I didn't want anything too messy, as we still haven't been dating so long."

"Three weeks," says Milfred.

"Do you think three weeks is too short to fall in love, darling? You're the writer, how long does a love story take?"

Milfred cringes. "Nine to twelve months, conservatively," she says. "And longer when you get older."

Her mother twists around to look at her, clamped between Milfred's knees, looking, with the strands of hair pulled out of her head, like someone about to undergo a very risky experiment.

"Why don't we double date, my boyfriend and your boyfriend?" she says. Milfred looks at her eyes. In that moment they are so bright that Milfred cannot think of comparing them to anything less clichéd

than stars. Her mother can manage to maintain beauty at the most extraordinary of times. Milfred feels the effort of her own lined eyes, the highlighter she has started to put on her cheeks in an effort for them to look skinnier under her growing weight. The T-shirts she steals from her current boyfriend are tight and uncomfortable, her body clinging to them.

“Sure,” she says.

Her boyfriend does not come to her flat the night before they are meant to visit her mother. Eventually, she meets him on a park bench on the green field that separates the buildings of their campus. The days are warming up mockingly. They are late for their train. She pulls on the ends of his green scarf so it is tighter and tighter around her throat.

He fumbles around for words. “It’s like...I mean...I’ve, like, met someone else, kind of,” he says.

“Don’t break up with me with a simile,” growls Milfred.

She knows exactly who it is. There is a girl in their class, dark-haired and skinny, who writes extraordinary poems about masturbation.

“A poet!” She screams onto the green as he walks away, the birds pecking at the grass rising in one dramatic swoop. She watches the released arrow they form, escalating up past the trees, idiotically offering up for the millionth time their pretty leaves.

She goes to the dinner on her own. Her mother decides home cooking will be less stressful than a restaurant for a broken heart. Although Milfred knows her mother owns four chairs, she notices that she has removed one from around the kitchen table and hidden it somewhere, so that there is only room for Milfred, her mother, and the vicar. Her mother roasts a chicken slathered in lemons and makes gravy as pale as water. Milfred picks at her pink chicken. She stares opposite her at the empty space where her boyfriend would have sat. The silence is whole and spacious. She imagines her boyfriend filling up this room with opinions, and thinks perhaps this silence could be a holy thing.

“So, your mother says you’re a writer?” says the vicar. He is bird-like and whispery, the opposite of her father. He reaches a gnarled hand over to touch her mother’s, and she is reminded, repulsed, of a dream she had a long time ago.

"I dabble," she says. "Evidently, it's harder than it looks. I use too many similes and all my stories are about my parents' divorce." She takes a large gulp of red wine, her third glass. She spills some on her wrist and down her sleeve, which she scrunches up to her elbow.

"Well, it must have been hard for you," he says.

Her mother glares at her. "Milfred can be a tad dramatic," she says.

"Fred!" shouts Milfred. "Why can you never call me Fred?"

"I named you! I get to call you what I named you!" shouts her mother, louder.

Milfred starts to cry. She thinks of her boyfriend opening the window, her father's single toothbrush spinning in its glass. She thinks of her and her mother's twinned hair, their shared map of highlights, moving independently through the world. She even thinks bitterly of all those botany students she so undeservingly replaced, those unread books in the library full of flowers, growing stale with lack of attention. She cries harder.

The vicar reaches across the table. Milfred looks down at his boned fingers spread out across her wrist. She smiles a sudden, untarnished smile, as she notices the inexplicable disappearance of the birthmark beneath his hand.

**EDGES**

*Billy-Ray Belcourt*

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## DRUNK ON HOPE

Drunk on hope,  
which is of course the most NDN of all NDN feelings,  
we hold hands as I drive recklessly through rush-hour traffic  
even though we know that we are risking our lives  
and that this is founded in empirical data somewhere.  
But right now, all that matters is that we are amateur physicists  
who make matter from something outside of ourselves  
and no, I'm not talking about bareback sex  
but also, ain't I always talking about bareback sex these days?  
Oh shit, did I just break the fourth wall or whatever?  
Anyways,  
I belt out every song on the radio  
about love at the top of my asthmatic lungs  
*But don't read too much into this,*  
I yell,  
*I just have poor taste in music!*  
Drunk on hope,  
which is of course the most NDN of all NDN feelings,  
we gather in the ash of possibility  
tongues tied  
our slurred words  
exploding with honesty.

*Arielle Twist*

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## D/REAM ME

I lost it.

sixteen silken with  
durex play  
luscious flavoured  
lubricant.  
passion cherry,  
popping cherry.

PDR didn't prepare me,  
fail me harder,  
daddy.  
d/ream me harder,  
daddy.  
my asshole wasn't ready,  
daddy.

how does a fag get fucked,  
without a fissure  
a cut?  
without  
bleeding out?  
'cause what they don't teach,  
we learn in hospital beds.  
on the bathroom floor  
of every mall.  
and every bloody toilet.

*Vanessa Carlisle*

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## SURRENDER AKIMBO

THE DOOR SMELLED LIKE CHERRIES.

“Just go in,” Frieda said. Then she rolled her eyes and pushed me through. Inside, a party was tilting on the edge. Lazy laughter and staccato trumpets. Pink lights. On the ceiling, a mural of the night sky as it may have looked before human longing killed everything.

I followed Frieda through a crowd of sinuous costumes. We wore sage-green latex minidresses. Frieda’s curls were piled high and loose. She had a tiny vagina tattooed inside her bottom lip and glittering piercings in her neck. I had conjunctivitis. I’d dyed my bob black and wore polarized prescription sunglasses. My collar was white vegan leather. Frieda held the leash.

My eyes burned. “Don’t scratch,” she said.

“I need help,” I said. She pulled a wipe from a pack in her purse. I removed some gunk and sniffed the baby-powder freshness.

She saw something or someone over my shoulder. “It’s happening,” she whispered. “It’s finally happening.”

The floor shifted quickly down on one end of the room. We all scrambled to stay upright, all except for Frieda. The furniture tilted and crashed. A void. A vacuum. We were headed in.

She tugged on my leash and I saw her wisdom. I let my butt hit the floor. I couldn't see. I slid. Chafing, ripping the end of the skirt.

Time turned elastic. People found ways to stabilize. Screaming stopped. We slid on and on. I hugged Frieda from behind, imagined we were in a bobsled. I nuzzled her in the dark. She squeezed my calf, and I remembered to enjoy it, enjoy even the terror, down to the microsecond, down to the electron, this was what we'd been waiting for, this nothingness and falling, this was the only mystery left. And it was ours.

## INTERSTICE

I have a lawn chair. It's dark outside  
but I know that even the plants are staring

at me. In between my jail cell and my backyard,  
what I don't want to think dreams me

half-asleep. If only I had a voice in these midnight  
conversations where everyone's got something to say

about my time except me. I see questions coming  
on the necks of carrier pigeons.

Should I paint a still life? My daily bread,  
counting the words that fit into a twenty-minute

phone call, the ritual enacted to fall asleep  
under lights that never go out. My mind is littered

with pencils. The simple lines I wrote to lovers,  
distractions down to the day, and every time I heard

"I can't wait until you're out." Now my cat,  
free from her bell, holds a press conference

in the alley behind the house. Releases statement  
after statement on my behalf. You're still

watching me. Strategizing with the raccoons  
who tell themselves that all they're doing

is dividing up a quarry of garbage. Even with  
no plexiglass, no filtered friends or censored mail,

I see you seeing me. The blinking unfocused gaze  
between the TV version and every last fucking thing

I have no clue how to say. It's easier to imagine  
the purely political, the big picture, the giant fuck-you

to the state than to see the bare bedroom walls and to hear  
the ease with which my oldest friend

is snoring down the hall. It's in the nighttime  
that I realize how clearly I'm not dreaming.

*Jenny Mary Brown*

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## METAKOSMIA

Sleepwalking, I travel the space  
between worlds like a tiger stolen

from a zoo—free, but confused.  
I find myself in the bathroom,

having time-travelled from asleep  
to the sink light burning into my open eyes.

Rose has died, and I'm unsure why I'm here.  
It's always 2 a.m., or 4. Never light.

It's as if those hours of sleep fast-forwarded  
by quick-cut sequence. A nanosecond swipe.

The truth is that I don't get her back,  
and I can't redo anything.

I'm only in-between somewhere, asleep,  
awake, maybe dreaming. The room shape-shifts

from flannel sheets to tile under toes. I'm cold  
and nude. I retreat, disappear back to bed,

wrapping the blankets around my arms, clutching  
it with fingers, attempting to reset the clock.

I get a grasping glimpse of time, past  
and future, like a late-night phone call

when you're barely awake enough to catch  
who's talking, but they thought of you,

and needed to hear your lips parting to speak.

*Tessa Yang*

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## WHAT DO YOU DREAM?

THEY HAVE BEEN DATING around four months when Neil begins dreaming Marla's dreams. All the shining wreckage of her childhood scatters itself through his sleeping hours. He wanders the Tulsa ranch house where she grew up, bow-tied teddy bears cackling from their high shelves. He watches as her mother—dead ten years now, breast cancer—glides from room to room on a pair of old-fashioned roller skates. He sees Marla's old teachers, college roommates, ex-boyfriends, childhood neighbours, the half-brother with the mouthful of spotted teeth who never calls. He explores the dream-addled version of the office where she copyedits textbooks (quicksand in every cubicle, tentacles swaying from the ceiling like birthday streamers). He looks on helplessly as the small white bunny rabbit named Pancakes, which Marla had loved as a girl, flops down the driveway toward its death beneath the wheels of her father's Ford Taurus.

"Pancakes was a brown bunny, not white," says Marla when Neil recounts this dream fragment to her over breakfast. "Why would you name a white bunny Pancakes? That doesn't make any sense."

"I don't know what to tell you," says Neil. He finds himself saying this a lot around Marla, who remains just as mysterious to him now as she was on their first date.

In some ways, she is reliably boring, like Neil. She has a boring job, and a large square face that is unremarkable except for her wide-set eyes, with their swirls of emerald, gold, and brown. Sex with Marla is consistent and undemanding. She gets off quickly, without much fanfare. After, she usually wants him to bring her something salty to eat, like Fritos or Pringles. She devours these snacks in bed with a palm cupped under her chin to catch any crumbs, though when she's finished, she dusts off her hands and the crumbs fly everywhere. Her diet is normal, which is to say, not very good.

In other ways, though, Marla is completely bonkers. From each paycheck, she sets aside twenty dollars to go toward her marble collection. Has any sane person ever collected marbles? They arrive in tiny square boxes from all around the world. Marla stores them in a jewelry box with a velvet divot for each one, and Neil is not allowed to touch them. And her hair! It's so long she can wrap herself in it like a trench coat. She looks like one of those fanatical Christian women on TLC.

Strangest of all to Neil is the fact that Marla can apparently speak something like twelve languages. She has an insane gift for it. She picks up new dialects on a whim, the way other people pick up hats or shoes. She'll scold and grumble in French, Arabic, Korean, German, Swahili. Does Neil believe she can actually speak this many languages? Is he absolutely certain she's not discharging rounds of gibberish in what is either a very drawn-out prank or a more vindictive exercise in belittling his intelligence? No, he's not certain. Not at all.

This dream business is just the latest in a long list of oddities Marla has brought into his otherwise unexceptional life. As he smears butter over a slab of burnt toast, Neil decides that he's going to accept it, because he would like to shape himself into the sort of boyfriend who is accepting of such things.

For her part, Marla is unimpressed by this new dimension of their relationship. "It happens with all the guys I date," she says, reaching past him for the sugar, and Neil tries hard not to wonder just how many guys that might be.

After breakfast, they go to the gym in Neil's apartment complex, a starving little suite of squeaky machines and mirrors smeared with greasy handprints. They are both trying to lose weight, though Neil suspects he is trying harder than Marla. He mounts an elliptical. She wanders from station to station as if sleepwalking—two reps on the shoulder press, four minutes on a bike. She never adjusts the resistance. She uses whatever settings remain from the last person, like some aerobic leech trying to sponge up the remains of a stranger's successful workout.

Does he love her? Neil ponders this question as he puffs away on his elliptical, sweat burning his hairline. His parents would prefer he found someone different. Someone more sociable, more grounded, more Asian, just *more* than Marla, who seems always to have one foot planted in the room with you and one foot somewhere else entirely: Narnia, or never-never land, or wherever it is she goes when her face fogs over like a breathed-on window.

And yet. He is infatuated with her. He can just sit and watch as she rubs lotion into the flaking skin on her knuckles, or strains pasta over the sink. It takes almost nothing to turn his thoughts in her direction. At work, hovering over a pair of grossed-out high-schoolers slicing into their fetal pig, he finds himself thinking fondly: *I wonder if Marla would like pork chops tonight.* When he drives, he always imagines she's in the passenger seat. He pays special attention to the things he thinks she would find interesting. A woman waiting at the bus stop with four balloon animals and no children. A squirrel that has been completely run over except for its tail, a stubborn poof that stands perfectly erect and flutters in the breeze like a flag.

Neil's sweaty neighbours have begun eyeing Marla as she meanders back and forth across the room. She wears embarrassingly clean, traffic cone-orange sneakers. Whenever she passes in front of the oscillating fan, her hair comes alive, thrashing like a nest of snakes. He is torn between wanting to reprimand the gawkers—it's a free country! If a woman wants to wander around the gym like a lost child, let her!—and wanting to bark at Marla to please just *pick* a station and stay there for more than five minutes.

He dreams himself inside Marla's body. Or maybe it's Marla inside *his* body. They stumble through jungles, playgrounds, nursing homes, construction sites, classrooms, dorm rooms, and restaurants. They spill

down staircases and waterfalls. They sprint after buses and cruise ships they'll never reach—this monstrous *Marla-Neil* who speaks in a guttural voice that belongs to neither of them.

Sometimes Neil recognizes the scenes of the dreams in which he finds himself. More often, he requires Marla's interpretation the following day.

"A castle," he'll recall as he drives her to her office, "with a huge lawn full of cakes on platters. Water in the distance. A guy in a tuxedo playing the violin."

"Oh, that must be the hotel where Meg's sister got married," says Marla, rummaging through her giant purse for sunglasses. "I've never been, but she said it was like a fortress."

Or he'll say: "There was this woman? Pearl necklace? Teeth falling out of her head?"

"Aunt Fern," Marla informs him. "She always wears these huge fake pearls. I don't know why her teeth were falling out. She has perfectly good teeth."

For every setting or figure she can identify, there are a dozen Marla can't tease out. Neil finds himself frustrated by this. These are the dregs of Marla's days, the lingering ghosts of *her* childhood. If she can't shed light on them, who can? He presses her. She tells him to fuck off. They're having sex less and less these days, though in some bizarre tradeoff, they attend more events together as a couple. He brings her around to the student vs. faculty bowling night. Over the clatter of struck pins and the whoops of over-caffinated teens, he introduces Marla as his *partner*, because it sounds more serious than *girlfriend*, though he cannot hear the word without a cowboy twang. *Howdy pard-ner. This is my pard-ner, Marla.*

She drags him to her company's holiday party. The publishing house has rented the back room of a popular Italian restaurant. Platters of shrimp, zucchini blossoms, and garlic bread cover the tables. Little plush elf toys sprawl across the rafters and perch on windowsills. The effect is supposed to be festive, but Neil only feels surveilled by their manic, glossy eyes.

Marla introduces him to a few people near the door—she says *boyfriend*—then promptly abandons him. It feels vengeful, though he cannot imagine what he's done to deserve it.

At the bar he orders a beer, then two more. He's a bit nervous around all these book people, most of whom are older than him, married, and white. He finds himself talking to a pretty middle-aged woman with

large breasts and red jingle-bell earrings. She says she had a dream about this party last night. It was just like this, really, except there was a giant bonfire eating through the floor. Every once in a while, a person would dive into the flames. There'd be a shower of gold sparks, like fireworks, and a smattering of applause.

"What do you think that means?" asks the woman.

"Social anxiety?" suggests Neil. He drinks deeply from his beer. "Last night I dreamed I was walking through Barnes and Noble when this man tried to kidnap me. The only way to escape him was to transform into different animals. I was a parrot, a swan, a mouse."

"How colourful!" cries the woman.

"It wasn't really my dream," Neil feels obliged to confess. "It was my partner's. Marla's. I only dream her dreams now."

The woman throws back her head and laughs, and her earrings jingle. Obviously she thinks he's lying, but she's enchanted all the same.

"Don't you miss having your own dreams?" she teases.

"Oh, no! My dreams were so—so *uncreative*. The night before a big test, I'd dream I had to take a big test. Stuff like that. If I even remembered them. Marla's dreams are so rich. Everything comes at me so intensely. Plus, I get to meet people in her life I never would've seen otherwise. Like her brother. He's this meth head. Lives out in Michigan. Total loser. But in dreams he's wonderful. He's always got a rope for me to climb when I'm stranded at the bottom of a cliff, or a laser gun to fight off the evil lizards ..."

He feels a tug on his elbow—Marla, hauling him out to the patio where a group of smokers shivers in the orange glow of the outdoor lamps.

"You're making a fool out of yourself," says Marla. "You're making a fool out of me."

"I was just telling her a story."

"You're drunk."

"So?" He doesn't know why she's getting so upset. He sits down on the low stone wall encircling the patio and pats the spot next to him. Reluctantly, it seems, she sits down as well.

"I don't know why this dream stuff happens," she says. "I don't control it any more than you do. But it's not right to go around bragging. It's very self-serving." She takes the beer from where he's clamped it between his thighs and drains it in two gulps. He finds this sight oddly arousing and

wishes, more than anything, that they were home in bed together, rolling in sheets full of Pringle crumbs.

The smokers finish up and return inside. Neil's beery warmth has been replaced with a creeping cold that saps all feeling from his extremities, but Marla appears unbothered. She's looking up at the restaurant's roof, drifting away from him in that way she does, jaw slack, hands limp and open at her sides. Searching around for something to bring her back, he asks a question that he will later wonder how it possibly took him so long to ask: "What do you dream? Do you see the same stuff I see, or is it all new?" An exciting thought occurring to him, he blurts, "Do you dream *my dreams?*" What a lovely balance this would be: each voyaging nightly into the forests of the other's mind, mapping all the roots and snares and dark, winding paths. But Marla shakes her head. She murmurs something at him under her breath in a language he does not recognize, but he can tell by her tone it's an insult or a curse. *Small man. Fuck off. Stupid.*

"You really don't get it, do you?" she says. "I haven't dreamed in years."

They don't break up right away. They peter out over the next few weeks. They *lose steam*—a phrase a friend had once used to describe his failing marriage, and which had recollected for Neil the wheeze of his mother's old Saab as it struggled to turn over on cold mornings. One day shortly after New Year's, he's cleaning his apartment and realizes it has been completely scrubbed of Marla. She's taken her toothbrush and hair scrunchies, her face cream and razor, her deodorant and the extra set of clothes she used to keep in the bottom dresser drawer. Her fatty dessert-flavoured yogurts have disappeared from his fridge.

He calls her. He feels like some sort of closure is in order. To her voicemail he says, "I guess we both knew it was coming. For what it's worth, I had fun. I hope you did, too." She does not call him back. Neil searches himself for feelings of loss, but finds only bafflement. Did he do something awful to drive her away? He sifts through his memory. All he can think of is their argument at the holiday party. But that had been nothing! That was stupid. A drunken little tiff. (Well, *he* had been drunk. He tries to remember if Marla had also been drinking and decides that yes, she must have been).

He throws himself into mid-term prep, crafting overly detailed review packets on cellular parts and functions. He says, “If I were in a band, it’d be called the Endoplasmic Reticulum,” and his students gaze back at him dumbly, grimly. He resurrects his OkCupid profile and goes on a date with a nervous Korean woman who breeds labradoodles out in the country. All he can talk about is his dreams, Marla’s dreams, which have only grown sharper with time. The night before, the amalgam *Marla-Neil* had stormed through a blinding tundra, pursued by dancing women in purple sports bras. Neil awoke from this vision sweaty and disoriented, with items strewn around his bed. Pens and spoons. Hangers. The salt shaker shaped like a baying wolf.

“I teach my students that dreaming is a process of memory consolidation,” he says as the waiter appears with their entrees. “Or else it’s just an epiphenomenon to sleep. A random response to the electrical activity of the cortex. But the way I’ve been dreaming lately—it’s hard not to feel like it’s something much bigger than all that. Like I’m receiving messages. Like I’ve been chosen. You probably think I’m totally crazy.”

The dog-breeder cuts into her steak and offers him a weak smile that says yes, she thinks he’s totally crazy. “Last week I had a dream two of my dogs got out,” she says. “I crossed oceans looking for them, but it turned out they were in my old piano teacher’s house the whole time. I think I have the ability to will happy endings out of my dreams, to circumvent the truly awful situations.” She gives him a significant look, and Neil, if he had been listening, may have wondered whether he were being labelled an Awful Situation to circumvent, or one out of which she might yet wring a forcibly happy ending.

But he’s not listening. He is thinking of Marla with a belated sorrow that floods him so suddenly, he wishes only to slip beneath the tablecloth and curl in a ball on the floor. Marla’s purses. Marla’s hair. Marla’s half-assed makeup. Marla’s palm full of marbles, their cream-and-peppermint swirls, how a boyish longing had risen within him to take those tiny, precious orbs to a steep place and scatter them down the incline.

Someday soon, he understands, *Marla-Neil* will scrape their way to the surface, plug their feet into his slippers, and carry him still groggy out the front door. He will wake in a place he does not recognize, a smear of bright lights dazzling him from above. Then all propriety will leave him. He’ll break the break-up code. He’ll call her just as soon as he can get his hands on a cell phone. “What does it mean?” he’ll beg into her voicemail, and keep begging until the three-minute recording cuts him off.

*Lindsay Nixon*

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## BAWAJIGAYWIN

I.

*That fucking hair  
of hers.*

It always creeps up on me.  
Golden and smelling of jasmine, glinting in the sun,  
at dawn, when I did acid and it started raining when the  
drugs kicked in.

Her,  
and *that fucking hair*.

II.

I smoke as ceremony, and smoked long before I knew what ceremony was.  
Cheap rez cigarettes.

I smoke, much unlike the good NDNs who lay down only the best tobacco.  
#MoreNativeThanYou

I smoke smokes that you buy on the side of the highway, sold in plastic bags.  
By 100s for \$10 a bag.

I smoke the same rez cigs for months, and store them in the freezer to keep.  
A real low budget bitch.

I smoke to pull that sweet tobacco into my lungs, and feel it cleanse me  
the way city NDNs like.

Like a fucking meteor.\*

I smoke when the sadness seeps into the bones, when it settles in and makes a home.

Like a lonely prairie wind.

I smoke to distract myself from my feelings, another dissociative coping mechanism.

Fuck “bad” coping mechanisms.

I smoke when I start having visions of her, crying and blubbering to someone.

Another cliché first love story.

I smoke and say, *I had planned to take her away. I could've made it work.*

“So why didn’t you?”

I smoke and watch the sun rise sitting amongst my self-pity and doubt.

Out there, in the rain.

III.

Reprise or obsession?

*That fucking hair.*

It will come to you in dreams,  
sitting on rocks out in the ocean.

You can only see *that fucking hair*,  
and never her face.

There are few things I regret more,  
than the love I was unable to give.

\*Reference to an Audre Lorde quote.

*Matthew Stepanic*

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## THE GREATEST OLYMPIC COMEBACK

I am painted up like Tessa, shrouded in ruby chiffon & pirouetting into Scott Moir's sparkling arms. I want our sexual history to be as translucent as the nude mesh of your shirt, Scott. Still, only I will witness your nip slips.

Our bedroom is an ice rink & there's room for the whole nation in it.  
We came back for this:

After we defeat the Russians & they cast our bodies in Olympic gold,  
they'll give us all the keys & we'll free the queers from their cages in Chechnya. Listen.

This is urgent. I want to hold the blade so close to your femoral artery  
we'll fall together to Hades.

When we quaff pints of golden brew & yell at the judges, we are yelling  
at toxic masculinity's every biased call.

I forgive you for all the times you pictured Adam Rippon sans sequins.  
Mirror skating, we perform the cantilever then the Charlotte spiral;  
each skate's slice of the ice decimates the patriarchy.

My body above your head, you lift with me all my fallen sisters  
& then we spin & jump tighter & tighter—

toe loop, now Lutz, now Salchow—

as two threads on one spool,

we entangle our genders

so utterly that we are

no gender.

In the kiss & cry,

your mouth so near

my neck

I can hear

the clasp

click

*Sanchari Sur*

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## THE LADY AND THE BEARD

*[A] ghost/ who has always already/ haunted [you].../ through you.*

—Lucas Crawford

“Your Fat Daughter Remembers What You Said.”

SHE WANTED A BEARD. One like Freud’s would have been ideal; neatly trimmed, debonair, available for stroking with approval or derision, whichever suited the moment. *He always did look so well turned out.* But no, it wouldn’t do. She wanted one that was longer, like Moses perhaps, but without the religious connotations.

She wasn’t sure when the desire took a hold of her, her hand unconsciously reaching to stroke her chin amid discussions. It was an itch she needed to scratch, and scratch constantly. She supposed it was soon after she came across a photo of Harnaam Kaur on social media, her elegant, delicate face framed by a Sikh turban and a lush beard. She was taken by Kaur’s confidence, the femme-ness that Kaur portrayed with a

beard. It was fierceness of a different kind, something she wanted to tap into.

She wondered about the narcissism of her desire. She'd never had polycystic ovary syndrome, like Kaur. It couldn't have been easy, growing up different. *It never was.* With facial hair came the bullying. The social isolation. The snide remarks followed by laughter—*always* the laughter—ringing in the quietness of a bright, sunlit day...

And yet, her desire to become a part of this community of bearded women wouldn't leave her alone.

She found herself searching online for images of women with long luxurious beards. In libraries, she rifled through yellowed pages. There wasn't a whole lot out there, but the little that she found was enough to sustain her. She coveted the lavish beards of Annie Jones Elliot, Julia Pastrana, Jane Barnell. Women who mostly worked in carnivals and circuses. She longed to become one of them, confident with their hirsute faces.

"In Gothic convention, it's the skin that houses the body," she said in her graduate film class, as her right hand automatically reached for her chin. "So, the monstrous *body*, and not the monster *per se*, is the 'other.'" She leaned forward, animated by the idea, beginning to punctuate her thoughts with chin strokes. "The body only becomes monstrous," *stroke* "in its otherness."

The week's discussion was devoted to *Silence of the Lambs*, the class debating on which antagonist was more dangerous—Professor Hannibal Lecter, or the killer-kidnapper Buffalo Bill.

"Do you mean Bill's deviancy is what makes him the other?" the professor said.

"Yes, because the deviancy *is* the other." *Stroke.* "The *real* monster is Bill's desire to be a woman—not his desire to kill."

"But isn't that obvious?" another student piped in. "I mean, horror conventions have historically played on fears within the social system of the time. *The Exorcist*, for example, demonized female sexuality."

"True, but my point is—it is the demonization of Bill's desire to be a woman," *stroke* "that makes the movie inherently transphobic and sexist," *stroke* "and by extension, makes Bill's desire the true monster."

"Boy, you sure love your imaginary beard," the guy next to her said.

The class broke out in laughter.

*Once there were two lovers, separated from each other by a vast body of water. They were so far apart, that they couldn't see each other even if they stood on their shores. The only way to keep in touch was by tying a twine from one coast to the other. When the twine turned taut, they knew that the other was having thoughts of happier days.*

*Or perhaps, a fish of some sort was trapped, trapezing on the line.*

One night, in the moments after sex, she mentioned her desire to Nitin.  
“How would you feel if I got a beard?”

“Like, for Halloween?”

“No, I mean...a beard. On my chin.”

“Like mine?” He rubbed his stubble.

“No...not like yours. A lo-on<sup>g</sup> one.”

“Jaan, you have such a lovely chin. Why would you want hair to cover that up?”

“Oh, but think!” she got up to face him, “my beard swinging between us.” She mounted him. “While we have sex,” she leaned back, “back...” she moved forward and kissed him, “and forth!”

“I will run away!”

“I thought you loved me!”

“I do love you,” he kissed her chin, “minus a beard.”

*Such beautiful genderqueer creatures jellyfishes were, open to both sexual and asexual relations. They didn't have brains, like amoebae. They didn't mean to hurt, the sting a defense mechanism. Such beautiful and misunderstood creatures.*

*Jellyfish phoenixes especially were rare, but they did exist. Turritopsis dohrnii. They were special, just one of their kind. When life ended, they contracted into themselves, curling inwards, withering. Only to rise again, death an exit to rebirth. Another body, another chance.*

*For some, it was possible to reinvent forever.*

It wasn't easy getting hold of a beard in the Canadian city of Kingston. There was only one Halloween store in the entire city, and she had to change two busses to get to it. But even then, after the effort of a long bus ride, the store was a disappointment.

"These are the only kinds we have," said the store clerk, her black liner having bled into the creases of her eye bags. "Which one would you like, sweetie?" The woman held up a moustache and a beard, one in each hand.

It had to be the beard, no question. It was a long, dark, bushy affair, held back by elastic strings she would have to tie according to the size of her chin.

"You will have to remove it each time you eat or drink," the clerk said, ringing up the purchase.

On Halloween evening, she began to get dressed early. Donned in her towel, she held up the beard to her face, staring into the mirror. The reflection wasn't what she had hoped for. *This* was clearly not the beard of her dreams. But it would do. It would do *for now*.

She kept the beard on her bed, splayed, letting it have its own space. She reached for her moisturizer and rubbed the cream across her arms, legs, back, and chest. She let it soak into her skin.

She went for her underwear first, pulling on the black silk panties she had bought as a treat after a successful conference presentation, never having the occasion to wear them before. To match, she chose a black bra. A push-up, Nitin's favourite kind. Even though she had explained the illusion of the push-up once to him, he still loved her in them. He was easy like that.

Next, the black lace dress. Tight across her chest, and flaring out right underneath her breasts. The most femme of femme dresses, she thought each time she wore it. *Fabulously femme*.

The make-up was basic for the most part. After a round of concealer and foundation, she accentuated her eyes with black mascara, pale coral blush highlighting her cheekbones. For her lips, she reached for her favourite red lipstick, Ruby Woo.

*Finally*, the beard. It wasn't difficult to settle it over her visage, the synthetic hair caressing her face. She expected it to be uncomfortable, but it fit, snug. She looked like a messiah, a woman with a vision for the future. Her short bob and straight bangs framed her face, not unlike Uma Thurman in *Pulp Fiction*. The ruby lips were hidden from sight, but she knew they were there. Just beneath the beard, waiting.

She smiled at her reflection, the beard smiling with her.

*The mermaid fell in love with the shark's warm bloodedness, the heat similar to her own. She stalked him while he fed, watching him gorge carelessly. She touched him in passing, letting his warmth seep into her hands, his armoured skin invading her dreams.*

*But the shark didn't care. And if he wanted to, he could have her nestled in the heart of his belly.*

They were drunk and back at his place, reaching for each other like they always did.

"Take it off, take it off!" she laughed, fumbling with the buttons of his shirt, "why is it so complicated!"

He laughed with her, his hands reaching for her face, "My cute bearded baby," he said as he kissed parts of her face above the beard, his hands fiddling with the apparatus, "take it off now, so I can kiss you."

"Leave it on, *na?* I like it on my face," she said, leaning in for a kiss.

"No," he dodged her, holding her back with one arm, "Halloween is over. *Come on.*"

"No, *you* come on," she aimed for his lips again, "just *one* kiss."

He stopped, staring at her, pouting his lips, his nostrils flaring. He was going into his fight mode. "*Really?*" he said.

She stopped as well, matching his stare, considering for a moment.

It was the beard, or sex. She had to choose.

"Okay," she said, removing the contraption, pulling it off over her head, "*okay.*"

It was close to dawn, the chirping of birds outside the window alerting her. She hadn't slept all night. She looked over at Nitin's defenseless face, sleep claiming all of his protestations. She focused on the traits that made him physically desirable. The cut above his lips from a childhood accident, a marker that captured her eyes almost a year ago. His dark curls—"my Maggi noodles," he called them—that she loved to run her fingers through, and clutch and pull during moments of climax. And, that nose. That sharp hawk's beak that added to his profile, regal in its mere existence. Even in darkness, she could make out his features.

She turned on her side, her back to him, her eyes wandering to the cast-off item on the floor. The neglected beard lay strewn, a messy ball of hair, helpless in its discarded state.

In a few moments, she would get up and cradle it. She would comb it out with a hairbrush, untangling the long fibres. She would find a cover for it, a plastic bag maybe, one from the stash under the kitchen sink. She would put it away somewhere safe, away from Nitin's eyes.

In a few moments, she would do all of these things. But for now, she stared.

## WHAT I REMEMBER

In this one I am dead. No, with the dead  
In this one the ground  
In this one voices are chanting  
In this one voices are mechanical  
In this one roads, thumb out  
In this one walking along the shoulder  
In this one the waters prefer I still fall  
In this, dawn's bleak order  
In this past uncanny lambent apartment  
In this, the girl, lightning beneath her eyes  
In this on repeat, floating, on grey seas  
In this one no waking even for the wake  
In this one voices are heated  
In this one I am overheard  
In this one you/her wave goodbye  
In this one tidal well, scale crushed  
In this one satellite science lab  
In this one voices at chorus  
In this one I'm found, dragged out  
In this one not knowing when or if  
In this one wolves hunt Manhattan  
In this one a satellite, the last  
In this one my next oldest mirror  
In this one limbs crumbling  
In this one R v R, with matches  
In this one love's unnameable  
In this, how many alleys, fire escapes?  
In this, world one remembered  
In this one, you too. You two  
In this one kisses wake me  
In this one three o'clock summer sun  
In this, our bodies tangled in grass  
In this one next year, a papered room  
In this one stay dead

In this one snow squall or the beach  
In this one try to stop crying  
In this one voices are tinny, tiny  
In this one are they voices, theirs?  
In this, mirror, one cracks in long drops  
In this one dream your mechanics  
In this one make a phoenix with your hands  
In this one hazard your hope

**RIPPLE**

*Spencer Lucas Oakes*

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## MELT

I SIT AT A DESK.

Sometimes I sit at a desk and I melt. I sit at a desk for thousands of hours and the hours melt too. The hours melt into the floor and the walls and the plain furniture. The desk is familiar to me and so is the computer on the desk and the keyboard and the mouse and mousepad and the succulent and the phone that never rings. The phone is a relic. Sometimes I feel at home and sometimes I don't. Her words, not mine. Sometimes I don't melt but the office does. I can relate to the phone. Other times I try to work and most of the time I don't know what I'm doing here. A co-worker is standing by the printer waiting for something. His face is plain. I ask him what he's waiting for.

"Anything," he says.

I shake his hand like it's the right thing to do.

The brain in my head melts a bit and I go back to the search engine on my computer and look her up but I still can't find her. The white-grey walls of the office melt again, making lines like wood-grain and then a phone rings.

I lose days like I lose hours. This is office melt. The unsystematic slippage of time like what I guess a wormhole would be like. I should quit this job, but I am disappearing anyway. She fell into the earth and maybe I can fall into the earth too.

*Austen Lee*

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## SLEEPOVERS AT THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

Distance used to be measured by  
how far I was from your house.  
I'd count power lines on the way,  
arms stretched out like men  
ready to shock me.

At your place, we flew  
down the driveway in a wagon,  
smeared our blood on gravel  
while our mothers drank beer  
and made raspberry jam.

When you tell me you're pregnant,  
I begin to see you in dreams.

We're always nine years old and  
you're teaching me Britney Spears choreography.  
We swing our hips and shine our  
teeth in the dark basement.

We pretend the field  
outside your house is white sand on  
a beach so long we can't see the water,  
play lifeguard in the bathtub  
and take turns drowning.

We eat Toaster Strudel  
with our hair wrapped in towels,  
scoop goo from pastry then  
smear our mouths pink.

At midnight, our mothers tell us  
to sleep, and we listen to them

laugh through the ceiling.

That drunk echo melts  
into my own headache,  
wakes me alone in my apartment.

I reach for you,  
but you have long gone home  
to feed your girl raspberries.

*Sachiko Murakami*

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## FIELD RESEARCH

I talk about my dreams like there is some factual evidence that will survive the trauma of waking and realizing the truth of my life; its plodding linearity, the plumb line that follows a bullet's path to the next day, and the day after that.

I'm told I should stay present. I'm told there is safety in the out-breath, there is a space between thought and thinker I would see if only I held still long enough to measure the distance.

Between here and Vancouver, most of a continent. Between a mother and daughter, a sinew stretching city blocks. Pluck it and it twangs at the same frequency as the knotted trapezius, the first long note of a dirge you've been humming since early childhood.

Check her breathing. Prepare a plausible story for why you're still here, a lie you will tell to tomorrow. When the doctors arrive they will hold the usual instruments close to our lives, listening for signals of the past. When does chronic bronchitis become a child you can name, a treatable condition?

My out-breath her in-breath, a chain that follows generations backwards to the first woman leaning over, heaving out sorrow into a man's empty bed. I lie down with my mother on her single mattress. Lions reach into me, following the lines I laid out for them, on her dresser.

We sleep for days, the litany of Tuesday mornings marching past windows, facing courtyard, a place where exhaled sleep gathers. I dream I read her diary and find all the secrets that will answer all the questions. I stand poised and ready to ask.

*Jack Wang*

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## BELSIZE PARK

“YOU SHOULD COME TO LONDON at the end of term. Meet my parents.”

We were lying in bed in her room overlooking the High Street. A month earlier, we had gone down to London to see a band at The Half Moon in Putney, but we hadn’t made our presence known to her parents, who lived in Belsize Park. I had agreed: no need for introductions yet. But apparently the time had come.

“Really?”

“Why not? We’re going on six months.”

This wasn’t exactly true. We had met at the end of second year and rendezvoused intently for a few weeks before going our separate ways for the summer, I to Stoke-on-Trent to work in my parents’ takeaway—Lucky House, it was called—and she to France to summer with her family, with no particular understanding between us. Come autumn, we did start up again right away, but all told, we’d only been together for a term.

“My parents need my help in the shop.”

A little mow appeared on her face. “Can’t they spare you for a day or two?”

In the beginning, I couldn’t quite believe I had fallen in with someone like Fiona, so clever and lovely and thoroughly English. The only way to manage my fear of losing her was to take it as a given. Since London, though, we’d spent nearly every day together, and despite myself I’d started to hope for more. If I hesitated, it was only to be sure she wasn’t just being polite. But her little pout told me all I needed to know.

“All right, I’ll go. But only if you come to Stoke.”

She stilled, recalibrating. “Will your parents like me?”

I wasn’t sure, but I said, “They’ll love you.”

My first week at Oxford, I had sat high in the upper gallery at the Sheldonian in full academic dress, listening to the Vice-Chancellor intone gravely in Latin and feeling as I often had in grammar school, that I was an interloper and none of this was my birthright. That same week, I wandered the deluged stalls at Freshers’ Fair but couldn’t bring myself to join the Pooh Sticks Club or the Heterosexual Decadence Society or even the Chinese Students Association, despite the doe-eyed looks of the two young women behind the table. Instead, I spent most of first year alone in my room or in a study carrel at the Bodleian Library, where I had to swear an oath not to “kindle flame.”

In second year, though, I found myself a coterie of friends who took an equally cynical view of the goings-on around us, the college balls especially, but at the end of Trinity term, we decided for a lark to crash one. The men went down to Shepherd and Woodward on the High to rent evening wear, in the spirit of Achaeans entering a Trojan horse. But when I put on the black tie and tail coat and looked in the mirror, there in the privacy of the dressing room, I thought for the first time, *I could be one of them.*

When the time came, we infiltrated the milling crowd at Radcliffe Square, with its battlements and spires, burnished at that hour in deep shades of gold. A row of women in taffeta posed for pictures in front of the Radcliffe Camera. One had thin, straight, mousy hair, this at a time when hair was all about volume, and her décolletage sagged, which made my heart go out to her. I caught her eye and saw myself refracted: tall, reedy, exotic. Then the moment passed and we both looked away.

Later, after I had breached security and found myself in a lantern-lit quad, I saw her again, this time standing alone, peering over the rim of her glass and looking rather abandoned. “Hello again,” she said, which should have bolstered my confidence. Instead I mumbled the usual: hello, how are you, which college are you at? When she told me, I cooled. If any college still embodied the spirit of bright young things, it was Magdalen.

“What about you?”

“Lady Margaret Hall.”

“The women’s college?”

I bristled. I was proud of LMH and the fact that it was on the outskirts of town—orbital, like me.

“We have something now called co-education,” I said.

My comment struck the mark, a little too well, it seemed. She took an injured sip of her drink, and I waited for her to flag down a friend and flee. Instead, she described her years in public school as part of a flotsam of girls in an endless sea of boys. Her school didn’t have a girls’ house; rather, every house had a couple of girls in each A-level year, and they had been tormented. “It’s no better here,” she said bitterly. “My junior common room debated the motion ‘College women should be hired out on the same basis as punts.’ It’s astonishing.”

My ears burned, and the only thing I could think to do was tell her about grammar school, how my only friend was a boy named Ramesh and how we had gotten all the usual abuse. I thought it might have been too little, too late, but she softened, said, “That’s awful,” and something like recognition passed between us.

We kept talking. In time, standing gave way to sitting, and sitting in turn to lying down once we vowed to make it all the way to the champagne breakfast. There would soon be far greater intimacies between us, yet in some ways nothing surpassed that first intimacy, the two of us lying face to face, right there in the quad, in full view of the dwindling ball, Fiona safe enough to close her eyes and fall asleep.

From the time I was old enough to peer over the counter, I’d spent long hours at the front of my parents’ takeaway. The summer Fiona and I were apart was no different. But unlike the summer before or the many years before that, when I whiled away the hours dreaming vaguely but intently of love, all my restive longing that summer took the form of someone real. When the school year ended, I said I would write, but she didn’t

know where her family would be staying in Paris and couldn't remember the address of their summer house in Colmar, so all I could do was give her mine. Every time the shop door chimed, I looked up hoping to see her, and every day I waited for the post, hoping for the smallest word.

At the end of each night, after my parents and I had trudged upstairs to our flat above the takeaway, I would retreat to my room and listen to records on my old Garrard Zero, and the track I played the most was "The Paris Match" by The Style Council. The song was a moody ballad about wandering the streets of Paris, looking for a lost lover. I liked the version sung by a woman, sad-eyed Tracey Thorn, which made it easier to imagine that Fiona was out there looking for me.

At the end of the summer, I finally received a postcard of brightly coloured houses lining a canal. Fiona wrote breezily of dry heat and mountains and drinking Alsatian wine, her words circumnavigating the card in ever finer script. She said nothing about us, but I didn't care. She hadn't forgotten me.

As soon as Michaelmas term ended, we took the train to Paddington Station. We'd done the same on our first trip to London six weeks before, sat rocking side by side on rough-hewn upholstery as the chalk and scattered scrub of the Chilterns streamed past, but the feeling then was different. Then, we'd had London—the whole wide world—to ourselves. This time, I was hurtling toward a brambly sense of entanglement, and the feeling sat uneasily.

Fiona's father came to retrieve us in his Vauxhall Cavalier, a hearteningly ordinary car for a banker. He pressed his greying beard to his daughter's cheeks, and his evident joy in seeing her extended itself to me. Belsize Park was a suburb near the Heath, blanched by row upon row of white villas. Theirs was semi-detached with a pebbled front garden and a raised ground floor.

"Mum, we're home!" Fiona cried as we stepped through the door.

From somewhere below came audible instructions to the cook, instructions that seemed prolonged, as if we were being made to wait. Then footsteps rose from the lower ground floor, and her mother appeared in a navy blue dress and pearls, her hair short and peppery. She accepted Fiona's kisses with hands hooked, like a mantis.

"You must be Peter," she said, flicking a smile, eyes darting.

"Pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Turner."

By way of welcome, she showed me the reception rooms. Both had a fireplace and a chandelier and dark scrolled furnishings. Then she led me up not one but two flights of stairs to the uppermost floor, where I was shown to my room, florid as a garden. Fiona made as if to speak, then thought better of it.

“I hope this will do.”

“Yes, of course. It’s lovely. Thank you very much.”

When we were alone, Fiona pressed her forehead to my shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s fine,” I said, thinking how in Stoke we would have to share a room, since there would be nowhere else to put her.

The dining room was downstairs, on the lower ground floor, an open space with two sliding glass doors and a large picture window, all of which looked out onto the garden. On my way in, I passed the cook finishing off in the kitchen, a woman of indeterminate middle age who greeted me warmly. The dining room table was long; I sat across from Fiona while her parents sat at either end. After raising our glasses, we started on the Sunday roast, and I wasn’t sure whether to speak or only speak when spoken to.

“This is lovely,” I finally ventured. “And you have a lovely home.”

“Do you know where the name ‘Belsize’ comes from?” Mr. Turner asked. “From the phrase *bel assis*. French for ‘beautifully situated.’”

“It is,” I said.

“This neighbourhood is nearly a thousand years old. Ethelred the Unready granted the manor of Hampstead in 986—”

“Dad.”

“—part of which later became the manor of Belsize. Richard Steele had a cottage on Haverstock Hill. Queen Victoria came out here for country drives.”

I was compelled to say, “I grew up on Gerrard Street in the building where John Dryden once lived,” then heard how strangely that sounded. But Mr. Turner just smiled.

“And how did you come to live on Gerrard Street?”

“Here we go,” Fiona said.

I flashed her a look to say it was fine. “My father moved to Chinatown when he came to London in the early sixties.” Dad had been a rice

farmer in the New Territories, squeezed out by the so-called “vegetable revolution,” and the only work he could find was in catering.

“I thought your parents lived in Stoke.”

“They do now. My mother worked in catering too, but they didn’t like working for others, so they scrimped and saved and started their own takeaway. But it wasn’t easy. They weren’t just competing against other Chinese but Indians, Italians, and Cypriots. Plus Sainsbury’s, Tesco, and M&S, which started making Chinese ready meals—”

“You have something in common with mum,” Fiona said happily. “She doesn’t like Tesco either.”

Mrs. Turner cleared her throat and stiffened, now that the spotlight was on her. “I’m part of a preservation society here in Belsize Park.”

“And they don’t want Tesco moving in,” Fiona said. “It wouldn’t be... consistent with the character of the neighbourhood.”

“It wouldn’t be,” her father said. “Next thing you know the streets will be full of lorries and car parks and we’ll go the way of American cities.”

Fiona smiled, as if she had goaded them. “Sorry, Peter. I interrupted you.”

“Where was I? Yes, too much competition, so my parents moved farther and farther from Gerrard Street. When I was nine, we moved to Birmingham, but even Brum was too crowded, so we moved to Stoke. If you’ve ever wondered why Chinese run takeaways in every lonely corner of the world...”

“So your parents met in London,” Mrs. Turner said, taking a different interest.

“Actually, no. After a year, dad went back to Hong Kong and married mum. But the funny thing is they could have met here.”

“How’s that?”

“My grandfather—mum’s dad—worked as a stoker on the Blue Funnel Line, which sailed from Hong Kong to Liverpool. During the war, he was part of the Merchant Navy. Helped to win the Battle of the Atlantic. He would have liked to stay after the war, but he was... repatriated.”

“Killed?”

“No, deported.”

After a silence, Mrs. Turner glanced at her husband and said, “Both our fathers served in the war.”

“Yes, of course,” I said.

At the end of the evening, I let Fiona and her mother catch up. After the pudding, Mr. Turner had excused himself and retired to his study, at which point the evening had entered a different phase, Mrs. Turner more relaxed somehow, maybe because the meal had come off.

Nonetheless, I lay in bed replaying the day, wondering how I'd done, if I'd said too much or too little. Eventually a knock came, and Fiona peered through the door. When she stepped in, I laughed. In Oxford, she lounged around in knickers and large off-the-shoulder T-shirts; here she wore a flannel nightgown, florid as the bedspread.

"Look, it's Laura Ashley."

She smiled ruefully, slipping into bed.

"How'd I do?"

"You were brilliant, darling."

"Was I?"

"Yes. Sometimes my parents need to... *see* themselves, you know?"

"I just hope they like me."

"They do, they do," she said, pressing her lips to mine, softly at first, then more ardently, with no intention of stopping.

"What about your parents?" I whispered.

At this, she sat astride me, crossed her arms, and pulled off her nightgown, tousling her hair in the process.

"Never mind my parents," she said.

By the time we awoke, we had the house to ourselves, her father off to work and her mother off to a meeting—the preservation society, perhaps. Today was our only full day before we would leave for Stoke.

"Let's go shopping," she said over breakfast.

"Didn't you want to show me the Heath?"

"I do. But let's go shopping first. I need to get gifts for my parents."

We got off the tube at Green Park, across from The Ritz, and walked alongside black cabs and buses to Old Bond Street, celestial with little white lights.

"It's pretty," I said.

"Have you ever seen Paris at Christmastime?"

"I've never been to Paris."

"Never?"

"I told you, we never went on **holiday**. But maybe you can show me."

She looped an arm through mine. "I'd like that, darling."

The day we left Oxford, Fiona had encouraged me to bring a dress shirt, a blazer, and my one decent overcoat. It was only now, browsing Valentino, Chanel, and Saint Laurent, that I understood why. Within a few shops, she bought a jumper for her father, offhandedly, as if he were easy to please. It was her mother she seemed concerned about.

When she still wasn't done by lunchtime, we stopped to eat. After lunch, Fiona ran into someone she knew, a fellow in tweed whose foppish hair fell in a perfect wave. He leaned down to offer his cheek, arms laden with bags. From what I could gather, he was a friend from public school and on break from Cambridge.

"Paul, this is Peter," Fiona said.

"Peter and Paul!" he said, extending a hand. "Where're Mark and Luke?"

We stood on the pavement, chatting. Paul was nothing if not pleasant, one of those people so undaunted by the world that he would never think to be anything but nice. What struck me, though, was how quickly Fiona fell in with him, how easily she too moved in the world. I had never quite seen it, or hadn't wanted to, and it made me feel cynical, the way my friends had been cynical when Fiona and I first got together.

Afterward, my feelings came out sideways. "You let go of my hand."

"Sorry?"

"You let go of my hand when you saw Paul."

"To say hello!"

"Was he your boyfriend?"

"Please. He never looked at me."

"But you wished he had."

Her eyes sharpened. "Now you're being ridiculous."

Fiona settled on something at the very next store, where purses were sparsely arrayed like artifacts in a museum. The purse she chose seemed plain save for a clasp in the shape of omega. Nonetheless, it cost £150. Sorry that I had nothing to show for myself, I bought the least expensive thing I could find, an umbrella, claiming it was for mum, though I knew she'd only be angry at the extravagance.

When I turned to leave, Fiona's eyes were raw and trembling.

"What's the matter?"

She left the store without answering, and I followed with a sense of dread. Outside, she said, "Did you see the shop girl?"

"What about her?"

"She was so rude! She didn't say a word to you!"

I pictured the girl: pencil skirt, blonde updo, cinched lips. I was so relieved that Fiona wasn't angry at me that my fear turned quickly to irritation. She knew that bricks had been thrown through our shopfront window in Stoke. That Ramesh and I had been chased through the streets routinely by boot boys and even boot girls, with their shaved heads and sidelocks. What was a buttoned-up shop girl next to all that?

I took Fiona in my arms. "Trust me, I've seen worse."

"You shouldn't have to."

It occurred to me that she could have spoken up in the shop, could have promptly returned the purse and vowed never to return, but I felt the surge of her breathing, the angry pulse of her love, and didn't say anything.

As soon as we got home, Fiona said, "Be a dear and say hello to mum. I've got to hide the presents."

I found Mrs. Turner at the dining room table, staring at the garden over a cup of tea, so deep in thought I almost backed away, afraid of disturbing her. But she sensed me, turned, and smiled.

"There you are, Peter. Come sit. Let me get you some tea."

On the table sat a teapot in a knitted cosy, but she rose to put on water, then came back to the table with a teacup and saucer.

"What did you get up to today?"

I didn't want to give Fiona away, so I said we went to lunch. "We ran into a friend of hers. Paul."

For some reason, Mrs. Turner pursed her lips. Until that moment, I hadn't seen much resemblance between mother and daughter, but suddenly I caught a glimpse of Fiona in the palimpsest of her mother's face.

"Fiona tells me you're reading accounting."

"Yes. To help my parents. Partly."

She paused, as if she'd run out of things to say, or as if she had plenty to say but couldn't decide where to start. "What was it like growing up? In catering, I mean."

Some of my earliest and fondest memories, I said, were of working alongside my parents, peeling shrimp and snapping bean sprouts until my fingertips were pruned, but as I got older, the work began to chafe. I wanted to do what other kids got to do: go to the cinema, go on holiday, muck about.

"One day when I was twelve or thirteen, I decided I'd had enough. I stayed upstairs and watched telly instead. But I couldn't enjoy it, not with mum and dad banging about downstairs. I could hear them rowing too, so I went back down just to keep the peace. In the end, it was easier to do my part. To be the kind of son they wanted."

Mrs. Turner absorbed this. "You haven't had it easy, have you?"

I was encouraged. We were getting somewhere, the way she was taking an interest, seeing other sides of me. "I suppose not. That's one reason Fiona and I get on," I said, thinking of her years in public school. "She hasn't had it easy, either."

Mrs. Turner reared back. "Don't listen to Fiona. She had a perfectly lovely childhood and only the best education."

Before I knew what to say, the kettle whistled, and Fiona came in crying, "Mummy!"

Fiona and I were going to dinner alone. "You don't want a couple of old fogeys tagging along," Mr. Turner said when he got home, and I took this for the gesture it was. As Fiona got ready, I waited in one of the reception rooms, perusing pictures of her at the awkward ages—glasses, braces, mushroom haircuts—which brought back snatches of a Larkin poem I'd read in grammar school: *Too much confectionery, too rich: / I choke on such nutritious images.*

Not surprisingly, Fiona chose a French restaurant, a *bouchon* in South Kensington with tightly packed wooden tables and walls full of copper pans and bric-a-brac. "I think you'll like *tête de veau*," she said over the menu. "Calf's head." She had pinned her hair in a barrette, which made her ears look elfin. By the wavering light of the votive, she looked thin-lipped and shy, and very much the person I wanted to be with.

The meal began with an entrée of three salads and ended with cheese and *pruneaux au vin*. Toward the end, Fiona said rather anxiously, "We only have two terms left." I sensed the subject she was trying to broach, one I'd been hoping to broach myself, even before she asked, "What are your plans afterward?"

"I'd love to move to London—"

"So would I," she said, and we looked at each other happily.

"What do you think you'll do?"

"The only thing one *can* do with French—become a governess."

I laughed. "I guess I don't have much choice either. And I'll still have to help my parents."

"Of course. You can do the books from anywhere."

"No, what I mean is, I'll still have to help in the shop."

She gave me that little mow of hers. She had never liked the fact that I went home once a month to help with the weekend rush.

"Even after you're working in London?"

"You'd be surprised how many Chinese leave London at the weekend to help in takeaways."

"Can't they hire someone?"

"They could. But they don't make much as it is."

She paused, measuring her words. "You'd make more than enough to hire someone yourself."

At that moment, I realized there were two kinds of people in the world: those for whom family meant leisure and those for whom family meant work.

"Remember, my parents don't speak English—"

Fiona kinked her brows. "They don't?"

Perhaps I'd kept this to myself. Nonetheless, her innocence vexed me. "Have you ever heard me speaking English on the phone?"

She scowled. "That's no reason to assume. They run a takeaway."

"They cope, yes. But people are always taking the piss out of them. That's why I'm at the front of the shop. And why I go home."

Fiona's eyes fell.

"Look," I said gently, "my parents never taught me how to cook. Never let me near the woks, even when I begged them. Trust me, they don't want that life for me. They just have to hang on for a few more years."

She considered, then shook her head at herself.

"Of course, darling. I'm sorry."

By the time we left the restaurant, rain and fog had descended. We hurried to the station hand in hand, to the wet sizzle of traffic, the world dark and shimmering.

After the cold and wet, their villa felt warm and inviting. Getting ready for bed, I thought of my parents, who would work late, then pop a tape into the video. It was what they lived for, it seemed, a little Chinese telly at the end of the night. Whenever their friends went back to Hong

Kong, my parents would ask them to tape the latest hit serial on TVB. Their favourite was *Seung Hoi Tan* or *The Bund*, about gangsters in 1920's Shanghai and starring a baby-faced Chow Yun-fat. I could picture dad sitting in his sweat-stained BVD, rubbing Tiger Balm into his shoulder until the whole place reeked of menthol. Suddenly I was sorry I had asked Fiona to come.

I went downstairs to say goodnight. A light was on in the study, but I ignored it, drawn by voices on the lower ground floor. Halfway down, I heard a voice rise and another rise to meet it. Instinct told me to turn around. Instead, I kept going, drawn by morbid curiosity. The door to the lower ground floor was closed. It wasn't until I was nearly outside that I heard Mrs. Turner say, "—even if it isn't Hampstead." Suddenly I was sure Mr. Turner would emerge from his study. I hurried back upstairs.

I lay in bed, heart skidding. It sounded like mother and daughter had been arguing about the past, the kind of life Fiona had had, but even then, I sensed it had to do with me.

In time, Fiona appeared. Without a word, she got into bed and held me.

"Everything all right?"

"Everything's fine. Why?" Without waiting for an answer, she said, "Let's get some sleep. I still want to show you the Heath in the morning."

I didn't press her, just glad to have her close. Whatever the tide, Fiona would protect me.

Mum and dad worked seven nights a week and served lunch every day except Tuesdays and Sundays. Today should have been a lie-in day, but they were getting up early to cook for Fiona. Our plan was to see the Heath, catch the midmorning train, and be in Stoke by noon.

We got up to trickling grey light. The need to whisper and tiptoe made the hour seem even earlier. On Haverstock Hill, bakeries and coffee shops were stirring, their windows burning brightly through the gloom. In one, a woman was wiping a table like someone out of Vermeer, and I wished we weren't in a hurry, that we could sit down and take in the morning. It was something of a strange errand, going to the Heath first thing, but Fiona had always loved the Heath and wanted me to see it.

After rounding the Free Hospital, we took Pond Street to South End Road, past a row of bookshops, charity shops, and chemists. Fiona was in a queer mood, not exactly distant but not exactly talkative either. It was

the peaceable but still-delicate air of people who'd made up after a row. Only we hadn't rowed.

When we came to the edge of the Heath, Fiona waved at the next street over. "We don't have time, but Keats House is just over there."

I'd read my share of Keats in grammar school. He wasn't my favourite—Larkin was—but I'd learned some things nonetheless. "When Keats fell in love with Fanny Brawne, her mother disapproved," I said, "but eventually she came round."

I thought Fiona would laugh. Instead she turned to me, stricken. Then she started up Parliament Hill, past red-bricked houses trimmed in white, and I followed doggedly, breath pluming. At the entrance to the Heath, pavement gave way to a footpath. Without stopping, she took the path through open fields, the grass still hoary with frost. Six months earlier, we'd gone walking in Christ Church Meadow, the spires of Oxford jutting in the distance. Cattle had lolled in the fields, their strange horns curled like pincers. Fiona and I had just been together for the first time, and highstepping through the meadow, we couldn't stop grinning. How long ago that seemed.

At last we came to the top of the hill, and there she was, the great city herself, downy with fog, which made us seem much higher than we were. As we sat on a bench catching our breaths, the hillside empty save for the two of us, I thought of all those since Ethelred the Unready who had conquered this view and all those who had yet to or never would, like my grandfather, who had been surprised to find a long-established Chinese community in Liverpool, seafarers, mostly, like him, some of whom had taken up with locals, poor English, Irish, and Welsh girls who then became a kind of scourge, even to their own families, and I knew that time was not a line or an arc but a sine, a wave, forever vacillating.

"You aren't coming to Stoke, are you?"

For a long moment, Fiona squinted fiercely into the distance. Then she pressed her forehead to my shoulder, and I felt ashamed that my first feeling was relief.

"And we'll never see Paris, will we?"

She wrapped her arms around me, the cold wedge of her nose buried in my neck, and I saw it all: the long walk back to the house, the longer train ride home, the baffled looks of my parents. And I knew how I would spend my last two terms: in orbit, far from the centre of town, or in a study carrel at the Bodleian, where despite the rules, the threat to the precious past, I would cup my tiny flame.

*Amanda Baker-Patterson*

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## 5-YEAR PLAN

In my new life I'll fold  
towels in a grown-up fashion, get rich  
with nutrients, learn  
all the spices and buy us  
a spice rack—no, build one. Be sage.  
I'll have all my jack-o-lanterns  
in a row. Visit Scotland  
and make the most of the moors. Won't wish  
for downpours but enjoy  
dry thunder, sitting on the veranda  
reading recommended books. Know every  
constellation and remember  
my myths, pronounce Greek  
names right and never  
be boring. I don't have a dog yet  
but he's out there somewhere.  
At night, in the stairwell,  
I can almost smell him.

## MEN IN THE GUT

Scrape the inside of sleep the belly wall  
tasting like yoghurt cooked broccoli  
its emptiness leaving something  
on the tongue. Escaping the body  
that wants to quit from the inside.  
It unlaces you all the tethers sliced  
away from this world. When I dream  
of this body ending of opening the germ  
of the pain and going I am on the side  
of the road. My hands hold out my stomach  
my second brain to the men who already want  
me to die. This failing organ with a ruby  
wound kissing the place it is so easy to be  
stabbed or shot. A punch to the gut I anticipate  
violence here one cell layer deep shallow  
spreading roots a memory system in my body.  
On the side of the road a drive-by for men  
homophobic in trucks swallowing spit.  
When I was a teenager I let them disembody me  
internalizing everything through the mouth and  
now my stomach wants it out. I am interested  
in self-diagnosis. When I dream it is of trees  
budding from my stomach that will shade  
this heating world and of all the wounded men  
who masculinity failed who will lay their Oilers  
caps on my wrists say *I'm sorry* and their fingers  
will touch and they won't be scared of it.

*Hannah Abigail Clarke*

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## CHERRY PIE

I regret to inform you that the valisprat skewered you even before you were born. It happened in a sterile room. Some nurse slicked your mother's abdomen, projected your blotchy amphibian likeness on a screen and said, what a little, lovely, precious baby girl! and your parents said, a girl! a girl! and everyone fell into a rapture. They had always wanted their very own darling girl, they said. They joked about buying a shotgun, because they prophesied how your adolescent beauty would lure hordes of rabid men panting to your bedroom window. It was like an incantation. The valisprat manifested fast. It bloomed like mold on the ceiling, became viscous and molasses-like and oozed down onto your mother's starchy sheets where it writhed, grew limbs and the twist of a mouth. Your mother was so happy. She failed to feel it crawling closer, and how it licked all the gel off her womb.

It rattled the bars of your crib every night. It whispered and touched your soft head. It chanted mantras that you would memorize, mimicked the voices of your father and the television screen. It said that you liked *Snow White* and *Grease*. It said you wanted a veil that swept behind you

forever like Princess Diana's. It said you wanted knee socks and a nice blue dress. It taught you to love meanness, told you it was good if someone grabbed a fistful of your hair and yanked, was good if you were torn from a swing, was good and indicative of a pure and deep affection. It said you should boil in Coca-Cola. You should become a cherry pie.

It clung to your shoulders when you learned how to walk. At first you did not notice how the valisprat had hooks for hands. Recall how you asked a fellow Girl Scout to marry you when you were six, how you kissed her on the knuckles in your garden. Your parents saw this. They sent your fiancée home, never to return. They dragged you sobbing by the elbows to your bedroom and said, what a vile thing for a little girl to do, how inappropriate, how unclean. The valisprat drooled. It slipped its hooks between the notches of your spine and thrashed you for hours, howling, snapping at the lobe of your ear. WHAT A VILE THING, said the valisprat, WHAT A VILE THING I HAVE WHAT VILE WHAT A VILENESS HAVE I IN YOU.

It goes on like that. It is habitual, and consistent.

So you grow up nervous and crook-backed from carrying this valisprat around. You acclimate to the hooks, develop a sort of numbness. By the time you make it through adolescence, you have accepted the valisprat as an extra sort of limb, a scaly part of your body that is unworthy of remark. It is the half-angel/half-albatross invertebrate that bites you and lives on your body. It is not special.

But then it is, because you read that book, or watched that film, or saw the girl across that lecture hall and felt your ribs expand. You denied it and then you couldn't deny it. You buried yourself in a weird and previously unexplored section of the library, and you lurked on niche forums and cried in your bedroom and found new humour in music and laughed so hard that you nearly cracked your sternum wide. You told your parents. You stopped talking to your parents. You met some friends in a classics class and moved in with them, and now everyone there lies on the floor and feels the Earth move together. You dress significantly better, or perhaps much worse. You forego eating meat. You chop your hair and your nails. You drink more, maybe. You embrace an all-consuming explosion of technicolor pride.

That thing on your back is a monster. It is not you. It is something else.

You figure out how to talk to girls.

She wears your sweaters to the lecture hall now.

You watch her leave for class. You are hungover, wearing torn denim, and feeling insurmountably happy. You rub the skin on your neck where she touched you. You snag the edge of a claw.

A housemate finds you in the throes of a death match. The valisprat has fit its jaws around your stomach and you thrash and kick so it squeezes harder. Its teeth are longer than your femurs. It has punctured you twenty times through. You bash your fists against its mold-pink skull and you sob so hard your lungs pop. It clings tighter. Your capillaries burst. Your friend scoops you off the floor and drops you in the bathtub, and the water is scalding and loosens the valisprat's grip, but it's not fucking over. Your friend sits on the sink and sings Elton John and you regain control of your organs, but the valisprat keeps watching. It floats heavy in the bubbles by your ankles.

You never mention it to her. You never mention it to your housemate and he has the grace not to remind you. You scarcely mention it to yourself, for shame of recognizing that the valisprat exists at all. You are not a monster. She is not a monster. Why should monsters exist?

You watch her pull your sweater on in the morning. The valisprat drags its fingers through your hair. It coos, YOU SHOULDN'T BE WATCHING HER YOU VILE LITTLE THING AND YOU'RE JUST LIKE ME UNSALVAGEABLE JUST LIKE ME HAVE YOU TRIED BEING LESS OF A PREDATOR HAVE YOU TRIED THAT YET? IF YOU LOVE HER YOU WOULD NEVER LOOK AT HER YOU WOULD KEEP YOUR CROCODILE EYES OFF HER SHOULDERS AND BE LESS VILE. WHEN SHE LEAVES YOU WE WILL SCRAPE YOU OUT OF YOU AND PLACE YOU IN A NICE BLUE DRESS NOT A SLUTTY BLUE DRESS A NICE BLUE DRESS. WE WILL FIND A MAN WHO WILL HAVE SEX WITH YOU AND YOU WILL ENJOY YOURSELF OR ELSE YOU WILL BE VILE AND YOU WILL HAVE CHILDREN THAT YOU WILL LEARN TO WANT OR YOU WILL BE VILE AND YOU WILL BE GOOD AND HURT NO ONE. YOU WILL EAT HAMBURGERS AND CHERRY PIE IN A NICE BLUE DRESS WITHOUT YOUR VILE CROCODILE EYES ON LOVELY SHOULDERS AND YOU WILL BE GOOD. YOU WILL NEVER BE GOOD. YOU WILL ALWAYS BE VILE.

The valisprat has this trick. It speaks only venom, because it knows that you would never repeat that venom. You recognize it as venom. You love your housemates. You love her. You are trying to love yourself. You

would never repeat the ravings of the valisprat, because it would come across as satire, or else a gesture of violence. You are not violent. Your insistent lack of violence is your primary form of resistance.

You suffer the yoke.

Listen: this is not just about you. This is a fungal sort of demon. Its rotten touch reaches further than the eye can see. Your valisprat is one apple on a tree that is centuries wide. It is and is not unique. It is only one fruit, after all. The tree from which it sprung has been nourished by radio waves and holy folk and hospitals and your grandfather. It has roots and precedence that coil underground and puncture the foundations of nearly every building in town. So, say you kill your valisprat. Say you have this grand victory. Would you be liberated? Your housemates retain their own incarnations of the valisprat. Lighter, perhaps, or far heavier than your own. You wouldn't know that, because you're too ashamed to broach the subject.

Stop. You are retreating into yourself.

I need you to stay with me.

The valisprat has been with you since always. You have never not been haunted. I know. I know. The more you recognize it, the less you can deny its interference with your everyday life. I just need you to understand that this is a tree metaphor, not a hydra metaphor. Healing yourself first isn't useless, or counter-productive. It just can't be the end. Audre Lorde had the right idea.

So you've got to gather all your kind for a cleanse. Spin a ritual. Cast a spell to free yourselves from the toils of current circumstances. Stop blaming yourself for the times. They aren't your fault. Tell yourself and then the mirror and then your lover and then your housemates all the truth. Tell them that you need them and that you need this. Wave off cynicism. Insist. Perform it twice or perform it backwards. Perform it with every friend you meet. Rewrite it when the time comes. Just know now that it's yours.

With love and fire, just like this:

1. Build an altar in your living room. Use a rainbow gown for the cloth and place upon it emblems of truth: that book, and that film, and the sweater your girlfriend keeps stealing.
2. Take a picture of yourself, and a picture of your household. Place the pictures on the altar, even if that means leaving your phone with your sweater. Hold proof of your own existence. Consider yourself worthy of art.

3. Burn something. Don't be an idiot about it but burn something. Candles work. Printed out retro posters for *Grease* work better.
4. Pour glasses of cold water, one for each housemate. Drink them in one go.
5. Clutch the hands of the gays on either side of you. The valisprat buries its hooks muscle deep, sometimes deep enough to puncture bones. Hold on tight.
6. Chant this mantra to replace the old: how vast and spiralled and strange I am. How human, how ridiculous. I am a prism and a flock of geese. I bleed and breathe and am flush with life, as life does, and I am whole and without tarnish. I am more red honey than I am red penny. I am beyond the stretch of words.
7. Say this until your vision fuzzes, then twice more.
8. Recognize the silhouettes above your heads. Watch the fumes of the valisprats as they buck and twist and sizzle. Watch the snapping of maws and split flopping tongues. Squeeze the hands a little tighter. Be alright when your T-shirt shreds.
9. Say, I banish self-loathing from these bodies. Say, I banish archangels and dead albatrosses. Say, I banish all meathooks from the small of my back.
10. Say, Baby, you're beautiful. You're so fucking beautiful. Say, Baby, you're like the dawning sun.

*Lida Nosrati*

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## ON TOPOGRAPHY

They say one forgets dreams because of the absence of a hormone  
in the cerebral cortex

I say I would have dreamed of an ordinary tree  
standing un-tall in the backyard  
delaying the kindly descent of its leaves  
in total disregard of promise

I say I would have dreamed of salt crystals waiting to hold the snow one  
last time

of a notebook acutely aware of the economy of scarcity

of all the ways of saying your name in February

of how type three conditional (“an unreal past condition and its probable result in the past”) almost always confuses me—and let me be clear that this has nothing to do with English being my second language; it confuses me in my mother tongue too. Speaking of which, did you know how ashamed I am of not being able to form even a simple sentence in your mother tongue and how the shame deepens every year on the day that marks mothers and the tongues they speak?

I say I would have dreamed of a father who keeps tabs of sunrises  
in more than one city

I say I would have dreamed of a birthday without guests

Truth is, I dreamed of flying over a city known as *Nesf-e Jahan*

Truth is, I never made it to half the world  
or its most important river  
before it completely dried out

Truth is, this was the first flying dream I had

The first I didn't disremember

## CONTRIBUTORS

**Amanda Baker-Patterson** is an award-winning and Pushcart Prize-nominated Canadian poet living in Seattle. Her writing has appeared or is forthcoming in *The New Quarterly*, *Contemporary Verse 2*, *Grain*, *Arc Poetry Magazine*, *Soundings Review*, and *PageBoy*. “5-Year Plan” is dedicated to her husband, Josh, and their dog, Ruby June.

**Billy-Ray Belcourt** is from the Driftpile Cree Nation and lives in Edmonton, AB. His debut collection of poems, *This Wound is a World* (Frontenac 2017), won the 2018 Canadian Griffin Poetry Prize. His next book, *NDN Coping Mechanisms* (House of Anansi Press), is due out in the fall of 2019.

**Jan Guenther Braun** lives in Toronto and is the author of *Somewhere Else*. She has previously published poems in *Rhubarb Magazine* and on the inside of unsuspecting cases of beer while working on the line at Great Western Brewing.

**Gregory Brown** is a graduate of UNC-Greensboro’s MFA program in Creative Writing and Memorial University’s MA in English. His writing has appeared in *Paragon*, *Postscript*, *Pulp Literature*, *Tate Street*, and elsewhere. He teaches at the University of Virginia’s Young Writers Workshop and the Creative Writing for Children Society in Vancouver.

**Jenny Mary Brown**’s work has been in *Tipton Poetry Journal*, *Berkeley Poetry Review*, *Sugar House*, and *DIAGRAM*, among others. Jenny lives in California and teaches at College of the Redwoods and Humboldt State University. She attempts to play piano, autoharp, and accordion.

**Michelle Poirier Brown** is a Cree poet, performer, and homilist living in Victoria, BC. Her creative nonfiction “The House on Strathnaver Avenue” appeared in *The Fieldstone Review* (2017). “Dialogue as Seditious Act” will appear in the anthology *Dis(s)ent* in 2018.

**Vanessa Carlisle**, PhD, is a writer, podcaster, activist and educator in Los Angeles, California. Her work centers on LGBTQ and sex worker characters. Her fiction and nonfiction have appeared in both literary and trade magazines, and her first novel is called *A Crack in Everything*. Find out more at [vanessacarlisle.com](http://vanessacarlisle.com).

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**MA|DE** is a collaborative writing partnership comprised of interdisciplinary artist Mark Laliberte, author of *asemanticasymmetry* (Anstruther 2017) and writer Jade Wallace, author of *Rituals of Parsing* (Anstruther 2018). MA|DE is based in Toronto, Ontario and are currently working on their first full-length collection of poetry.

**Elizabeth Mitchell** is from southeast Michigan in the United States. Her writing has appeared in several journals including *Blue Heron Review* and *Mobius: The Journal of Social Change*. She builds websites for nonprofits and tutors girls for a living.

**Keneilwe Mokoena** is a Johannesburg-based visual artist and curator. Mokoena is a Fine Art graduate from Tshwane University of Technology. She received the 2015 Reinhold Cassirer Award and completed a residency at the Bag Factory Studios in Fordsburg, South Africa. Mokoena is currently a participant in the Talent Unlocked Mentorship Programme with Assemblage Studios and the Visual Art Network of South Africa (VANSA).

**Sachiko Murakami** is the author of three collections of poetry, most recently *Get Me Out of Here* (Talonbooks 2015). She teaches, edits, and writes in Toronto.

**Lindsay Nixon** is a Cree-Métis-Saulteaux curator, award-nominated editor, award-nominated writer and McGill Art History Ph.D. student. They currently hold the position of Editor-at-Large for *Canadian Art*. Their forthcoming memoir, *nîtisânak*, is to be released in September 2018 through Metonymy Press.

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**Lida Nosrati** is a literary translator whose poems and translations of contemporary Iranian poetry and short fiction have appeared in *The Capilano Review*, *The Apostles Review*, *Words Without Borders*, *Anomaly* and *Lunch Ticket*, among others. She works as a legal worker in Toronto.

**Spencer Lucas Oakes** is a Canadian writer. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Emerge*, *Daily Hive*, *Shirley Magazine*, *Occulum Journal*, *Soft Cartel*, and elsewhere. Along with the Vancouver Whitecaps, he created and edited *MAJOR Magazine*. He is currently enrolled in Simon Fraser University's 2018 Writer's Studio.

**Jason Purcell** is a writer living on Treaty 6 territory (Edmonton, Alberta). He is co-editor of *Ten Canadian Writers in Context* (University of Alberta Press 2016). His poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Contemporary Verse 2*, *Poetry is Dead*, and *Glass Buffalo*.

**Trish Salah** lives and writes in Toronto and teaches Gender Studies at Queen's University, Kingston. Her books are *Wanting in Arabic* and *Lyric Sexology, Vol. 1*. She has new writing in *Action-Spectacle*, *Angelaki*, *Anomaly* and the collections *Women of Resistance* and, *Meanwhile Elsewhere: Science Fiction and Fantasy from Transgender Writers*.

**jaye simpson** is an Oji-Cree trans femme two spirit writer, performer, and villain living on what is colonially known as Vancouver. they enjoy disrupting white narratives and challenging such colonial workings within the world of CanLit.

**Matthew Stepanic** is the editor of *Glass Buffalo* and poetry editor of *Eighteen Bridges*. He is a co-author of the collaborative novel, *Project Compass* (Monto Books, 2017), and the author of *Relying on that Body* (Glass Buffalo Publishing, 2018), a chapbook of poems about RuPaul's *Drag Race*.

**Sanchari Sur** is a 2018 Lambda Literary Fellow, PhD candidate in English at Wilfrid Laurier University, and the curator/co-founder of Balderdash Reading Series. Her work can be found in *Matrix*, *The Unpublished City* (Toronto: BookThug, 2017), *Arc Poetry Magazine*, *Humber Literary Review*, and *Room*. She (temporarily) resides in Mississauga.

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**Sara Tilley**'s work bridges writing, theatre, and Pochinko clown. She's published two award-winning novels: *Skin Room* (Pedlar Press, 2008), and *DUKE*, (Pedlar Press, 2015), and written/co-created twelve plays. She was Artistic Director of feminist theatre company, She Said Yes!, 2002–2016. Sara lives in St. John's, NL.

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**Jack Wang** was longlisted for the 2017 Journey Prize and shortlisted for the 2014 Commonwealth Short Story Prize. He was the 2014-15 David T.K. Wong Creative Writing Fellow at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, England and teaches writing at Ithaca College in Ithaca, New York.

**Tessa Yang** received her MFA from Indiana University where she served as the Editor of *Indiana Review*. Her fiction has appeared in journals including *Joyland*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, and *The Cossack Review*. Tessa teaches at Earlham College in Indiana, and you can find her tweeting about writing and sharks @ThePtessadactyl.

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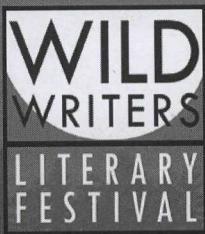
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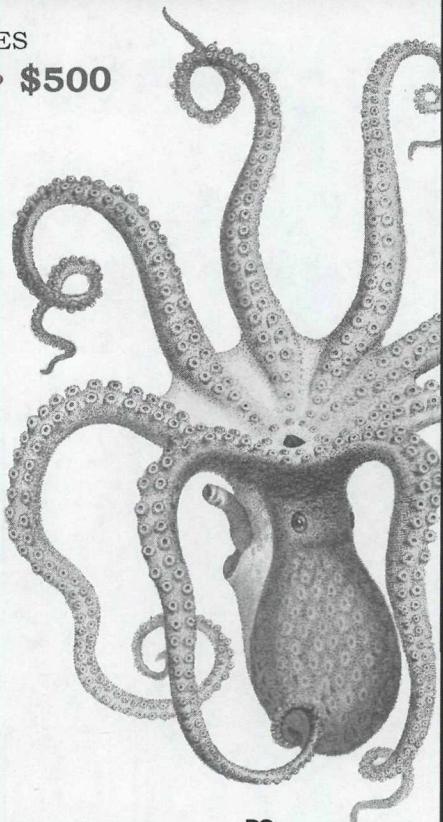
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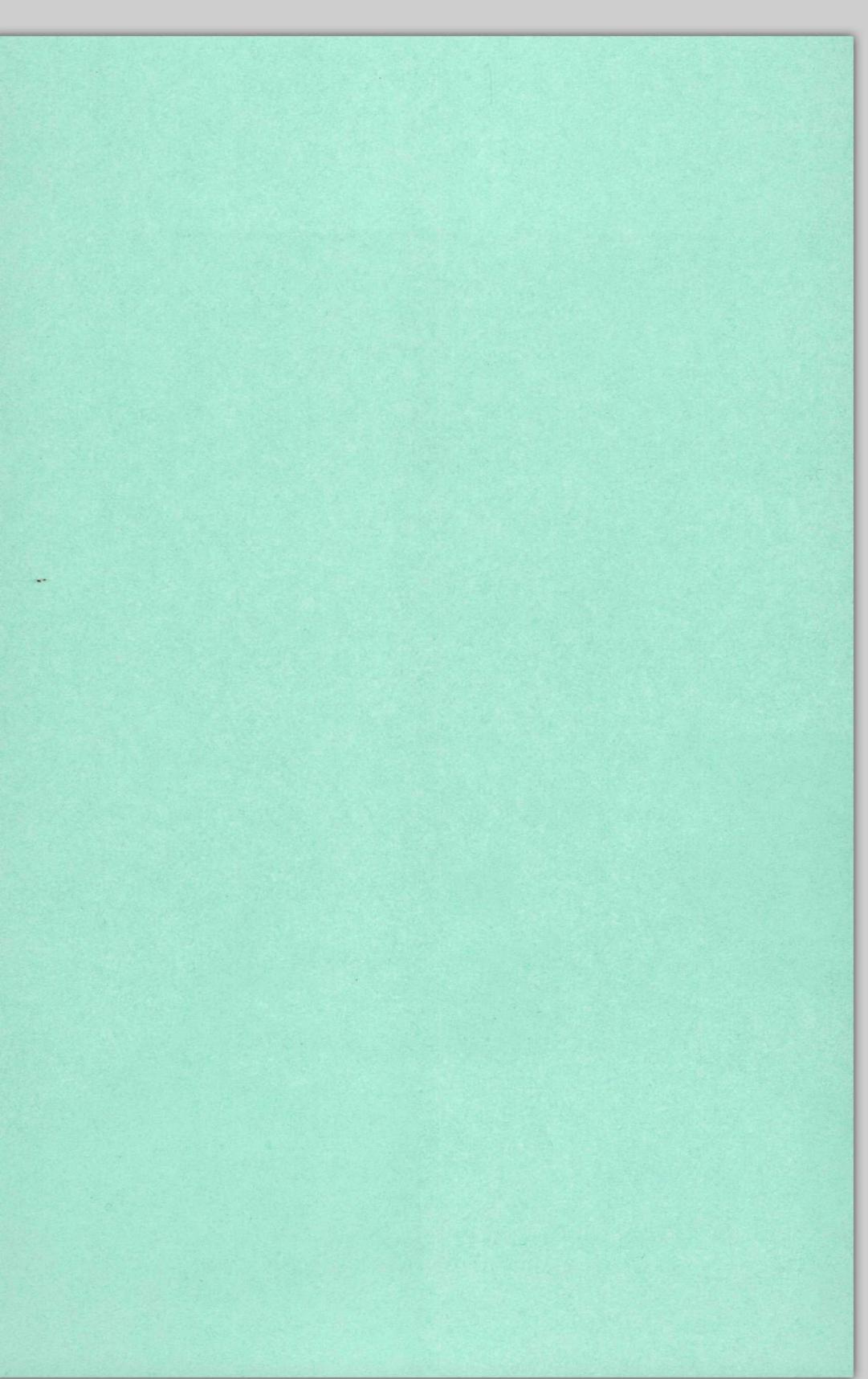


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“You dream of more, always keep  
a jam wedged, stare at a thing that  
isn’t there. An exit door is

an open lung.”

—*MA|DE, “A Bad Dream Bent Ends Wet”*



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