# PRISM
international

WINTER 2019

# PRISM international

## CREATIVE NON-FICTION CONTEST

### GRAND PRIZE

"How to Dig a Ditch" by Antonia Crane

### FIRST RUNNER-UP

"It Wasn't Weakness" by Emily Casali

### SECOND RUNNER-UP

"Feral" by Kat Savino

### JUDGE

Jonathan Kemp

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a place of mind
THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

CREATIVE WRITING PROGRAM

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*Jonathan Kemp*

# VOICE

The key to good story-telling, whether fiction or non-fiction is in my opinion, voice. But what do I mean by voice? For me, voice is an holistic entity or overall effect irreducible to an isolable constituent part such as "character," or "style," or "point of view." It is non-simplifiable, and it is textured. Part of that texture is word choice, or (for want of a better term) prose style: syntax, sentence structure, rhythm and rhyme; but it is also, and importantly, visual. What is seen should be as important as how what is seen is described to the reader; both are crucial to a sense of the character or personality of the narrator, regardless of point of view. The voice sees. And the voice says.

The confessional tends to favour first person, but good memoir writers possess the surgical eye of the novelist, selecting the telling details that are always more than a sum of their parts. In these three winning stories we find ample evidence of sharp-eyed, candid, and distinctive voices. Voices that speak of what they know, feel, have lived through. As Samuel R. Delany states, "a first person narrator is a witness to something—and it demands that the character saw something that most people haven't seen, and can tell about it clearly and with some insight, simply from having been there." Each of these three narrators takes us into their unfamiliar world, their exceptional life, and imparts the wisdom found there. In "How to Dig a Ditch," a sex worker/film-maker offers a candid and poetic take on the oldest profession, using language and pace to hit where it hurts. In "It Wasn't Weakness," third person narration recounts a childhood incident with arctic clarity and makes it shine with a profound resonance. In "Feral," grief, a familiar enough subject of memoir, is given fresh new valence in these snapshots from a wounded life. All three pieces explore the experiences, the subjectivities, of young women/girls, and they feel urgent and necessary in our current climate. These are voices demanding to be heard.

The voice is also structural. Where to begin, where to end, and every stage in between. Each of the three winners navigates various time frames skillfully enough for these gathered moments, laid out in this order, to offer us memorable insights and an eloquent range of feelings and events. Each of these winning pieces is a powerful and original voice.

*Faith Arkorful*

# I FORGOT MY REAL NAME DECADES AGO

and so I said my name was diaspora.
I said my name and somewhere, god kissed their teeth.

I'm still alive, after all. Even when I don't want to be.
Even when the body says no. I would do almost anything

to know the language of my father. I owe him.
He pulled me out of the ground like a dead root.

Used his last sober breath on the promise
of a sky he could swipe his fingers across but never own.

The moon orbits the earth and I become a fearful creature.
What are you? Night, forgiving. How did you become so?

I tried to dance on an invisible line. I tried to kill the border
and now god is laughing. It is an unfinished sound

like the splash of a black man who jumps off the deep
end of a pool and never resurfaces. I am a girl, maybe

who betrayed her own empire for a handful of promises:

Black people alive. Black people not the night.
Black people not the border. Black people

who know my name. Black people.
I want to open up. I might be aflame but I'm still alive.

I prefer to call the silence here not peace, not
polite but a crime. To live in this quiet country

is to be the anxious river my father tried to prevent.
I have had opportunity and trauma knotted

together and presented as a gift.
I'll burn my fingers and send a message to the sun.

This time, facing revival or survival
I'll awake knowing the language of ascension.

*Chee Brossy*

# MOVIN' IT

The plants were something different. She was going to give them to the medicine man as down payment. As long as I'd known her, Rhonda had never gone to get plants for a ceremony. Ashkee had just got back from the war and Rhonda wanted to have a sing. When she told me where she was going with the plastic bag I said, "Do you even know what you're doing?"

I was in my sweats boiling some tea when Rhonda came in and sat at the kitchen table. She was breathing hard. Green and yellow plants stuck out of the top of her plastic bag and a stick poked through the bottom. She put her elbows on the table and touched her forehead. She had her sleeves rolled up the way she did when she was working.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" I asked. I was feeling sorry for what I said before. I knew she was annoyed at me with her hand on her forehead.

"I'm fine," she said, waving her hand. But it was a little too slow. Like for show. Maybe she was playing.

"Did you see a coyote? I think I saw a coyote." I smiled. I couldn't help it. "Because I didn't see that skin hanging in the shed. I figured you put it on to go hunting. Better to sniff out those herbs." I giggled—it was my old joke. I could already feel her turning to me all disgusted, then she would get that twinkle in her eye, poke me in the ribs, shoo me away and say, "You're just the worst. *You're* the coyote. You old Coyote Man."

But she didn't say anything. The corners of her mouth were shaky. She touched her forehead again and said, "I don't feel right."

"Too much Kool-Aid?" I wanted one more funny moment. Just one more. But my heart was already beating fast. "Because sometimes that means too much sugar. Or is it not enough? I forget."

Rhonda closed her eyes and tipped sideways. My feet slipped but I had just enough to catch her shoulder with my chest before she hit the floor.

When Ashkee came back I drove to Albuquerque to pick him up. I was so nervous and happy at the same time. Finally I saw him come through the revolving doors. He was wearing his uniform with the yellow buttons and the braided rope under his arm. I felt like my legs wouldn't hold me

up so I went over and hugged him. Knocked off his beret and my own cowboy hat. I just said, "Sonny boy," over and over again. His crew cut was prickly against my cheek. Then I got embarrassed and stepped back. He said, "Where's Mom?"

She hadn't been so well. She said she wanted to stay home and get things ready, get his room ready, but I knew she should've come with me.

Ashkee joined up two days before the Twin Towers. Two days! He signed up in Gallup at the mall where they had their offices in a row across from the Waldenbooks. Army, Navy, Marines. The morning of September 12 we heard three hard knocks at the door just as the dogs started to bark. That was it. The recruiter popped right out of the air in his green uniform. He took off his cap as he stepped in. Ashkee wasn't supposed to leave for another week. "But these are special circumstances." That was what the recruiter said. But he didn't need to worry. Ashkee had stayed up all night watching TV. The plane going through over and over again, exploding out the other side. Seemed like he grew overnight.

"Bad luck, huh, Dad?" he said to me in the morning. But it was like he was buzzing, his eyes bright, ready to go. The way I'd been.

I didn't sleep either. It wasn't the TV but that worry that climbs into your throat that kept me up, that dread. I told him not to do it, not to sign up, no no no. I don't ever get like that but I had a bad feeling. And then the towers and it was starting to feel like last time, the way everyone's talking about war. You could feel it in the way the newspeople said "tragedy" and "evil," the way they frowned and glared.

Rhonda was angry with me for a long time after Ashkee left.

She knocked the dishes around. "Do you want him to end up like you?" she said.

I could tell she was sorry the way she looked away. But it still hurt. We didn't talk for a while.

When Ashkee came back he was quiet. It wasn't the first one but the second tour that changed him. It was that quiet mad-sad, sad-mad. He didn't play with his dogs which had been his pride when he was in school. Didn't even feed them. At first they sniffed him and wagged their tails—they were sure he loved them even though it had been three years. His face was sharper and there was a line between his eyebrows always there. Before it used to only show up when he was concentrating, playing basketball. Pretty soon the dogs wised up. They didn't run up to him in the yard anymore, didn't wag

their tails. They just lifted their heads the way they did when any old body opened the door.

He was quiet in his arms and legs, too, the way he hardly moved. Even when he was walking his top half was still. But under that was tension, like when you lasso a cow and it's trying to get away. The rope is stretched as far as it can go, almost about to break. The Army counselor came to our house in his slacks and said Ashkee would need some time to "decompress" and "ease back into civilian life." Ashkee was sitting there the whole time but the counselor just talked to us.

I got Ashkee a job at the company fixing wires, telling him he could work his way up like I did. But the second week he got in a fight with Maurice's nephew. Maurice had been at the company as long as me. I got there when the boys were trying to pull Ashkee off. "Geez, buddy, you gotta do something." Maurice was breathing hard. "He's gonna tear the whole place up." I pushed Mo out of the way to get to my sonny boy. Took four of us to pull him off. His face was red and his eyes were like a wild animal. All they know is fight. All they know is kill. Scared me. Worse than the haircut or the uniform, or the one-word answers, or the time he called me "Sir." I didn't recognize my own son. My own Ashkee.

He beat up the nephew pretty bad, busted his nose and knocked out one of his teeth. I asked management to go easy. My hat in my hand I told them Ashkee was provoked, Maurice's nephew was a no-good, lazy kid who beat his girlfriend, everybody knew that. But they wouldn't listen. "You know we like you, Will," they said. "But policy is policy. Can't be fighting in here."

The one thing Ashkee took care of was his hair. He kept it real short. He could do it himself with a clipper, the only thing he'd bought since coming back. He asked me specifically to stop at Wal-Mart on our way home from Albuquerque. It made him like a weapon. No other way to say it. He was sharp. Just one touch from him might cut you, draw your blood the way a knife opens your finger before you even feel it.

One day he told me, "I can't live here anymore."

We were feeding the horses. He'd grabbed a hay bale but just stood there, then dropped it. I threw mine over the corral where it busted open, spraying the fresh green hay on the ground. I could've opened the gate but I liked doing it this way to know I still could.

"It's like I'm living someone else's life. The bedroom, the dogs. Those Metallica posters. I don't know whose they are. Some little boy. Some stupid boy."

"But they're yours," I said. "All of it." But I knew what he was talking about.

"I need to move."

"Where?"

The two horses came over and started to eat, swishing their tails.

"Phoenix. We got relatives there."

I waited for him to say more—he hardly ever talked. The horses blinked their long eyelashes, listening. But he didn't say anything else.

I didn't trust those cousins who grew up in Phoenix.

"That's the worst idea ever," Rhonda said when I told her that night. We were in bed with the lights already out. "He needs a ceremony is what he needs."

She rolled away from me, then rolled back.

"You keep him here, Willis," she said. "That's *your* job. You keep him here." She rolled away again.

In the middle of the night, something woke us up. A door closing or a horse whinny or the wind or something. Rhonda went to the window and said, "Willis...Willis—" her voice getting high.

I kicked off the covers, ran down the stairs and busted out the front door. Too late. Still I jumped down the steps until I was on the dirt. I stood there watching the Pontiac's red lights as he turned onto the dirt road. I breathed in to shout his name but I couldn't. He didn't have headlights on but you could see the car with the moon. The windows glinted when he turned onto the highway and the engine went through the gears. He was going west.

Rhonda came down next to me. "Jesus, where are his lights?" she whispered.

The dogs started howling. Away towards the mountains the coyotes joined in, yipping and howling at us. It was too dark but I could see them in my mind, sitting in a group, taking turns to point their mouths at the sky.

The doctor said it was cancer, which was what we were both worried about, but it was a blood cancer, which is something you never think of. We hid the fall in the kitchen from Ashkee. The cancer was in her veins. We should have told him, that might've kept him around, worried for her.

Usually it took six hours to drive to Phoenix, but this time it took all day and into night. Rhonda was sick and we had to stop every half hour. It scared me to see her dry heaving on the side of the road.

She was tired from the first treatment. "All those needles," she said. "Like I'm a pincushion. Pretty soon I'll look like one of those fish with the spikes, the ones that blow up." She looked at me. "What do you call them? Puffers? Blowers?"

But I stared straight ahead at the San Francisco Peaks. There was snow at the top even now at the end of summer.

"Gah-lee, you're so serious!" She shook her head and turned to look out her window.

Maybe I was mad that she was sick. That she was making me feel scared. She was putting this whole operation to find Ashkee in danger. I couldn't even think about what might happen without getting queasy and sweaty. So I swallowed and didn't answer her.

*This was the same route Ashkee would've took, along 66 until Flagstaff* where we turned south into hills covered in ponderosas, then over the Mogollon Rim.

We found the cousins in their apartment complex. The oldest one answered the door. He was wearing a tank top and had a tear tattooed at the corner of his eye. "He ain't here no more," he said. He said Ashkee'd only crashed with them for a couple days then moved on, saying that he knew some people. They were Irma's sons but I didn't trust them. "I tried to buy his car cuz I could tell he needed money, but he took it and drove out. Sorry I can't help you, Grandpa." He rubbed his cheek. "I'll tell you though, he's been somewhere. Got weird and jumpy, always wanting to start a fight. I had to *let him go, you know. Can't have that shit around good people, excuse me.*"

People were whispering that he was holed up in this dim apartment or that low house. We checked the homeless shelters. We checked the streets from Sunnyslope to Bell Road where people stood on street corners, leaned against alley walls, sat on benches at the bus stops. There were all kinds: whites, blacks, Hispanics, women with crazy hair, boys Ashkee's age with camo pants and dogs on leashes. And there were lots of Indians, lots of Navajos. We looked and looked.

"We'll find him," Rhonda kept saying. "He's just around the corner, I know it."

But he wasn't.

After Phoenix she was tired all the time, like someone had flipped a switch. And no word from Ashkee.

"You keep looking for him," she told me.

"Don't talk like that," I said. We were on the couch. We bought the couch because she liked the flowers. When she sat down on it in the store she had smiled up at me. I'd been grumpy for some reason. "As usual," the way she liked to say. She smiled that way she had that made me feel lucky, her cheeks bright as a girl's, and she said, "This one. I want this one." Then she patted the seat next to her.

It took so much for her to sit up. She was losing her color.

"You need him as much as he needs you," she said. She had to concentrate on her breath and couldn't say too much before taking air.

"Have some tea," I said.

She brought the mug to her lips but didn't drink. Instead she squeezed her eyes shut and held her breath.

Irma came to help. She would wash Rhonda because I just couldn't do it. She was crumbling. Her skin was going white in front of my eyes.

She laughed at me. "You always were a softie, boy. Right from the start, you old soldier boy. Come here."

I got into the bed and hugged her with my face on her chest. Her robe was still damp and she smelled like soap. I wanted her real smell, her sweat and skin.

She put her hands in my hair and said, "But you'd better get strong. There's work to be done yet."

I sat on the couch staring at the dark TV. There was just sports and more sports. Talking about the NBA Finals, flashing their bright teeth. Before that was the shopping network selling watches. Before that was the Mexican telly-novelas with the people running around breathless. Talk talk talk. Like they had too much breath, like they had to use it all up, every last drop.

I had on my good shirt. The sun was coming in the west window onto the carpet. I leaned over and pulled on my good boots. It felt like just yesterday she was getting after me for wearing them to work, the ones she bought for me with the flowers on the sides. I sat back on the couch, listening to the old clock tick. Under the clock was a picture of us, all three. Rhonda was sitting on a chair wearing a velvet shirt and turquoise necklace and her big glasses. She always had these big glasses. They only came off in the bedroom, the very last thing to come off. The photographer asked her to take them off. She said, "How will I know where I'm looking?" I stood behind her, my left hand tucked behind me, my right hand on Rhonda's shoulder, I did it without even him asking.

I sat looking at myself in the TV screen until the 5:30 chime. So happy and bright, so strange now that it was just me. "K'ad," I said and slapped my thighs. Enough. Let's go.

At the door I was going to put on my old hat with the hole in it but I stopped. What the hell. I picked the good Stetson instead. Might as well match.

Raven, Busky, and Leechai stretched and yawned when I came out. Nothing grew on the south side where they dragged their chains all over and scraped the ground bald. Ashkee got them when they were puppies. Now they were strong and vicious-looking and I had to remind myself they knew me, they weren't sheepkillers. Still, turned out one of them was. A few months before Ashkee left for the Army, we found the neighbor's sheep with its throat ripped out on the dirt road to the highway. Fox was the prettiest one. She had a shiny coat and big lion-paws. She had gotten the blood all over her face. We always chained the dogs up after that. Like junkyard dogs. I was the one who whistled Fox into the pickup and drove away to make sure the job was done. Ashkee couldn't do it. "Not my favorite," he said. She sat in the passenger seat like nothing had happened, like a person, looking out the windshield. I never let a dog sit in my truck after that.

I walked to the corral and rested my arm on the top log. The roan and the black one snorted and nodded their heads at me. "See you," I said. They perked their ears forward. I opened my truck's creaky door and ducked in, on my way to the chapter house.

The drive to the chapter house is real pretty. It's at the bottom of the Lukachukai Mountains. There's sagebrush fields and creeks and washes that come down. There used to be a lot of hogans. Now it's houses and trailers. When I came back from Nam there was a big black road all the way through. Before that it used to get muddy all the way through there in springtime when it melted. So much you couldn't drive through. Just horses. Or walking.

The people settled down. Parked their trucks, stacked their wood. You have all the telephone poles in a row and the wires stringing between them. All the ranch lights at night, like a little city. Used to be Tótsoh Wash was always flooding in April and the summer then drying up dusty. It hardly ever floods now. Kennedy's is boarded up. Used to get everything there. Now it's all tagged up. I used to know everybody. Redhouses, Tallmans, Bicentis, Bluehouse. Now it's new people, their children or younger.

"Hey, ch'izhiiman, where's your jokes?" Maurice was smiling big. He was stretching against his truck.

The parking lot was never full like this except maybe Election Day. Everybody was dressed in shorts and T-shirts and colourful shoes. Even the dláaniis! They had on their shorts and running shoes, too.

Maurice whistled at me. "Look at you! Did you wash behind your ears, too?" He laughed like a dog barking. He had a skinny mustache around his mouth. We called him Mouse.

I put my hands in my pockets. My jeans were pretty snug. Needed to break them in a little bit. Not many cowboy hats out there. Maybe I should've brought some shorts. I'd seen it advertised in the sports section calendar. *Luckachukai Movin' It 5K. 6pm Friday. Chapter House.* I spit and walked into the crowd.

The runners were all over, jogging and stretching, talking loud. They folded their legs behind them like water birds. I didn't know where I was going I just walked into the crowd and no one bumped me or touched me. Like fish avoiding a boat. I stood tall and tried to look like I knew what I was doing. In front of the front door they had set up a row of tables. There were ladies in T-shirts sitting behind them. Their T-shirts said "Movin' It" across the front in blue and pink letters. Under that was a runner.

"Hey there, mister," said one of the ladies. She smiled. She had on a orange visor. "Here for the race, cowboy? I got a form for you."

I didn't know what to say. She had red lipstick and dangle earrings. She had a nice smile, too. I hadn't been around ladies like this in a while. I couldn't tell if she was flirting or what.

"I got a bib number for you after that." She picked up another piece of paper. "Just like the rodeo...You're a bullrider right? You look like a bullrider. A tough one. I bet you're real good." When she talked I could see her shiny silver fillings. She was probably a real knockout in her day. I took the pen she offered and bent down to write.

"You want the T-shirt?" she asked, handing me the bib number. There were safety pins at the corners that tinked.

"Fifteen dollars if you want the T-shirt." She leaned back in her chair and looked down at her chest. "They did a good job with this one. Don't you think?" She tilted her head up so I could see her eyes.

"Hey," she smiled. "Maybe you could wear it for the race. You'll probably get hot in that nice shirt."

I gave her the form and stood up. It felt hot all of a sudden. I could feel the eyes of the ladies at the other tables on me, too, waiting to see what I would do. I wanted to turn around and ask somebody.

"Well whatever it is you better make up your mind, bullrider. They're about to start the race." She was getting snappy. She leaned sideways and looked past me even though there wasn't a line anymore. Everybody was going to the start line.

I pulled out my billfold and gave her a twenty. She gave me my change and said, "Size?"

"Will it shrink?"

"It'll shrink and make you look good, bullrider." She was smiling again.

A guy holding a megaphone stepped onto the cinder block wall. He had a cowboy hat on, too. But he also had on shorts, running shoes and the white T-shirt.

"Five minutes til start time, folks," he said. "Five minutes! Get your running shoes on. It's a good day to die—I mean run. Aye! Hey, *every* day's a good day to run!"

I turned to walk back to my truck. My ears got hot. I wanted to be in my truck.

Runners crowded in front of the flagpole where the guy with the speaker had just drawn a thick line across the parking lot with flour. The young men looked light and fast. They were doing their last stretches and bouncing on their toes.

But not everybody was young and athletic. Some were chubby. But they were all smiling, like they did this all the time.

"One minute!" said the man into his megaphone.

The sun was going down toward the western ridge. They would be going that way, going out the gate then turning south onto the dirt road.

I still had the T-shirt in my hand, the bib in the other one. I was getting all sweaty.

"This is all about being healthy," he said. "Fight back the diabetes!" He punched the air with the megaphone, making it whine.

I threw my T-shirt on the bushes. I folded the bib with the safety pins and everything and stuffed it in my pants at the back. I was hustling back to the start when the gun went off. Boom! I jumped.

I ran hard out of the gate and turned left. You could hear my boots crunching the gravel. The young guys were out like a shot, sprinting like crazy. I felt like I had to keep up so I ran hard. After the first hundred yards my legs felt like they were made of wood. I started to feel hot in my jeans.

But I kept my legs going and it was like the tight feeling in my chest started to come loose. At the first mile marker I felt a side cramp starting. It got worse and I had to hold my side. Runners turned around and stared at me when they heard me coming. Sometimes the wind caught my hat so I had to hold it down with my hand. My other hand was still holding my side so I was twisting all around at every step. My chest started to burn. I couldn't remember the last time I felt that much pain.

Near the turnaround table I saw Maurice in his yellow shoes running all bow-legged. He jumped and turned around when he heard my boots. He was sweating down his face like someone had poured water on him. I was sweating good, too. I could feel it on my shins hot and sticky. I could smell it, too, all meaty. Maurice was still staring at me when he tried to grab a water cup from the table but he missed it and knocked over a bunch of other ones as well. I passed him running around the sign that said "1/2 Way." I was breathing hard.

The whole way back I wanted it to be done. I was all foggy. Weaving around like a dláanii. I wanted to stop the air burning my lungs. I could smell the dirt in the air from the dust. It smelled good. I almost dropped down right there to eat it.

I was in bed for five days. Sick. They were a blurry dream. My whole body ached. The first day when I woke up I just lay there staring at the ceiling because every time I tried to move it was like I was tearing something. I still had one boot on. I couldn't remember how I got home. When I had to, I crawled to the bathroom to drink water from the tap. My mouth was dry. It was a long time before I could go down the stairs. I looked out at the horse corral but it was too far, miles away it seemed. I could see my truck too. Looked like we got back somehow. In the back window was my gun rack where I used to carry my rifle. After I came back from the war I shot coyotes with it.

First it was to protect the sheep. They had killed some and left their carcasses in the bushes. I was driving after the sheep one time, bouncing cross-country when I found a dead sheep in the bushes. Half-eaten. I'd scared the coyote away from lunch. I got down to look. The sheep's wool was nice and white. But there was just half of it left. The half with the head. That was the first time. I felt the reaction quick as I looked up. My neck prickled and my hair stood up. I turned around and it was staring back at me from a little hill. Not fifty yards away. Easy shot.

Pretty soon it was my sport. I'd bounce along in my truck looking for them in the washes or on the mesas and hills. I even brought my brother Arthur with me sometimes. I didn't know how many we got. Lost count after my fingers. I got to know them, the way they move like this. The way they bob their heads when they stop, dodging something. The way they look over their shoulders. I got to know the way they run. Hard and quick if I miss the first shot. And even when I hit them sometimes they keep running. Maybe just a few steps before they go down, twisting around, trying to bite their wound.

Shimá. Mom. She called me when she heard about it. Arthur told her. That guy. He was lucky he didn't see action like me. It was so easy to die. One of my buddies was shot while he was taking a shit. Right through the neck. That's when you start to lose faith.

She called me over to her house. Had Arthur bring me. He said we were going to the fair but he brought me there. You could just feel it when you got into her house. Angry. I could feel it from across the table.

"How did this happen? What's the matter with you? Who are you? Didn't we teach you right? What kind of beast has gotten hold of you?"

I tried to say something but she said, "You need a ceremony! Probably have to do all kinds of prayers for you. Look what you've done."

I got outta there. I ran outta there. I was pissed off at both of them for ambushing me.

I didn't do it. Wouldn't do it. Kept saying no cuz she kept telling me. Then we didn't talk. Because it changed me. The war changed me. Those old things didn't matter anymore.

I kept going in and out. On the third night I woke up back at Rhonda's wake. I was in a daze, trying to keep my eyes open. Irma was there. So was Arthur and Mary, his wife, and their kids who are grown up. Rhonda's sisters were there, her nieces and nephews too. The women were making bread in the kitchen, talking low. I was sitting on a folding chair in front of the TV. People came in and hugged me. I didn't know a lot of them. Some I hadn't seen in years and couldn't recognize—somebody's grown up children. Rhonda would have told me who they were. *Of* course *you know James! Jesus, I swear.*

I kept thinking, where was Ashkee?

I knew he would come back like that. Golly I knew it. I prayed the way I could, I really tried. But I knew it. In the back of my mind. I wanted to see him smile again. I wanted to see him play with the dogs, throw sticks,

wrestle with them when they wouldn't let go. They never did learn it the right way no matter how hard Ashkee tried. Ashkee was sitting in his room, staring at the wall, that magazine *Guns and Ammo* in his lap. I was going to ask him to help with the chores, but because he was staring like that I said, "Wanna go outside, get some fresh air?"

He just sat there with his hands on the bed.

"Your dogs are waiting for you. They miss you."

He finally blinked. He turned a little bit and said, "I don't remember them. You keep telling me they're mine but I don't remember them. They're a bunch of fuckin' mutts."

My heart went cold.

It was Maurice's nephew who started that fight. He didn't like it when Ashkee got quiet, when he didn't answer the nephew's questions about the war. So he said Ashkee was just an errand boy. That's why he wouldn't talk. He wasn't a real soldier. Then he said, "And what kind of name is Ashkee anyway? All it means is Boy. That's all you are. A little boy playing army. Did you get scared?"

He didn't show at the funeral. He didn't show at any of the four days for the wake. Didn't do any of the things you're supposed to do. I did all of that stuff. I knew all of it but still everyone told me what to do. Don't wash your hair. Don't cook meat. Don't touch meat. Don't touch knives cuz you'll probably cut yourself. Matter of fact don't touch anything sharp. Don't touch guns. Stay quiet. Don't cry too much cuz that only keeps her here when she needs to move on. Irma came over and cooked for me, made bread and stew.

"You have to eat," she said holding the bowl out to me. She had Rhonda's red dishtowel on her shoulder.

It was the best food I had since Rhonda got sick. Or maybe it was the first time I could taste again.

I'd told Ashkee's cousins about all this at the funeral, to tell Ashkee if they saw him. But I didn't hear anything back. He was gone. Or worse, he knew and didn't come.

On the fourth day after the race, I threw scraps out for the dogs. But the horses were too far. Just a few more steps but they were too far. On the fifth day I still couldn't stand up straight. When they saw me they started to pace the corral. The roan who was the leader lifted his forelegs high and neighed. The old hay was all gone. I grabbed a handful of hay from the shed—golly even my hands hurt—and shuffled over to them. The roan shook his head

and rolled his eyes. He knocked his head against the logs. I held my hand out. "Easy, easy. It just took me a while, shi-buddy. I was all beat up, you know." But he wouldn't eat the new hay. Wouldn't even smell it. Man my back was killing me. I braced myself against the corral and watched them.

I knew they would be mad but I took the chance. The second I opened the gate they busted out, the roan first, and knocked the gate into my shoulder, knocking me over. Their manes were flying, hooves kicking up dirt. I watched their butts get smaller and smaller as they ran northeast toward the canyon. The Rottweilers were barking like crazy. They pulled and twisted their chains. They were warning the horses to stay away—they knew they were gone, too.

I heard a rumble behind me and turned to see a dust cloud coming down our driveway. It was a red truck barreling down the dirt road. The dogs turned their barking on the truck. They stopped when Maurice got out.

"Wow, you don't look so good."

I tried to stand up straight but my back wouldn't go all the way without making me dizzy. Sweat jumped out on my scalp and forehead.

Maurice ducked back into his truck and came out with a water bottle and offered it to me.

"Want some water? You're looking kinda white."

I spat on the ground. Hell if I was gonna take it from him.

"No? Okay. More for me." He took the cap off the bottle, tilted it back and took a few long swallows, his throat going up and down like a cow sucking from a drip.

"Whatchyou doin' here?" My voice came out tired.

"Looks like you lost some horses," he said. Water dripped from his chin. "I seen them kicking up dust over there." He pointed to the canyon with his lips.

"What—" I tried to straighten up again but my muscles seized up and I had to strain it out. "What're you doing here?"

"Came here to see my friend! See how he's doing. Heard he hadn't got out since the race." He broke into a smile. "Boy you were flying there, weren't you! Scared the shit outta me when you came up. Ho-lee! All that noise like a big wind coming up and I look back and there you are, teeth grinding, holding onto your hat like a rodeo rider, ha!" he leaned on his truck, smiled and shook his head. "That was something." He looked off toward the mountains where the horses had gone.

"Yeah. Well," I said. "I beat you. I won."

He was still shaking his head and smiling. He pulled off his hat and wiped his forehead. "Anyway, just wanted to see how you were." He put it back on, squeezing his eyebrows together to get a better fit. "Well, better get goin'."

When he opened the door he paused. "Oh yeah, my nephew, you remember my nephew, he said he saw him when he was in Phoenix last weekend. He was cleaning floors at the Burger King or Taco Bell or somewhere."

"Saw who?" I couldn't see his eyes under the brim of his hat.

"Your boy. What's his name..." He turned his head up and he was scrunching his eyes shut. He shook his finger. "Ashkee." He nodded like he'd made a important discovery. "At least he thought it was him."

He looked off again at the mountains. "But I better get going. Looks like it's going to rain and I left the barbecue going at my place." He made his barking laugh.

I tilted my head. Maurice's place was almost a half hour away on the outskirts, going toward Greasewood.

"Yeah," he said and scrunched his eyebrows again, this time like he was thinking. "I..."

"What'd you leave the fire going for?"

"It's what I said." He cleared his throat loudly. "I gotta get back now. My nephew just showed up with his girlfriend..." He trailed off. "They're probably waiting for me."

I rubbed my back and tried to straighten one more time. The sun was coming down warm. The sweat felt better now, too. To cool down instead of from the pain. Phoenix was out there, the heat waves rippling off all those miles of blacktop like it was under water. My back was warming up, the sun seeping into my skin.

"Maurice," I said. "Shik'is. My buddy. Do you know anything about dogs?"

"Dogs?" His hat went up with his eyebrows.

"Yes that's what I said." I could stand up now to look him in the eyes.

"What do you mean dogs?"

"I got these three Rottweilers here." I waved my hand at the house and there they were, all three of them sitting in a row. They were panting with their tongues hanging out, squinting at the sun, waiting. Ashkee was out there in the sun probably looking for someplace to cool down, someplace with air conditioning. And the coyotes were out there, too, I could feel them. They were all around Ashkee. Watching, waiting. Practicing their

strides, light like cats. In the shadows where I had pushed them. Where I kept them.

Ah. But now I could see. It's a mistake to think you're keeping them anywhere, running like that. The way they dance and dodge, dip their heads. Tongues hanging out when they stop and turn to you, look at you. The way you miss even when you hit them. They will always be there. Running. In the shadows. In the shade.

"Ashkeee!" I yelled.

Maurice startled and looked around.

I wasn't going to stop until I found him.

*Jenny Boychuk*

# YOU WAKE, DISORIENTED

in late afternoon's half-light. Drawn
to the kitchen sill, you slice blood oranges,
reheat dark roast from this morning.
A chicken carcass ages in your fridge,
though the meat has long been torn,
picked from its wishbone. You can't
fall asleep & wake to the same day,
the blue hour rising, without horn-
startled memories rushing in:
the last time your heard your mother
breathing, or the night your father
came home from driving trains
& something wasn't quite right, but he
didn't say anything until you were older,
told you he hit a teenager walking
the tracks that night. How it wasn't
the first time. How beautiful
the backcountry was with fresh
snow in that moonlight. How
it takes a mile to stop a train.

*Zofia Rose Musiej*

# SOUVENIRS

though I threw the glass that shattered
shards littering the floor
and on the walls remained splattered
contents of the jars
I still did not deserve
the nine stitches in my hairline

my brother held my hand
as the doctor wove his thread
I cried lied and tried to
forget about the blood
the sticky running flood
that brought my best friend to his knees
begging me *please*
*don't take that taxi*

*Antonia Crane*

# HOW TO DIG A DITCH

I've been in a lot of motels lately but I never stay the night. Last Wednesday was room 387 in Palm Springs with purple carpet and lime green doors, ping-pong tables in carrot orange and a winding maze of yellow hazy light—Technicolor reminders of what's buried and gone: marriage, children, someone saying "forever" and meaning it. A teenage Latina with magenta lips and shiny bangs stood behind a beige desk. Gold and green plastic Christmas wreathes floated above her head. She whisper-flirted with a skinny security guard, passing the slow hours of her graveyard receptionist gig. When I walked up, he left.

What an empty and red motel—walls of wine bottles on display and a single tree smothered with limp tinsel, no guests anywhere. Zigzag burgundy wallpapered hallways ended in an elevator and more numbered doors.

In room 387, I burrowed under the sheets of a California King in fuzzy zombie pyjamas and my mother's ripped grey sweatshirt she picked up at Salvation Army, where she liked to shop for clothes after chemo. I made a wall of giant, soft pillows until it was time to dress up.

Outside a small window, a tequila bar flashed its neon pink star. I wanted to steal it. Instead, I lined my lips, glittered my lashes and lotioned my legs and arms.

I couldn't find the elevator in the yellow maze so I took the stairs. Two weeks and a year ago, I received an email from a woman I'd never met telling me that my boyfriend cheated on me. When I asked, she told me specific dates and times. He fucked her when my friend Piper was in the hospital dying from breast cancer. He fucked her when I was driving home from dancing at the strip club through the desolate mountains and windy desert roads. But this is not an essay about my ex-boyfriend cheating on me.

When he moved out, it was winter. I wanted my mother. I walked downtown at three a.m. with my arms wrapped tightly around my ribcage wearing her black vintage wool coat, heavy with drizzle, ruining everything. I carried a water bottle filled with raw eggs, looking to find my ex's swanky, new fully-loaded BMW and drizzle egg yolk all over it. But his parking garage was locked so I walked around the block with my

mouth open to the sky. I missed sleeping with him pressed against me. He softened my edges until I was a puddle of muddy girl dreams. But this is not an essay about insomnia. This is an essay about how to dig a ditch.

Spring brought juicy gemstone petals, yellow fields and the edible catchphrase "super-bloom," which danced on NPR talk show hosts' lips like some frenemy's garden party you said "fuck no" to. Electric-orange poppies and buttercups exploded on the dirty dry hills where I ran every day. The shock of loss smacked my face by accident, like bird shit, even when I served up sexy sorrow like cocaine cookies to one, two, three hundred golfers who held my chin at the edge of the stage or in private booths and said, "You're habit forming."

Last Wednesday night I met one of the golfers, my regular customer, Anthony, in Palm Springs. He drove us to a small restaurant that had a fake fireplace, dark wood floors and red vinyl booths. Applebee's was having their Christmas party in the main room a few feet away. A paper arrow sign pointed towards a dancefloor where twenty-something girls with gobs of foundation wore more respectable versions of my tight red dress: turquoise floral and forest green skirts from last summer's weddings, still reeking of cheap jasmine body spray and yellow cake. Simple hoop earrings. Only they worked at Applebee's. I was on a paid date with Anthony, who was pushing seventy with light blue eyes and thinning hair—a grandpa.

I have my grandpa's eyes. He was a grumpy beekeeper and plumber who drew smiley faces on the crusts of his rhubarb pies. He wore a frown and thick, striped suspenders. When I was twenty and pierced and shaved and high and a dyke baby stripper, he told me, "Just remember, someone, somewhere is digging a ditch."

I had no idea what this meant. Never saw him dig a ditch. I figured it was something about work and his fear of my generation and our art school, MTV-horny, slacker ways. He made the mistake of investing in his only son instead of my mother. He died of starvation in a trailer park under the care of meth addicts who robbed him blind. At the time my mother didn't seem to mind, maybe because she was angry with him for beating her and ignoring her accomplishments. But this is not an essay about my mother's resentment towards my grandpa.

Lap dancing and doing sex work for a living is digging some kind of ditch that I never complete. I dig for the parts of men that ache to be

touched: a wiry and concave chest, the nape of a neck. Salty slug lips. I dig my way out of poverty, desperate for better and covered in dirt.

Anthony finished his watery minestrone soup. I took off my denim jacket and bunched it behind me, wrinkling my red dress. I showed my bare arms: carnivals of pink and turquoise ink swirls, candy, stars and a green-eyed Ganesh. A bored busboy stood by the table and showed me his tattoos. Anthony told me about being a farmer from Nebraska—soybeans, I think. He said he was one of eleven kids during the Depression in his town of two hundred and seventy people. While he was talking I thought about driving to San Francisco, away from the fiery hills and ravaged homes where all the green had burned away.

"Are you a Republican?" I asked him. "Did you vote for Trump?"

"I am. Yes."

"I can't wait to take your money," I said.

"What?" he asked. I sipped my soup. I thought about becoming a soybean farmer.

I glanced at my watch.

For the last few years, in the strip club where I work, Anthony had asked me to meet him outside for a date. "I will for one million dollars," I'd said, hot breath in his ear.

And then I needed to pay the people I hired to work on a short movie I wrote and produced. I needed exactly three thousand dollars and didn't know how I was going to come up with it. It's a lot of money to me. Not an amount I can make in one or two nights at the club.

In room 387, I knelt on the dusty concrete floor and prayed for safety—for a friend in this moment. For the guts to ask for three thousand dollars with a straight face.

Earlier that night, when he drove us to dinner in his maroon Impala, he stared straight ahead. The amber moon lit up the Jacinto Mountains and the sky was a violet grey. One hand was on the steering wheel and the other rested on my naked thigh. We didn't speak. He missed a turn and drove on Highway 111 with the radio on a 1940s station. I hummed "You Go to My Head." One quiet mountain town slid into another, shifting from the blue-collar grit of Cathedral City to Palm Desert to Rancho Mirage. Soft pink lights lit palm trees from the trunks like the twinkle in Marilyn Monroe's eyes. Frank Sinatra and Bob Hope Drive and sprawling golf courses surrounded us, deeply hidden in the night. The Obamas, Reagans,

Oracle, and the Trumps all have eighteen-hole golf courses here. Anthony told me about his niece with a brain tumour. An employee with breast cancer. A friend with dementia he helped move into assisted living.

Inside room 387 I slid my naked body over his. I hoped the mattress didn't have scabies like the last one. He kissed me with too much tongue. I put on Marvin Gaye to help relax him. Then I put him in my mouth.

Anthony closed his eyes. The only person I had sex with after my boyfriend left was Jolene who was loud and outrageous with cheap Tijuana tits, a nasty mouth, and her prized cock and balls. She hung her floggers and cuffs from long nails on the white walls above her bed. This sex was quieter—an ache of conflicted wants. I rubbed his thighs like the girls taught me at the tantric hand-job temple where I used to work. Then he came.

Outside, the pink star sign blinked again.

"I need three thousand dollars," I said.

He didn't have it with him. Said he'd come back. My phone died. I forgot to bring a charger with me. I sat on the bed and listened to voices outside in the small parking lot. I pulled the heavy brown curtains back and saw a maid smoking with the woman who had taken my credit card at registration. "There was a man," the maid said to her. I walked through the lobby to charge my phone in my car. She glanced at me as I walked past them. I felt a pang of shame knowing what these women knew. I would never come back here. I charged my phone. When it had a tiny bit of battery back, a text message from Anthony said, "You are so funny. Did you think I was really going to come back?"

I looked up. How could I be so dumb?

A maroon Impala was parked on the street. Anthony stood outside of it, with a terrible boyish smirk. I walked up to him. Touched his nose with mine.

"Very funny," I said. He handed me an envelope with three thousand dollars in one hundred-dollar bills.

The next day I bought a Christmas tree and strung dainty red lights around and around.

*Mercedes Eng*

# RIP PRN U R 4EVER

I can't believe it, Prince
I was in a café in Vancouver
the unceded territory of the Musqueam, Squamish,
and Tsleil-Waututh peoples
when I saw a portrait of you on the wall
a few short days before I flew
to Minneapolis
your birthplace
the traditional homelands
of the Dakota, Anishinaabeg, and Ho-Chunk peoples
the birthplace of the American Indian Movement
the birthplace of my grandparents
and I was talking to it, to you
said, I'm coming to see you

I can remember like it was yesterday
lying on my flat 11-year-old belly
in my best friend's bedroom
cradling my unlined face
listening to "Little Red Corvette" on a 45

we watched *Purple Rain* at like every sleepover that year
88 million pubescent girls
and who knows how many boys, women, and men, trans or cis
all masturbating to the Purple One
imagining being Apolonia on the back of Prince's motorbike
vehicular vibrations getting her as wet as Lake Minnetonka

no wonder Tipper Gore lost her shit
overhearing her daughter listening to "Darling Nikki"
I misremember rap originating the parental advisory warning
but it was actually your crooning and a million white girls creaming
that led to that black and white sticker

I'm on a stopover in Edmonton, Treaty 6 territory
when I hear the news that you have died
enroute to Minneapolis
to visit my gal Emily
who though not from there
fits in with the blonde blue-eyed migrants
that have historically occupied the area

Prince, I can't believe it

Minneapolis, the settler name a mash-up of Dakota and Greek
Layli Long Soldier teaches us
the name for the state of Minnesota
is from the Dakota language that is from their land
*mni* meaning water *sota* meaning turbid
like the US treaties with the Dakota Nation
that resulted in the Dakota Uprising
then Lincoln ordered the largest legal mass execution in US history

Minneapolis, birthplace of my maternal grandparents
who met not there but later in southern Alberta
where their fams went in pursuit of $10 homesteads
migrating from Europe to arrive on stolen native land
south of the Medicine Line
crossing the 49th parallel to buy stolen native land
near Medicine Hat Alberta, Treaty 7 territory

me and my gal Emily drive downtown
with her friend Sarah and Sarah's brother
who both happen to be from my birthplace of Medicine Hat
what are the odds?

Sarah's brother
drives us in his big truck
bought with big cheques
brought in by the oil patch

looking just like the boys who used to hurt us
cause we weren't white or
straight, or either

along with thousands of others we conjure
a block chapel service at First Avenue
mourning under a sky made violet with hundreds of flood lights
aurora borealis in tribute to you, Prince

this is the conversation I have
while waiting for drinks
that take forever to get
cause there are 10,000 folks
all looking for drinks
none of us can believe it
one of Minneapolis's native sons
gone:

me: that Isaiah Thomas got a pretty shot

him: isn't he retired?

me: not Pistons, Dream Team 2 Isaiah
shortest player in the league Isaiah
one of the best point guards in the east Isaiah

after a day of
security checkpoints
fluorescent lights
fluctuating altitudes
and the news of your death
watching playoff highlights with a big glass of bourbon
talking with a cute boy about Isaiah's pretty shot
with my gal I've been missing now close enough to touch

this is ritual and fellowship and healing this is church

*Mariah Lynne Dear*

# THE WILDEST DREAM

In her wildest dream she was a foundling on the naked boom of a beach in Honduras. She bit the crowded air. She was sweat and dank and humid when the moon set over scaly skyscrapers. She owned a window. The foster parents were the only ones allowed to open and close the glass. She bit the crowded air. This suburb was so close to what used to be her skyline. Her dreams bombastic taunted all her old ones. In this little apartment there was a dog. Skin on her arms had bite marks. The dog is a great story. Back a few years ago it was the idea of the police. Huddled in the top bunk, she bit the crowded air. A girl named Lucy slept beneath her. If there was an earthquake she would be the first to die. The truth was everything was good and she was dry. In her bundled glory she chose the word copacetic. Foster Mother and Foster Father would wake to make her pancakes. Someone in the room forgot the rule about no snoring. She bit the crowded air. In the dream of Honduras she had a family who found her and became hers forever. She never absquatulated the brown brick house, the white brick neighbourhood rights and wrongs. That house was the nicest house she ever lived in. Beat begets beat. Beach begets beach. She unroofed all that for a reason. In this full room three bodies slept. They called themselves children. The roof was ten stories up. None of them had ever lived in houses again. It was too tight of a city for that. In Honduras her new sister read a book to her. The first daguerreotype was on the front cover. Her sister had a beautiful photograph of when they found her as a scrawling baby in the sand. She bit the crowded air. In the wildest dream the humid was wind. Her arms were stippled and the scratching formed a flower. The family would laugh about an ancient wild dog who had loved her like a chew toy. Or better yet in Honduras she had smooth skin. She floated in this windmill possibility, she bit the crowded air.

*Sarah Kabamba*

# FIELD NOTES ON GRIEF

1. *Death doesn't care about time zones.*

Mama always told Sifa not to answer the phone at night.

Mama would never answer the phone after midnight, even if she was sitting right by it. Sifa used to count the rings of the phone until it fell silent. She used to count the times family members would call to report deaths. She doesn't remember when she stopped counting.

To Sifa, the ring of the phone sounded the same no matter who was calling. But she swears Mama could tell when it was death calling. She'd freeze at the sound of the phone, pause in whatever she was doing—gutting fish, braiding her hair, frying plantain, telling a story—and just look at the phone with knowing in her eyes. Sometimes Sifa would catch her, in that moment before she picked up the phone, see her cock her head, listen, and then square her shoulders before answering.

What is there left to say—death doesn't care that she's tired of missing people she never got to meet.

2. *Sorrow doesn't care about the seas that separate us.*

Baba always told Sifa that she should never tell people bad news until after they've eaten.

She was doing the dishes when the phone rang. It's funny the things the mind remembers—she'd eaten fried plantain that night, could still taste the sweetness on the back of her tongue. She could see the stars in the inky sky through the window above the sink, the water warm on her hands, and the lemon scent of the soap in the air. The tile was cold under her bare feet.

She'd paused when the phone rang, the plate slowly slipped from her hands as she silently counted the rings, the sound echoing in her empty apartment.

Even before she heard the click of the answering machine, and Mama's familiar voice, she knew.

She'd grabbed the phone, cutting off Mama mid-message.

"Mama," Sifa said, her wet fingers grasping the phone tightly.

"Sifa, mtoto wangu," Mama sighed. "Have you eaten yet?"

What is there left to say—death doesn't care that she's tired of carrying tombstones in her chest.

3. *The body begins to eat itself within seconds of suffering sorrow.*

Mama always told Sifa that grief will eat you out of house and home.

After speaking to Mama, Sifa felt as if her stomach was twisting into itself. She barely made it to the bathroom before her stomach emptied itself of everything she ate before.

Sifa drove to her sister's house, one of Baba's old Lingala CDs playing softly in the car. She sang along, could almost imagine that Baba was beside her, belting out the words the way he always would.

Mireille answered the door. Her daughter, Imani, peaked out behind her mother's legs.

"Mama Sifa!" she cried out, recognizing her aunt.

Sifa smiled and reached down to swing Imani into her arms. Imani wrapped her small arms around Sifa's neck. Her curly hair tickled Sifa's nose, and she let her eyes close, inhaling the sweet smell of coconut oil.

Imani wriggled in Sifa's arms, and Sifa raised her head, meeting her sister's eyes.

"I missed my favourite niece," Sifa said.

Mireille smiled. "Your only niece," she said as she stepped back to let Sifa in.

Sifa followed her into the kitchen, Imani still in her arms.

"Have you eaten yet, Dada?" she asked her sister.

What is there left to say—death ignores table manners, passports, borders, doesn't care that no one invites him in.

4. *If you let it, grief will kill parts of you.*

"You think one of us would have got his height," Mireille laughs.

Sifa stares at the photo of Baba. He always seemed larger than life, filling rooms with his deep voice, laughter, and never-ending stories.

"Grandpa?" Imani grabs at the photo in Mireille's hand.

"Yes, honey, it's Grandpa." Mireille gently unwraps Imani's fingers from the picture.

Mama, Sifa, and Mireille sit on the floor of the living room surrounded by photographs, albums, and Imani's toys. A tangle of pillows and blankets are in the corner, where Sifa, Mireille, and Imani had spent the night with Mama, laughing, crying, and sharing memories of Baba.

Sifa leans her head back against the seat of the couch, staring unseeing at the various family photos on the walls of her childhood home.

Imani jumps onto the couch and then slides down beside Mama. "Grandpa gone?" she says.

Mama puts an arm around Imani, her eyes wet.

What is there left to say—death comes and goes as he pleases, doesn't look back at the wreckage left in his wake.

5. *Absence will leave you feeling bloated, but you can't live off loss.*

Baba always told Sifa that nothing brings people together like weddings, births, or deaths.

In the days following, their home is filled with people looking to comfort Mama. They bring plates, pots, and pans filled with food. They fill the house with crying, laughter, and music.

Several people are gathered in the kitchen, while others are in the living room sitting with Mama, sharing stories about Baba.

In the kitchen, pots simmer on the stove, plates are spread across the island, and the dishwasher hums in the background. Sifa recognizes some of the women from her days in the neighbourhood, others are foreign to her, but she greets them all the same—hugging, kissing their cheeks, calling them "mama" and answering their questions about her dissertation, apartment, and job at the university.

"This one is married to her degree," someone says, laughing. The kitchen fills with laughter, the women talking over one another, and joking with easy familiarity.

One of the women pauses in chopping onions to smile at Sifa. "You make us proud, mtoto. We love hearing about you from your mama." Other women nod, and murmur in agreement.

They speak without pretense or malice, and Sifa feels tears at the corners of her eyes. She closes her eyes and breathes in the smells and sounds around her, the frying of sweet potatoes, the sting of onions, and cloy of garlic and cinnamon. The chatter and laughter of the women like a long-forgotten song in her ears.

What is there left to say—death will leave you lost and found and lost again.

6. *Grief will make you remember and forget all at once.*

A few weeks after the funeral, Sifa goes with Mama to return pots, plates, and containers. No one expects them to, and they end up leaving many of the homes they visit with new pots and plates full of food.

There is an older woman, Mama Aline, that Sifa only sees at funerals. She is always there, kikwembe wrapped around her waist, headscarf wrapped tightly around her dark braids, sitting with the other women, crying, or pounding flour in the kitchen.

When they visit, she will not let Sifa and Mama leave until they've eaten something. She fries fish, cooks sombe, okra, and fufu, as she tells them how her husband died. Later, over tea and plantain chips, she shows them pictures of her only son, who lives in London.

When they leave, Mama Aline hugs them, kissing them on both cheeks. "Tutanonana," she says.

As Mama backs out of the parking lot, Sifa looks at the apartment building, sees the light burning through Mama Aline's window, the flutter of her curtain.

She wonders who will call Mama Aline's son when the time comes.

What is there left to say—

*Djamila Ibrahim*

# BLOODLETTING

I come home to find my mother alone
at the end of the silent corridor
in the kitchen, carving goat flesh off bone.
I fancy the cold focus of horror
flick villains in her hands. Come, sit and learn,
she used to say, ginger *then* turmeric.
Now all silence. I grab a knife and turn
to face her stooped backbone. The nomadic
blood, dad once told me, aches for departures
even when it's singing of arrivals.
I think of bloodletting and the ruptures
of keening hearts, the rites of revivals
and how to ease my mother's rigid limbs
back into the warm vigor of her hidden wings.

# BRINE

I see my eyes on the shimmering brine
dreaming up a road out the glass window,
looking for paths on a map without signs
while sulking in memories of sorrow.
I once triggered my mother's anger.
Dead to her eyes, I found myself alone,
bleeding through land and sea lines like water-
colour. I crashed against walls of stone,
lived on the border between flesh and its
shadow. Now, pressing mother's frail hand
in mine, I read in her pulse words of bliss
I'd lost in the belly of a quicksand.
My eyes, it says, always by yours on the brine,
as you seek a path on your map without signs.

*Jessica Bebenek*

# AWARE

*after D.H. Lawrence*

The sun puts his foot on the floor. I'm like,
Gimme that dick, sun. I know you know I want it.
Got him divesting himself of that sheath, like
He can't help himself. Got my face down, tits
Pressed to the springs of the earth. Feel heat
spurting on my back like, is it so hard to look at me

*Emily Casali*

# IT WASN'T WEAKNESS

Cold afternoon sun cracks against ice and rock, the air humming taut with winter's chill. Snow perches on the bony shoulder blades of the Rockies like a row of white hawks. Far below, across the frozen bowl of the lake, strides a small group, their footprints stalking them in the snow. Four men, pulling sleds and wearing snowshoes. A girl too, but you almost don't see her at first, so closely is she shadowing her father, so deeply is she sinking into the snow. She watches where he walks. She steps in his footprints.

Several times, they stop and test the ice. One spot looks good and they take off snowshoes, open tackle boxes, pull ice augers from packs. The men set up camp chairs and fishing lines, unpack thermoses of coffee, rip open packages of jerky. The girl hangs close, orbiting her father like a satellite. A pale winter sun swims languidly through the sky. By late afternoon, three fish flop in the bucket, small but long enough to be legal.

The girl is less and less watching the lines, more and more making snow angels. She builds a mini-igloo. She crunches mouthfuls of snow, drinks her weight in hot chocolate. The men walk to the camp's edge and pee right out in the open.

"I'm going to those trees," she says, pointing. "Over there."

Her father nods and she sets off, snow pants rasping fabric-on-fabric. A tricky thing, peeing outside in the wintertime: the reluctant removal of mittens; the unzipping of the warm jacket; the fumbling with twisted snow pant straps.

On the way back, she sees the hill. It's solitary and unexplained, a pregnant white bulk in the middle of the frozen lake. There will be a good view from the top. At its zenith, she turns to survey the world below: the half-circle of the camp, the kyphotic smudges of men around their lines. The scrap of moon above the Rockies is beginning to shine faintly. She tips her head back and blows a cloud of steam into its gaunt belly.

There's no warning—barely even a crack—when the ice gives way beneath her.

In a coldly matter-of-fact way, her footing disappears; in its place a dark crevice yawns wide to swallow her whole. Falling, she too is matter-of-fact. She notices new things, ponders them in the descent. The warm

rush of blood in her neck. How her calf itches where her snow pants rub above the boot. Time stretches out like the white expanse of lake around her and she finds she can count her breaths.

*Breath*

She's waited for this day. When he comes to wake her, she's already up and dressed in the clothes she'd laid out the night before. They eat oatmeal together in the kitchen, he reading the paper, she watching his hands. He doesn't reach for the sugar, so neither does she.

"Here, baby, take a hat." Her mother pads into the kitchen wearing a housecoat, and hands her a toque. It's embroidered with pink flowers and the girl's eyes flick to her father. Later, she'll switch it for a black one. Her mother braids her hair while he loads the truck. She squirms at the time it costs and the pink barrette that pins it back.

*Breath*

Her arms shoot out and she catches herself against the circle of ice around her body. She hangs suspended over darkness, ice cutting into her armpits, feet dangling in an unknown void. Everything is still, time frozen solid like the hard belly of the lake. The spell breaks. Fear and embarrassment mingle into an emotion stronger than either and fill her like cold water. She gasps and screams mechanically, almost apologetically, on the exhale.

*Breath*

Her heroes are Caddie Woodlawn, Kristy Thomas, Jo March. She spends hours curled around books, joining ink-and-paper idols as they wade through rivers, ride horses, climb trees. Books are easy. School is harder. She's not sure about this new world of lip gloss and boys and Laughing At Things That Aren't Funny. Graphite on her fingers, the sweet rot of apple cores in the garbage can. Long division spans the whiteboard like a row of dusty white ants. The boy she likes sits in front of her—the tag at the back of his shirt is sticking up.

At the recess bell, she swallows hard and taps him on the shoulder. "Bet I can beat you in an arm wrestle." His hand is warm in hers. A brief struggle, a gathering of classmates, a dim buzz of cheers and taunts, and then, unexpectedly, his hand is pinned beneath hers. Her eyes flash to his,

incredulous, triumphant, cheeks bright with pride. Something dark flicks over his features but is gone so fast she can't be sure. He pulls his hand loose, tosses her a quick smile, and reaches over to snap the strap of her new training bra with a definitive twang. "Your hair's frizzy."

She holds her stinging shoulder as he runs for the tire swing, unconsciously smooths a hand down the back of her head.

*Breath*

Her father is running to the hill, calling her name, yelling instructions. "Don't move! Stay still!" He lunges up its frosty spine, legs straining against the incline. The other men have run over, too—she can see their silhouettes jumbling together at the bottom of the hill. A chunk of snow breaks off under her arm and a thin splash echoes from below. There's water down there: freezing, wet blackness. A thick cord of fear wraps around her stomach. She starts to cry and it makes her angry.

*Breath*

She thinks of the hunting trip earlier in the fall. The steel-and-gunpowder smell of the barrel. The full moon of the scope level with her eye. The ruffled grouse just visible in the bush, mottled brown and white against the fallen leaves.

"Steady arms, relax your shoulders," he says. "Take a breath." The scope stops dancing. Her finger is starting its slow pull on the trigger when a vision bobs like a cork to the surface of her mind. A nest of grouse-babies, downy feathers fluffed, beaks tilted hungrily, waiting for a mother that will never return. She shoves this image down but it breaks the surface again and floats there in the quiet. The crosshairs swim with moisture, swing left. Her shot goes wide and the grouse disappears into the brush. She lowers the gun and looks down. "You had the shot," is all he says. His tone is neutral, a blank canvas. On it she paints a hundred colours: irritation, anger, disappointment.

At the end of the day, she dresses the birds loudly, enthusiastically. "This one has berries in its crop!" "Look Dad, here's the heart!" "Bullet got that one right through the head!" She thinks of the nest of babies and retches.

The rasp of wind on snow. The cold drip of snot on her lip. He's close enough to see her tears now. Panting, he drops to his stomach and flattens himself against the ice. "Hold tight," he says, in a voice not quite his own. "Hang on." He shimmies forward slowly, until he can grab her arms. The ice groans. For a brief minute, they freeze, bodies perpendicular: he horizontal on the ice; she vertical in its belly. His eyes are wide. She notices this. In the distance, the hair-raising howl of a she-wolf climbs to the moon: wild, beautiful, fierce.

There is a splintering and a cracking, but her father has her tightly by the shoulders. He pulls her from the ice's womb and she slithers free, gasping on the snow beside him like a newborn. The rest of the hill holds firm. They look back at the dark vein between the two ridges of ice and she sobs.

She thinks suddenly of her mother and her soft arms. Across the frozen prairie, her warm body beckons like a lighthouse. She longs to be held close, tender fingers in her hair. Another feeling, foreign and full of yearning, surges suddenly in her chest. She doesn't recognize it now, but it will come to her later on, down the hallway of years, laughing and fierce, on the night she first holds her newborn son. The midwife will place him on her breast and the dormant ache will bloom and make its existence known to her at last—the flower that grew tall without her watering it, from a seed planted before she had a memory. *It wasn't weakness,* the warmth of her baby's body will whisper.

They sit on the edge of the hill, avoiding the crack that's split it lengthwise. It's starting to snow again; soft flakes fall, light against the bruising sky. Her father rubs her shaking arms, pats her on the back. "They must have let water out of the dam. Ice broke and peaked up and then when it snowed...it just looked like a hill. I didn't even think."

He's dropped his gloves back where he pulled her out. She can see them lying black against the moonlit snow. He'd worn the same gloves last spring to free a hawk that had gotten caught in a barbed wire fence. She'd been out in the cattle pasture, shooting cans off a fence with a pellet gun when she'd spotted it, trapped and twisting in the wire. He'd worn the gloves and talked to the bird gently while he'd worked it out of the wire, calming it as it struggled. She'd jumped back as the hawk snapped and arced. Couldn't it see he was trying to *help*?

He looks at her sidelong in the chilled, darkening air. "You ok?"

She sticks out her chin, scrapes at the tears that won't stop leaking. Her arms are shaking. "I wasn't scared."

"Of course you were." Frost sparkles in his beard. "So was I." He looks at her, then away: out at the moon and silverlit wilderness. "Honey, you're just a kid."

*Just a kid,* he says. Not *just a girl.*

Years later, she will work as a deckhand on a fishing boat off British Columbia's northern coast—the only girl on the crew. She'll hoist salty, dripping prawn traps, wrestle giant octopuses and live in dank rain gear. She'll thrill in the adventure and challenge, in the cold harshness of the sea and this fierce, blank world of men.

But she'll wake early in the morning to braid her long hair. She'll curl her eyelashes in the cracked mirror above the rusty pump toilet. When they drop anchor next to the wild, wind-scratched islands, she'll take the skiff ashore to gather flowers and bring them back out to sea, wedging them next to the row of screwdrivers in the salt-stained windowsill.

Back in the truck, the girl licks the tears from her lips. She takes off her frozen mittens and presses her hands to the newborn ache in her breast. She stops counting breaths. Outside, the slamming of tailgates and crunching of tires on snow. Men's voices mingling with the noise of engines rumbling to life.

She breathes. Her warm exhalation fills the frozen interior of the truck. Against the icy window, frost softens to delicate droplets, tremulous and cool as spring rain.

*Cody Caetano*

# COURTER'S PITCH

If only this THC and Portuguese rotisserie didn't bake me and my cats
back to when they were kitties, or make my brain pics pretty
as a pixel-eyed fly with fruit gusher vision, out-of-body and grinning at
these two and a half-breed couch potatoes
would I immediately boing toward your four course, low-lit salmon dinner
and stress test a fire pit below the skirt of El Dorado
do my best brother-in-the-backyard, toss cardboard to keep the heat lethal
and splashing à la deep-fried water, just enough chemistry to blow our
hopes, and post-up in some ineffable *AirBnB* where we love unloaded
and go to watch the gas light.

But lo, I have this kink
to let the days lapse between deleting dating apps
and their subpar, sequinned retrieval settle into nice long weeks
of air-borne lint and hair upkeep, a consistent diet of sifted ramen, party mix
and lifting sock fluff off cold junk, keeping company who wave away the wet
hot *hmmmmm-ing* hum of a tin bachelor box, which stinks of derelict cat litter
and cartographic maggots exploring under sink, and I'll risk it
before I dare pinch the fidget spinner out the trash
and pick the best off Bloor racks, grinning
to hear about your tooth-loss dreams once again.

*Boston Gordon*

# YOU ARE ALONE IN A SMALL BLUE ROOM

The blue light from the bridge licks your toes.
The blue rug is blue because you messed it with pen ink,
or blue paint from the protest depending
on who you meant to be that day.
It can be blue to be you, because you love
the colour of it. You know, the colour
of when you first kiss someone you are
scared of, and they say they know who you are.
Scared because you saw them in a dream,
and in the dream they held a piece of charcoal,
blue and dusty, to your forehead, and told you
that you were the son of god. That was before
you knew the prayers they told themself.
In the dream you felt them muttering
like a blue bird on a Carolina fencepost,
words that only make sense to the mouth
they belong to. When you kissed
you remembered the prayers, and also
the dream. They held you behind a statue
like you were the crown jewel, the trophy
of a lifetime of suffering. Someone who knew
what it was to be kept from jumping off the bridge.
You wore blue that night because you like it. They had blue
eyes like a movie star, and a blue bicycle laid
by the river. You wanted the river to be blue too,
but it was only blue because of the lights
from the hospital and the easy wake of canoes.
You touched the blue artery in their neck
and reminded them they were alive.
Years later their blue bike got bent
by a yellow station wagon
and you screamed blue! and ran to touch
their artery. You took them to the blue hospital

to wait to see how bruised their body was.
You held them, and talked about the dream
and they tried to tell you not to dream so much
it's bad for your blues, but you insisted
that in the dream there were blue bubbles in the air
and the sky was purple and you could see
everything, the prayers, the bridge, the bicycle,
and you were against blue brick in a blue alleyway
singing I know who you are too.

*Zoe Power*

# REFLECTIONS

Since my grandad's death, I've seen him only in the elevator of his old Sydney apartment building. It's this tiny space with strange, small mirrors where the walls meet, supposed, perhaps, to gather and disperse the light but which instead stubbornly capture it and do not let it go—the illuminated panels drawing the eye closely, in an otherwise claustrophobic space. It's somewhere here, between the fractured tiers of distorted geometry, that I find him: that I start to see myself as through his eyes.

Sometimes all we do is stare at one another. That is, I stare at myself. Mirrors seem, for me, to create a distance usually, smudges and stray hairs appearing separate from myself. In this reflection, I encounter myself differently—as looked at from the arms holding me sky-high, from the matching flannel work shirt, from across the first shared beer glass. I appear familiar, strange, radiant and darling, incomprehensible yet loved beyond all questioning.

The feeling isn't quite the same as when he was alive. There's no instinctive motion toward downplay or dismissal—those brusque guffaws with which he used to protest hugs, to bat away I love yous. My grandad was a cloistered man, a product of his place and time, and love with him was always something complicated, somehow: not quite restrained but more contorted, as when ushering a thing unfathomably large into a space more reasonable, appropriate, discrete.

Here, though, my gaze, our gaze, lingers. In the eyes reflected back at me there's no such reservation, nothing which cannot be asked or must be understated. Open, here, I watch my lips form questions I'm afraid of—should I even be here? Am I here often enough? Am I exhausting my grandma too intensely by these visits—if I do so, is it worth it? Why do I distrust the counsel of my own self so completely? Where should I seek this help, and silent adoration, if not here within his gaze?

I try not to dwell too much on what it means if my most meaningful cross-dimensional exchange to date has come through gazing lovingly into my brow hairs and tracking the steady multiplication of freckles up my cheekbones. Perhaps there's true spectral force within that mirror, and my narcissism's so extreme that I'm not able to process it outside of

the guise of my own face. My preferred theory about the mode of our encounters runs instead along the lines that we are switching viewpoints: that this is how the spirits who will haunt us experience the living world after their deaths.

My grandad's body is long gone. He wanted—forcefully, pragmatically, predictably—to donate all he could of it to science, but when the time came and the Botswanan sun had run its course with him this turned out to be nothing much at all. His body, having toiled all his life in the name of nobler purposes (family, livestock, land), had now become a burden: returning to a home where he no longer claimed a duty, at costs and lengths that would have pained his frugal sensibilities. And even this would then be burned; the proud and weathered vessel of his homey physicality non-functional, unnecessary, then discarded.

What remains, the sum total of a full and generous life, are the visions and perspectives of the living. Those artefacts which do remain—his best in show, stiff photographs, the crumbling hat, boots heavy at the door—are insignificant except as processed through the eyes of the beholder. Ghostly beings must surely walk among us every day, accessing this earth according to connections with the living: our uncertain memories, our fractured recollections, rising with the scent of hay the morning after rain.

When he sees himself through me, as I am sure he does each time I make the tea correctly; master a new recipe; dip deep into my patience for a trying fellow human being; I hope he sees beyond my recollections of a grumbling grey grandfather. Or, I hope he doesn't need to see beyond at all—I hope he sees this gruff old man and even at the same time, sees what's underneath: a man so full of love and kindness that he had to hold it in at every moment not to burst. When I stare at me, I hope he feels the way that I feel in his eyes: loved, adored, accepted—precious beyond words or measure.

*Scott Jackshaw*

# UNKNOWN CONSECRATION TO THE CHURCH MONSTER

this is my body in twelve shapes / this is my body in eleven shapes / this is my hung with its suds fallen out / this is my razor burn / my gash-gaped holy side / my excoriate rinse / this is my mirrored blister / this is my bad faith & the rub of its towel

before its speech I shrieked bright red sound & passed myself over porcelain where hollows a figuration of clotted desire / I sent wild televangelisms & soaked in wandering

my lost rib which shook with words I dug & when coming into body a skinned mystery where I am all hearing & sightlessly tactile in my inhabitations / it said

out from the shower curtain my watered blood / regret-swallowed spit / clogged drains / waterlogged oath / soap-scummed touch

*Marie Hélène Poitras, translated by Corine Tachtiris*

# ON THE HEAD OF JOHNNY CASH

That night a big, round wave rolled a sperm whale up to shore. It twirled in the foam, waltzed. It looked like a floating missile. The moon poured whey over its back, as if to cook it or peel off its skin. Its stomach had been torn by pebbles and open mussels, letting slip a carpet of oily blood that congealed in the saltwater.

September 11, 2003, everything in Saint-Jean-de-l'Anse revolved around the beached monster. At first we thought we'd spotted one of those little American army submarines that sometimes wandered close to the bay at the edge of the village. Five-year-old Elsie was the first to spot the cetacean, which seemed to scorn her with its big glassy eye. She screamed, provoking the concern of her mother, who set the coffee pot down on the burner of the old stove. An expression of such terror shouldn't come out of a child's mouth: a cry twisted with fear, a wrong-way cry up a one-way street.

The monster was covered with a grey film, proof that there had been frost on the ground overnight. Its tail oscillated to the rhythm of the waves as if it were still alive. The gulls pirouetted around it, already seeking a breach to rummage in. Elsie's tricycle was lying upside down, and the little girl, usually so giggly, patted the sperm whale's melon head and sobbed.

The news made the rounds in the village. We wanted to know if it could be eaten or if there was a danger of poisoning, but mostly we wanted to know what had driven the cetacean all the way to the shore. Sperm whales normally sink like wreckage, capsize into the marine depths, descend gently among the kelp and wrack, and melt between the soft jaws of sea urchins. The dead mammal's head fills with water, creating a natural counterweight that cancels out the buoyancy of the spermaceti organ—a fatty mass hidden away behind a tangle of ligaments in its cubic melon. Its presence on the sand thus went against the logic of its species.

On the regional news report, we saw Elsie's mother tell how her daughter had found the "whale with a square nose." What was going to be done with it now? The thing needed to be studied first, to discover the age of the beast, tests carried out to see if pollution had affected its

health, the area scoured in a hydroplane to ensure that this sperm whale hadn't been the scout for a little clan and, if need be, a plan set in motion to redirect them toward the open sea.

The next day, early in the morning, Elsie detected an unusual noise, a sort of obstinate clacking mixed with the cries of seabirds. As she approached the animal's body, a horde of gulls rose up, leaving behind it a cloud of chalky droppings, uric incense that recalled the smell of lime. An opening the size of a briquette had been made on the left flank of the sperm whale, and its intestines were emerging in bluish tubes punctured by repeated pecking. Its head was caving in, grown mushy, like fruit left out in the sun.

Then they came, in their shark-grey anoraks, carting little sterile suitcases filled with phials, test tubes, gallons of formalin, scalpels and blades of various incredible sizes, from a flat knife to a razor-sharp billhook.

"Why make holes in a fish's stomach?" asked Elsie.

"We're biologists. We want to know the reason the sperm whale came here to die."

"I know why it died. It's because the water tastes too strong now."

A pair of biologists worked together to plunge a trocar into the heart of the beast for a core sample so they could analyze its multiple layers: skin, fat, muscles, internal organs, periosteum, marrow. They had already installed a mini-laboratory on the shore.

The news of their presence made the rounds of the village in the blink of an eye. That whale had come here, so it belonged to the locals, to Elsie more precisely, since she had discovered it. On the regional news, they broadcast a report presenting the viewpoints of the different parties. On one side, the villagers in anger, with red cheeks and sharp accents: "We're not going to leave it for the people of Tadoussac. It came here to us and we'll do what we want with it." Then little Elsie appeared, who put forward her case in her crystalline voice: "Finders keepers. Plus, they're making holes in the sperm whale and then the gulls come and eat it." On the other side, like sly predators, the phlegmatic biologists explained that the skeleton of the sea mammal would be displayed at the Museum of the Sea in Tadoussac, where it would thus contribute to enriching the knowledge about these cetaceans and to raising the awareness of tourists to their cause—which would prove, over time, to be very profitable.

We decided to stand guard near the sperm whale. Old retired sailors set up nets and torches around the cadaver, so thoroughly that even the

birds had a hard time getting close. That night, discussion in the village was heated. What was going to be done with the big fish? Why exactly did we care about it so much? Were we going to risk eating it?

On his way home that evening, the mayor stopped in at the Cow-boy, the village tavern, where he learned that Johnny Cash had just died at the age of seventy-one. The place was rather full of villagers for a Tuesday night, as if the presence of the sperm whale and the death of the Man in Black had attracted them there, where they could discuss the beaching of the former while listening to the latter sing. After his second scotch, the mayor slipped into a keen, lucid state, intuitive yet vulnerable, a bit like a woman whose water is about to break. He concentrated on the lyrics of "One Piece at a Time," the story of a simple worker on an automobile assembly line who slowly makes himself a car with parts pilfered from the factory. Maurice came to slump in front of him: "Johnny Cash cared about the rejects, in little people like *us*, who go nuts because a fish came and beached itself on their shore, as if it was a gold mine. If he had come here, Johnny Cash would have written a song about us people for sure."

The moon, which was full, looked like a communion wafer placed on navy blue velvet. The mayor went down to the shore where the sperm whale was still lying in its shelter of nets. The guard reacted to his arrival by crying "Halt!" into the megaphone. Then he showed the mayor how to approach the beached monster by slipping through a narrow gap in the rigging. The sperm whale's eye was larger than the mayor's head. An aqueous film had formed over the iris, but he could still clearly make out the cetacean's expression. In its gaze, the mayor read the fact of necessity, a certain resignation, like when you need something and you know that even faith won't overcome the lack to be filled, that your prayers will rebound from one wall to another, echoing themselves, that your will and hope will be put to the test, hard, and that only the salt of time will form a patina over the cracks. Then, as he looked at the old fisherman, he understood why the sperm whale mattered so much to them, to all of them. He thought of the proliferation of "For Sale" and "For Rent" signs, proportional to the appearance of funeral parlours (you could count not less than three on the short Rue de l'Eglise alone), senior citizen clubs, bingo halls, and retirement homes. No one wanted to live here anymore; they only came to die, and now even sperm whales were leaving their oceanic shallows to come breathe their last on the shore, at Saint-Jean-de-l'Anse, which had become a sort of hospice. The cemetery

was stretching its arms toward the residential district, and soon there wouldn't be anything here but the ghosts of what the village could have been. A truck loaded with pine trunks passed close to him on the road, vibrating as it went. "And yet this is the only place where trucks leave the perfume of wood behind them," he mused ironically. Still in the haze of the caramel-coloured scotches he'd knocked back one after another, he returned toward the guard at a run. "This'ere big fish is, for us, a chance to be reborn with a new identity. What do you think about that, my good Pierrot?" And the mayor swore, on the head of Johnny Cash, that not another cubic centimeter of flesh would be ripped from the animal "until putrefaction sets in, if necessary."

The next day as he awoke, "Ring of Fire" was playing on the radio. Upon opening the curtains, he saw that his wife had hung his shoes from the laundry line. The comforting smell of hot coffee, like an uplifting tonic, filled him with youthful vigour. He was readying himself for the last fight of his political life for the local people, who had been ignored due to their isolation, and who would hereby regain their lost dignity.

That day, after much equivocating, it was agreed by the mayor and his advisors that the sperm whale's skeleton would be displayed in an impressive arc at the entrance to the village which would be re-baptized L'Anse-au-Cachalot: Sperm Whale Cove.

From that point on, a close struggle ensued between the biologists and the villagers. The former proposed that the latter retain all of the mammal except for the bones. As proof of their good faith, they even wished to bequeath the jawbone…in exchange for the intestines. At the Cow-boy, discussion about the agreement was heated until the mayor made his entrance. "Messieurs-dames, let's not be fooled. Let's not be satisfied with just the soft parts. If these people want the bones, it's for the same reasons we do. Plus, the rest of the cadaver doesn't interest us. We're not vultures, we aren't really going to consume the meat from a sick whale. As for the oil, we're not in the last century either, and these biologists seem to be unaware that, however remote and small the village we live in may be, we have electricity just like they do. And as for the intestines…isn't the zeal with which they ask for them enough to make you not want to let them go? We are proud people and we will hold on. And allow me to add that these nice scientists are consenting to leave the jawbone because at the Tadoussac Museum of the Sea, that's the only part of a sperm whale's anatomy they already have. These people get their kicks from finishing a jigsaw puzzle, imagine!"

The mayor made the rounds of the village, pronouncing the same speech at the bingo hall on Tuesday night, at the restaurant, at the school, and during Sunday Mass at the parish church. He reawakened a feeling of pride in his fellow citizens, made their pugnacious side reemerge, and it was worth it: their case was going to be heard in court. On the television news, you could read the villagers' placards: "Give Elsie back her sperm whale," "We aren't vultures," "Don't take us for fish," and even "Free Willy."

The biologists then went to see the mayor to reach an amicable agreement.

"We're civilized people, mon cher monsieur. Let's settle this affair between us. Let's divide the skeleton in two."

"And I can well enough imagine that, in your great generosity, you'll leave us the front of the fish, and therefore the jawbone, and that you'll settle for the rear portion, that is to say the intestines and the tail. Is that your proposition?"

"You're a perceptive man, mon ch—"

"Let us think about it. We'll summon you for a meeting with the time and place. And for goodness' sake, stop calling me your 'cher monsieur' as if you were condescendingly addressing some doddering old man."

"My fish looks like an old prune," said Elsie to her mother as she came inside. "You could crush it like a puffball mushroom. There's some kind of smoke coming out of it, and it smells like low tide. There's gunk coming out from under its tail, like when I pick up a grasshopper sometimes. My fish is all wrinkled, and the seagulls flying around it are angry. Come see, Mama." The closer they got to the carcass, the stronger the acrid smell of sailing and excrement became, enough to make your eyes water. The sperm whale's back was hillocked with dubious-looking cysts, and one eye had collapsed in on itself. Snails, slugs, and mauve mussels forged across its flank to suck the spot where the trocar had punctured it a few weeks earlier. The sand had opened up all around the monster which, from afar, looked like a massive coffin abandoned on the shore. If things were left to go on like that, the sea would swallow it back up with the rising tide or the earth would bury it. There was something pitiful about the spectacle. All the time lost wondering what would become of the sperm whale would have to come to an end. It was time for action.

Drunk on country music, the mayor had pleaded "the cause of the sperm whale" without even resorting to an attorney. When evening fell,

he would go for a scotch or a Spanish coffee at the Cow-boy, narrating the day's events to the villagers who, in ever greater numbers, left their houses to go have a drink. As a storyteller, the mayor had no equal. He took his place on the little stage and put on an entertaining one-man show. He'd always been a good communicator, actually, and the acuity with which he expressed himself had to do with the fact that, in another life, he'd been a priest. Love for a woman had turned him away from the priesthood, a decision he would never regret. The trial lasted twenty days, during which the village awakened from its torpor: a local newspaper was founded, a schooner went out hunting for sperm whales, old fishermen daydreamed while they polished their rusty harpoons, and Willy, the owner of the Cow-boy, repaid a lingering debt in its entirety. They nearly forgot the beast itself, as well as poor Pierrot, who bemoaned the acridness emanating from the fish in his nets.

Then the verdict came down: the sperm whale would be returned to the people of Saint-Jean-de-l'Anse. A hefty compensation would be paid to the City for the inconveniences caused by the length of the trial. Any interested villagers would even be offered a workshop in the art of removing ambergris from the whale's intestinal walls. That's when they learned that aggregates form in the digestive system of sperm whales, a little like bile duct stones in humans. They're deposited in the whale's cavities and attach themselves to the linings as they thicken. More layers accumulate throughout the sperm whale's life. Since whales usually sink when they die, it's rare to be able to get your hands on ambergris. When such a thing proves possible, the stone can be sold at a high price on the European perfume market where it comprises one of the ingredients in certain fragrances. The stone has to be broken with a little pointed hammer, similar to the one used by archaeologists, in order to appreciate its odour, which serves as a versatile base for notes of woodsmoke and the sugary accent of vanilla.

Cranes would arrive in the village shortly to remove the putrefied flesh.

Despite the smell that hung over the shore and shrouded the village like a sickly sweet perfume, a gathering of villagers descended onto the sand to gaze upon the whale before its definitive disappearance. The sun, the sea salt, the humidity, and the passage of time had caused the monster to split open and spill its insides in a pink-blue-grey rainbow. Its varicose veins traced labyrinths across the diaphanous envelope of the pancreas, and the venous fireworks stretched to the liver. An ecosystem

was developing in the monster's organs; algae and mollusks were quickly evolving among the profusion of flesh. The protective nets had given way during the sperm whale's rupture so that the sea birds could bury their little digging beaks into the sundered animal as they pleased. Even a dog ventured up to the carnage and gnawed ravenously at the tail. Upon opening the stomach as vast as a parachute, they eventually discovered some ground-up lobster remains and an octopus three yards long. This whale was a real bag of surprises. But what made an even bigger impression on the villagers was the asphyxiated fetus the size of a horse that had rolled out over its mother's purple stomach.

The bones were whitened first by the sun, to strip the fat, then by lime, to dry them out. Those of the fetus were placed willy nilly in a box and sent to the biologists with this note: "A miniature puzzle awaits you, minus the jawbone. We are well aware that you already have this piece. Your friends from l'Anse-aux-Cachalots." The use of the plural in the final toponymy—Sperm *Whales* Cove—had something rebellious about it. The impudence of the villagers manifested itself in all its splendour, all contained in the simple mark of the plural. Just two humble letters added. And boom!

The sperm whale's coming had turned the village upside down. All that unrest, all that pride at stake, the territorial fighting, and the bottles emptied at the Cow-boy to the tunes of Johnny Cash for a whale impregnated too young who, feeling her hour approach, had drifted toward firm ground, mad enough to believe that men would have the mettle to save her little one. She hadn't known them very well, those people already intoxicated by the vapours of the ambergris who were drinking up their pay at the Cow-boy in celebration of their victory while they massacred "The Beast in Me."

*Mallory Amirault*

# S'MALL THINGS STILL M'OVE

Mornings alone and picking your nose is not the same thing as laying tobacco, so i wipe it on myself. A cavern of little slugs must be removed. All romantic interest got between some organ and some fluid and i wonder if a new hobby is necessary. Not desired, just necessary and maybe that's why dogear'd pages rarely get look'd at again. It's later in the morning, though still early and i've listened to my share of melancholic music so earplugs and wool socks. It's like, there's a whole ocean to look at but the two of us wrinkle, bent over, looking at the shells and sea glass. We know the latter doesn't belong to the sea, but still she makes her mark and this tragedy is why the collection is so competitive. I was trying to write about my lover, but ended up writing about my nan. The way i want to describe her fingers as twirly, so as to be more magic less root vegetable. You can buy some things, but you cannot buy pigment, so texture is a welcom'd relief.

I think i might have an idea where my love is stuck, because my left lower abdomen is craving a twelve ounce ladle of pine needles. There's something fragile in looking at one another with worry about sleep crust. I want to make a joke about gluten, but some things are not funny. Aren't looks like a Mi'kmaq name and so yet again, i've been figur'd and fuck i just want to hold onto things so i have something. I don't know how she got anything to grow there between the sand and salt, but root vegetables might be the most savvy. Diaspora is a fungi.

If we're being honest with ourselves, there's never enough tupperware and looking ahead is near about the same as holding a mirror up to our vagina—there's no real certainty about anything except prisms. Speaking of which, so much of loss comes from being taken. It's not there. So what is it really, then, to let go of loss. An ethnobotanist or Justin Trudeau would tell you to go back to m'undane and tupperware. But i'm like, yeah sure, why, though, did most of what is supple get slightly more firm? Well, duh. Because ethno-gotno-satisfaction. When you let a house fly crawl on you, it's like you're letting yourself be already dead and probably why most of us hide our faces when we lick

and suck chip seasonings off our fingers at the back of the bus and why the beer is so god-good. And yeah, i might be sentimental and yeah, i might have taken three shits today. It's 2018. Dogs piss on whatever they want, so how we got here makes a lot of sense. Even then, i am happy that Mi'kmaq love sounds gay. The outside light comes on long before sunset and it's an unmistakable prediction.

*Alize Zorlutuna*

# WELA'LIN

You tell me my hair is beautiful
and I think you might be trying to tell me something important.

Wela'lin.

My phone tries to spell-check that shit and says there's no replacement.

There is no replacement.

Your hair,
like the sea, is something I cannot understand.
But I am trying to listen.
Hard to do with this mind and mouth and ego like a packed city bus
where someone's wearing too much perfume.

I mentioned braiding hair over lunch and J shared someone's baddass tweet.
I wish I could remember what it was, who it was.
You laid your head on J's lap as she read it.
I don't know a lot,
but I am trying to listen beneath words.

My sister and I used to braid each other's hair,
walled in, where you can't leave the never ending patterns of the
wallpaper without a man beside you.
It was a thing to do with our hands, our hearts.
To pass the time.
A kind of love.
And now I braid her daughter's hair.
The last time I saw Eda she gave me three braids sprouting at odd angles
from my scalp, part tangle, part determination, all love.
I slept with them in knowing they'd be matted by morning.

I mentioned braiding at lunch,
knowing it could take years or never for my hand to be a welcome
companion to your tangles.

You,
some kind of sister not sister.
I am trying to listen.

*Kat Savino*

# FERAL

After our mother dies, my seven-year-old sister's hair gnarls into a fist-sized nest of a knot. Dirt gathers along the creases of her neck; her eczema flares, leaving her small hands puffy and wounded. The doctor sends home a note for our father; she intercepts it, tears it up into shreds and smashes the pieces into the trash until the text blurs into the wet stink.

My sister becomes feral, and I do too, though I am fourteen, and so it is less visible, more of an adolescent hunching. But I spend a lot of time curled, teeth clenched, a cold burning ache spreading over my skin that deepens over many years.

An aunt comes and, noticing my sister's hair, slowly begins to unknot it. It takes hours and some cutting of the parts that cannot be saved. Other extended family members come, but then come less frequently, and then not really at all.

Much later this aunt, who was not related to me by blood, is one of the few I'm still in touch with, and is the only one to say: *I'm sorry, I wish we did more.* She is in her early fifties and slowly dying from ALS.

Sometimes I wonder if other apologies will come, but only when death approaches.

Bird 1: Peachy

My father gets us a lovebird after our mother dies, but just one. Peachy, we call her, because of her chest: rosy as if her heart couldn't be contained within its boundaries. She dies, but I don't remember her death or if she ever sang.

Bird 2: Pepper

The next bird is a green-yellow cockatiel my sister names Pepper for reasons I no longer remember. Pepper learns all our names as well as part of Beethoven's Fifth, which I teach her. I know I have to take care of her, but I don't want to. I don't want her. And so no one takes care of her and her cage turns to ruin. Eventually a friend of mine takes Pepper, who learns my friend's name and some other words. When Pepper dies almost

twenty years later, my friend calls: *She never forgot your names. She never stopped calling for you.*

Cat 1: George

At the recommendation of a therapist, who says my sister should have some unconditional love, we get a cat from the shelter named George, who is white with splotches of grey and has yellow-orange eyes. George is middle-aged and placid and, unlike most cats, he likes to be cradled like a baby. We get a collar with a red metal heart with his name engraved on it. He likes the little bits of McDonald's cheeseburgers that we feed him. My sister loves him. Then, he starts hiding. Then, he is sick and there's no cure. We feed him a whole cheeseburger as his last meal.

Cat 2: Sammy

After George, there is Sammy, short for Samhain, since she is born on Halloween. She is a grey and white Maine Coon. My dad thinks she will be friendly, but she's skittish and hides a lot. She reminds me of the dreams. I don't remember when I start having the dreams about a small animal lost in a big house. I can always hear the crying, and I'm somehow aware that the animal is too vulnerable to be alone in the house, and yet I can't find her, but I'm also afraid to look for her.

Cat 3: Mercury

I call him Mercury. It just seems like his name. Freddie or Roman messenger god. Freddie Mercury, the messenger. He lives upstairs in the two-family house and my friend lives in the downstairs part of the house. Mercury lives in the house and outside. More outside. The upstairs family doesn't always let him in even when he cries at the door. And so he sometimes cries at my friend's door. Maybe he's crying to get into his house. Or maybe he just hopes some door might open to him, any door.

Mercury is friendly—always running up to greet me. He presses his face to my hand, putting his smell on me to tell me he owns me. I love him. He's striped like a tiger, but darker, browner, smaller, one long black streak over his back.

I steal Mercury.

He's in the backseat of the car with my friend, not in a carrier and so when we open the door, he tries to escape. He doesn't know he's coming to a new home. My friend runs after him and dives into bushes to grab him.

Mercury is always escaping. He longs to be in or out whenever he wants. So much that we give up trying to keep him in, even though it takes years off a cat's life. I think of Jeanette Winterson, how her mother left her locked out all night, and she sat on the doorstep, and how now, even as an adult, she still lingers in this "liminal space" by leaving the door of her house open. She writes: "I love the way cats like to be half in half out, the wild and the tame, and I too am the wild and the tame. I am domestic, but only if the door is open."

When she's sixteen, my sister moves into the basement, which up until that point had been the family room, and my father has it remodelled. Mercury is the only one allowed into her new room.

I sometimes wear earplugs because the sound of my sister having sex travels through the vents. I'm twenty-two and still a virgin.

I don't go down there until she leaves for Amsterdam where she will live for years. She runs off in what I later learn is a several-day heroin bender.

After she leaves, I go down there and see bottles of 40s line the walls, cigarettes ground into the carpet, trash everywhere. It smells like the inside of a bird cage.

Mercury lives a hearty life for some years though gets cancer and his eye is removed. Then he has to be put to sleep, but I still think of him as having died in battle, which is also how I think of Freddie Mercury.

When I finally start having sex in my mid-twenties, my first lovers have to say: *please don't bite my lips*. I don't even remember what possessed me at the time, maybe I don't know how to kiss, but it's more than that: there's something feral in my animal body that has never been kissed or been close to another person, and it is so hungry for tenderness that it bares its teeth.

It's around this time that I ask everyone to call me Kat, cutting my name "Kathleen" in half, like I've chewed myself from a trap. But sometimes I ask a lover to call me by my whole name. Even though the sound of *Kathleen* gives me a phantom-limb tingle, hearing it allows part of me to curl around a memory I can't quite grasp.

Sammy changes over her many years. She becomes less nervous, and when I live at home in my twenties, she sleeps next to me, curled. In her final

years, she sleeps on my father's lap as he watches TV. When I'm in my thirties and visiting home, she sleeps on my lap, though she digs her claws in when I try to get up. I understand her—it's hard to both want and fear tenderness—then when you have it, any threat of loss makes you want to dig your claws in.

I stay in my one long-term relationship too long. I sometimes wish I hadn't spent those years trying to hold onto something, but it was the first time in my life someone had offered me what looked like security, and, for that, I was willing to give up a lot. And still the sweet times in that relationship ease the hurt on my skin, those warm years of sitting together huddled in front of the blue TV light, my face against someone else's familiar smell, though somehow I have erased this imprint from my mind like snow covering up animal tracks.

After he tortured his monkeys, separating them from their mothers, proving that humans need touch, affection, warmth, Harry Harlow worked to rehabilitate some of them. He found that, if given a surrogate mother, the monkeys could recover. If not given someone to care for them, even the ones that seemed normal still had elevated levels of stress hormones, racing heartbeats. In other words: they would look fine, but they still held suffering in their bodies.

I seemed fine to others, I think. Maybe my relatives fooled themselves: *she seemed fine*. I seemed fine, but my animal body was forgetting how to love, it was being severed from something; I was becoming a raw-edged silhouette.

"My body feels like a ribbon run along a pair of scissors," I wrote once in a story I showed my aunt, the one related to me by blood, my mother's only sister.

I realize only later that the story doesn't present my aunt in a great light—or rather, it just shows that I was suffering and alone, and maybe my aunt was suffering and alone too, but my story didn't show that. My story was just my story. As much as I accept that I have been estranged from my aunt and most of my extended family, part of me will always call their names, but I have learned others.

I'm trying to soften my jaw. To offer some kind of forgiveness even if I haven't been asked for it. I've realized that anger is like holding a torch by the fire end. Not only do you burn your hand, but of course life looks to be

full of shadows in that light. I hope my family will understand that writing this is not revenge but the only way I have to put this thing down.

When my sister is in her early twenties, she gets clean and comes home. She and my father plan an elaborate scheme. On the way to a restaurant, my dad unexpectedly turns into a park where a woman is standing by the side of the road. "Do you recognize that woman?" my dad asks.

"No," I say.

Then, she comes to the car and I look at her.

My sister looks somehow taller, has dyed her hair a deep brown that reveals a red tint when she turns her head to the sun. She has what look like tiny teeth marks along her arm. "From meth," she says, "when I was tweaking." My sister has a good memory, better than mine. "Aunt _____ used to call Mom every day," she says and I remember.

What are my aunt's sad animal dreams? They say to lose a sibling is the most invisible of losses. I have yet to totally understand this, but a friend of a friend, a psychology professor, makes this her life's work. Maybe my aunt had to disappear from my life because she already felt invisible. Even though my sister is younger, she has a better memory of our aunt and our mother. I resist some memories, especially the good ones, because they are evidence of what I have lost.

When I allow myself to remember my aunt, I can conjure her house and its very specific smell that is impressed deep in my mind like the footprint of an animal that once stepped in snow but got out.

Cat 4: Oscar

I'm thirty and he's the first one that's just mine. Or mine and my long-term partner's before we break up and I take him with me. My partner says his name and we know it to be right: Oscar. I will later add: the Wild/e Grouch. Grey like a shadow; light green eyes; strange, almost owlish face. He is six months old when I first hold him and he shakes in my arms. I take him home and he hides under a shelf in the bathroom for almost two weeks. To give him his medicine, I reach under the shelf, and grasp him firmly, but gently, by the scruff of the neck, like a mother cat would. I lie there on the bathroom floor, my hand under the shelf, letting him get used to my smell.

It's hard to love with your body when the animal part's been hurt, and that's the part needed for various pleasures, not just sex, but the bonding we do as animals.

It doesn't take Oscar too long to come out, explore, and slowly, he lets me touch him. Now, he sleeps next to me every night. He has trouble with strangers, and insists on waiting until they are no longer strangers.

After the break up, the feral part that wants to be touched, to be comforted, starts to howl. The howls become too loud to ignore. So I go to get a massage because I can't think of anything else to do. I need someone to touch me.

I am nervous but the practitioner is queer like me and so he feels like family. He is patient and gentle the way you would be with an animal that might hunker down in a corner, tail between its legs. When I ask him what he did before he became a massage therapist, he says he was a gardener, which makes sense; he knows how to tend to something and just wait.

He works out of a tiny house he built himself that smells like pine, burnt sage, lavender oil.

He has a cluster of metal geese on his wall. I think of the Mary Oliver poem "Wild Geese" when I look at it: "*Let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.*" I love massage, being lapped in warmth, someone soothing my back, shoulders, neck, hands, feet, legs, face, holding my head. So many see massage as a luxury, but for my hurt animal body it is survival, a way to inhabit the entire house instead of flitting between rooms.

One day, at least a year deep into work with this massage therapist, my mind drifts. I have a thought, half-dreamed while listening to the new-age music he plays: *this is the soundtrack for animals released back into the wild.* It is only later that night, when I stop half way through doing a stack of dishes that I realize—animals released back into the wild have been rehabilitated; another animal has nursed them; they have recovered.

Massage releases bonding hormones, like those released between parent and child, between lovers, between anyone you share physical intimacy of any kind with. The language the body writes in chemicals, connecting our animal body to another animal body. During massage, these hormones are released in both client and practitioner.

But then the massage therapist moves away, and so a part of me howls. Around the same time, I sever another animal connection, the one with my lover, and I howl some more even though I am the breaker. One time on the subway I cry so hard and so visibly that a woman with a German accent gives me an unrecognizable European candy bar as if she could

see the child-animal that has been hurt. She says something to me I can't remember. She squeezes my arm. I usually don't let strangers touch me, but I let her. I eat the candy bar at home under a pile of blankets and I feel better.

Sometimes when I smell burning sage, I miss the first massage therapist, especially if I smell it without expecting it. But he taught my animal body how to love and it has not forgotten.

I find a new massage therapist. At first I have trouble because nothing smells familiar in his apartment. But he is also very patient and I like how he starts the massage with me facing up since he says we're still getting to know each other. And so he begins where the last therapist ended a massage: by cradling my head in his hands. His hands smell like soap. Soon the smells become familiar. He says he has never experienced trauma, but there's something in his animal body that understands mine.

He has a dog that sits outside the door and occasionally whimpers and sometimes makes off with one of my shoes and hides it as if to take revenge for being shut out of the room.

"If I opened the door," he says, "she'd come in here and lick your face—dogs lick our faces because wolves regurgitate food to feed their pups."

Of course, I think, hunger and need and affection are gnarled together.

I don't dream about the animal lost in the house anymore.

Because I'm not afraid of finding her, of letting this animal part of me drift to the surface of my skin like a whale revealing her body as she rises to both breathe and let go of the breath she has been holding for so long.

*Ivanna Baranova*

# SOMATIC

today passes through
and nothing
in the affirmative settles

    to exalt me in the right ways
    is a task whose criteria
    gets lost

talking it through doesn't help
but apparently this is how
feelings gone unfelt
gateway grief

when i get hit
i don't fall
i hover

how panic
suspends
the body

how the breath

adheres itself

to any promise

of motion

how the eye dilates

in peripheral

light's

expanse

searching

for the yes in anything

habitually

you are

camouflaging

yourself

in the affirmative

let me mourn

why don't you just

*Zak Jones*

# TIDAL

The moonwake bearing down above me, and monsters in the sun
shadows casting on the earth
        underwater I can see it.
I see milk in the water, shining, oily on top,
        shining, I see it like clouds of the earth underwater.
Powder and pontificating sand spinning over
        the earth underwater, I see it.
I see a turnip growing upside down
        burying its stinger in the earth underwater.
The weight under the water.
        I see it.
I see the warning of the water,
        the earth underwater, suffocating, I see it.
I see the closeness of cowardice, a man on the earth,
        I am under the water and suffocating.
The might of the water, the mass of the earth deep up under me I see it.
The malevolence, the men beside the water,
        through the water,
I see it from the earth underwater. The mundane murder of time,
        a mirage, a trick of future blurred through water I see it under
        the earth.
Extreme times behind me and under me and around,
        from under the water, from my time on the earth
        the future came and I see it:
the cloud, I see it, hanging above
        the water from the earth underwater.
The cunning of water, the drowning, the suffocating
        buried alive in the earth underwater.
The timing, the turning of time,
        the contours of time, the earth
                underwater; all of it, from the bottom of the
                ocean, I can see.

*Claire Kelly*

# BLESSED IN THIS CRAG

I cuddle up with the broken dog on the porch.
Nobody promised me a three-lane highway
to and from isolation, no traffic.

I sleep heavy on my hands until they pinprick,
and so I dream about fighting a polar bear
to save my mom's dog.

Never have I ever driven a car outside of a parking lot
and that was a decade ago.
But still I'm blessed with these spry feet

and a love of that sick gasoline smell,
a torso that weighs my arms and hands down
until they feel shot through with static,

nerve jam of pinched traffic signal. All summer
those around me say they're suffering with a bad cold. No one ever has a
good one—a good cold, as a concept,

does not exist. It was a nightmare golden eagle that scooped
the fat Lab up, the dog we all love unaffected by gravity
until I spoil with logic: *she's too heavy for that eagle to carry*.

Down she goes, pitching akimbo against boulders.
I sneeze to a chorus of worried *god bless yous*, especially on flights
where the shared air is over-recycled and germy.

I sneeze and cough airborne, bungee-corded to reason
and even gravity, but not my own weakness as I slam my stinging,
double-asleep hands into the muzzle of a bear that would

in the waking world chew me ragged and enjoy
my computer-tender meat. This time though,
the white bear scrams, startled and unsated.

When seeing any weakness in others my aunts emit:
*aww, bless'em*. I can't tell if they mean it or not; what
do we owe to a revealed lack?

The dog whimpering on a cliff-side cabin porch
and nothing to do but curl around her and wait.
Think off all the ways to be blessed—

a dog you love and who loves you,
the ability to fly, aided by machine, or not—
and all the ways nothing will help.

All week I wonder what horror it would take
for me to grab a pair of keys, turn them in an ignition, and floor it.
A quart of blood pouring forth, a body I love that needs saving.

*Sydney Məlidi Roberts*

# GREY WHALE

The rotting grey whale blubber was discomforting. It was around that time my parents split up. I remember because my family had this huge white van. Sixteen seater. When my mom and dad broke up she made him pay for half the snow tires. I'm happy I wasn't older than seven or I would have been a lot more embarrassed about driving in the big white van, with red indian feathers on the back. The beached dead grey whale was at the spit, an old village site of my tribe, the Weiwaikum, about a kilometer of shoreline stolen from us. My mom would tell me *this is where we are from, right here, thousands of years.* I just looked at the whale, lying on the rocky beach of my people, its blubber dented and deformed.

Dad called me Onion Girl after the Holly Cole song. He always took me with him to run errands in the big white van: parks, beaches, the bank. Bottles of Mike's Hard Lemonade clinking lightly as we drove, a feeling in my stomach like life is a pinball game and god is just winning right now. Once, he slammed on the brakes as I was drinking a slurpee and the straw skinned my mouth till I bled and my dad took me to the hospital. We were in the van when he took me to look at the dead grey whale. One of the last things we did together before they split.

*the grey whale–the white van*

I had a normal life on the rez. From what I can tell, my parents were pretty into drugs before they had me and my four older brothers. Although my mom quit before having my oldest brother, Wylie. "I did try heroin though," my mom admits. "Wasn't really for me." My dad, Norm, was sober, apparently, up until me. He was at a treatment centre when I was born because he overdosed on coke and almost died. When I grew up Wylie told me stories about what it was like before I was born. "Norm would set out plates for no reason," Wylie would say.

When Norm got addicted to crack again I must have been seven because my little brother Chance was only three. I knew something wasn't right when Norm would drive the big white van behind the bowling alley to visit his "friends." Leaving me and my god sister in the van while he cracked out. I sat there thinking a drug dealer's house was behind a

bowling alley named Crystal Lanes, thinking drug addicts don't live with themselves they live with the drug. At night, I brushed Chance's teeth and thought, "He's lucky he won't remember this."

*the grey whale–the white van–crystal lanes*

My mom found out about the coke because all the native jewelry was pawned and the little money they had gone. I woke up one morning and my dad was missing. I sat at the bottom of the stairs looking at his shoes. I knew it was serious. It wasn't long after this my mom kicked him out. I asked her to give him a second chance but she said he was on his fourth chance. I can't blame her. Living with drug addicts is shitty. My mom threw his shirts off the balcony, they landed in our own yard. They billowed down in a big black cloud. She said, "We will have to pick them up later, but I don't care." Our family was pretty poor after that. I knew because I would look in the cupboard for food and still be hungry. I offered to quit dance lessons but my mom always said the same thing: "We'll make it work."

*the grey whale–the white van–crystal lanes–dad gone*

That year for Christmas I asked for a popcorn machine. On Christmas Day, Wylie was eating waffles with blueberries and whipped cream, leftovers from my grandparents' house. He was mid-mouthful when he said, "Holy shit there's smoke!" We ran outside. I remember looking at our house from across the street, burgundy siding through watery eyes. Fire truck parked out front. The firemen looked at the electrical situation and told us it was nowhere near code, we were lucky it happened small now rather than big later.

After that we lived with my grandparents for a year and a half. Me, my brother Chance, and my mom in one room. I slept on a twin mattress on the floor. I was young, eight, so it didn't matter much. Blaze slept in the ironing room, Grady in the carving room, Spencer slept on the couch in the living room. Wylie had his own room. The smell of laundry detergent was always over powering, but it was a lot better than going to school smelling like weed. Plus there was always food in the house. My grandparents made dinner every day at five o'clock. The fried chicken smell would stick in my clothes.

I didn't see my dad for a long time. Except once or twice when Chance and I would go up to Fort Rupert where my other grandparents are from, and stay with them for spring break. It was always awkward. In my head I called him Norm, he was never Dad, not really. My mom would say that he loved us, but he loved drugs more.

We moved back into our own house after the fire, mid-renovation because the contractor took the money and left. I was nine but I knew things like this only happen on the reserve, shoddy electricity, half reno-ed house. This is when the real trouble with my brother Grady started. After a series of suspensions and eventual expulsion for hitting a kid in the head with a two-by-four, he went to live with my dad in Fort Rupert. Grady told me Norm offered him crack for the first time, granted he was already into hard drugs by then. Eventually Grady moved back. I grew to really hate him. So many nights of him and my mom screaming because he was just so high on drugs. Coked out. Kicked out, nowhere to go, comes back, gets clean, steals, coked out, fight, kicked out. Rinse, repeat. The house would be spotless when he was on opioids because he would clean for hours. He pawned anything of value for coke; I couldn't keep my birthday money in my room or it would disappear. Heroin was the scariest, Wylie found needles under his bed. I'm ten years old and I think to myself if something looks like it's for science it's probably for drugs.

Grady robbed the Petro Canada gas station and never got caught. I laughed at the picture of him in the newspaper, black stocking over his head. Not long after this he was in and out of prison. I hated him for making our family fight, I hated him for stealing from me. I hated him for the eventual relapse we would all have to go through. All my native jewelry pawned, that's always the first sign.

*the grey whale–the big white van–crystal lanes–*
*dad gone–valuables vanished*

I was fifteen when my dad moved back to Campbell River to "get closer" to us. Most of us were resistant, Chance and I were weary. He lived in a small house up the hill with his girlfriend. Her hugs felt good because she was so squishy. He told me how when he lived in Indonesia if you wanted to get high you would go see a local and they would take you to this hut and throw pot plants on the fire. He told me how he once tried a sense deprivation tank and if I ever got the chance I should try it. He told me how he got kicked out of Hawaii preparatory school. He told me how the

nuns beat him to be right-handed instead of left. That summer he died of a heart attack. I couldn't process it for a long time. I didn't even go to the viewing. I didn't tell any of my white friends.

I didn't know how native I was until I moved to university, because I had no backdrop to hold it up to. I was pretty shocked to see how white the world was compared to the rez. People in Campbell River silently hate indians, people in Vancouver loudly hate indians. "Are you mixed?" they ask. I am not a dog. "But you don't look native," they say. They tell me how I am supposed to look. I couldn't believe one of my first year "friends" dressed up as "an indian" for Halloween. He couldn't understand why it was offensive. All abs and "war paint."

After Halloween I did mushrooms for the first time. My brother Grady called during the trip, he had a radar for these types of things. He told me he was homeless and living on East Hastings with his boyfriend, Boydy. The first I had heard from him in years. Was homeless any better than missing? I would go down to the east side with a pack of cigarettes and ask if anyone had seen Grady. Twenty-five cigarettes meant I could ask twenty-five times. When I finally found him I told him he looked really good for a homeless person. He always had a good jawline and high cheekbones. "Heroin preserves," he said. I bought him socks, underwear, toothbrush, toothpaste, shaving cream, razors. He said he wasn't hungry much. He said, "There's always somewhere to get food." We went to a cafe on Water Street and I went inside to wash my hands and order for us. Grady came in to use the restroom and the owner told him he wasn't allowed. I asked why and he said, "Because he's homeless." I wasn't about to put up with that kind of bullshit so I asked them to give me my money back, but they said it was fake. Grady forced the money out of the shopkeeper's hands, we turned to leave, another worker guy blocked the door and grabbed my arm. Shopkeeper said he was calling the police. Grady said, "Let go of my little sister or I will start breaking shit." Jarred olives exploded across the floor. Pesto sauce splattered onto my white shirt. We pushed past them only to find the police outside. They immediately handcuffed my brother. I told them to handcuff me too because I was just as guilty but because he was known to police they had to take him in for questioning. They said I could wait for him outside the station. They said it would only be an hour.

The sun on the downtown eastside is always hotter. I sat outside the discharge doors for hours, seething, hating the police more with every minute the DTES sun beat down on me. I waited until the sun went

down to go home, stopping to tell Boydy that Grady was in jail. I gave him ten bucks and an apple. Grady later told me they held him for two days. "It's illegal to hold a heroin addict for more than twenty-four hours without methadone," he said. I still have no idea if that's true.

For the winter Grady and Boydy moved to Haida Gwaii. He called to tell me he won a thousand bucks at the casino and he could now buy Christmas presents for Boydy's family. I was with Wylie in Mexico on Christmas Day when Chance called to tell me Grady died and we had to come home. I wasn't really surprised, I had been worrying for months, now everything is laced with fentanyl. Wylie said, "Grady always said he would never live past twenty-seven." Wylie said, "If you play stupid games you win stupid prizes." A day later Boydy died, probably from the same batch of fentanyl-laced heroin, but maybe from a broken heart. Grady and Boydy are buried up in Haida Gwaii.

In the big white van, going to see the grey whale, I saw my dad run a red light. Mike's Hard Lemonade bottles clanked beneath the driver's seat. I remember the smell of the sticky sweet bitter lemon on his face when I hugged him. The same smell on my boyfriend after a night out. I guess you never know what will be comforting.

*the grey whale–the big white van–crystal lanes–dad*
*gone–valuables vanished–mike's hard lemonade*

*Madelaine Caritas Longman*

# ROOM WITHOUT WALLS

a woman stands beside an unfinished chair

raw plywood hammer in hand

cells of light line the curtains

opening into white space

the walls undreamed

she holds her body like it is no enemy

and looks into me

i want this:

eyes like the sun

tremble of nerves in the present

how she changes

the room

like light

but my eyelids unshutter

breath heavy as water

the wings of my heart a trapped bat

as i gasp back into myself

the poem of her presence

shreds

its full moment folds

of cotton to shoulders

the fabric of her jeans

the silence that said

everything is here

in this room without walls

i don't know if she was someone i loved

or someone i was

the way in a dream everyone

is someone else

*Emily Skov-Nielsen*

# WHAT THE BIRDS KNOW

*for Shane, in memory*

Six-foot-three landloping theologian—mascara-eyed,
kooky as Coleridge—a Belfast buck in skin-tight jeans,

master conversationalist, you tongued your way through
the folds of me to find the very small and penultimate

nesting doll, the almost pit of the peach, that niggling
bullet you left in my bed that you wore on a chain

around your neck the night I opened and clattered
like a drawer full of forks—and the pluck, pluck that came

after, as you pulled your wife and child from the past: two asters,
stem-ripped and askew. It was *children*, wasn't it, not *child*,

if you count the one you hadn't met, who cinched
your mania in at the waist, giving you the hourglass figure

of illness that women like me crave and cave for—but now,
there'll be no more of your veering or verges, like the morning

you climbed over the guardrail of the boardwalk, and it wasn't
until we baited you with Jim Beam and cigarettes that you leapt

back, tossing your coat in behind you, dying for some kind
of splash; the black-blue sheen of its corvus colour flashed

before falling, falling. I imagine it was crows that watched
you go, in that hunter green grotto of spruce where the officers

finally found you; you walked all day to get there, crossed
through fields of bracken, burdock. Tell me one last thing:

were the birds true to their word, were you given back
to the sky, stunned and bright-eyed—sadder, wiser?

*Christina Cooke*

# HOMECOMING

"Hey. It's me." I switch the receiver to my other hand. "It's—hold on." I crane my neck to glimpse the clock above the Departures screen. "It's 5:40 a.m., Vancouver time." I pause, listening to the stillness of my sister's voicemail. "I'm about to board my flight. So, um, guess I'll see you soon sis." I sigh, no one there to meet my sound. "See you soon," I say again, hanging up.

The little light clicks off as the flight attendant's voice fills the cabin: "The captain has now turned off the 'fasten seatbelt' sign…" I stare out the window at the crisp white dents in sunlit clouds. I took out a line of credit for this. I hug my backpack against my chest. I don't know how I'm going to pay it back. Daddy offered to help, but he's sold the drapes, the couch, the living room table. *Is jus' me one*, he said when I asked. The hallway mirror, the reclining chair—all gone. *Wha mi need all dem someting fo?* It's just him one. My brother's three years dead and my sister's far away, back home. I looked around at the house thinning like the hair on Daddy's head then told him no. Still a year left in college, I got a student line of credit. I'll pay my own way.

The plane bounces twice, shaking me awake. My seatbelt digs into my hips as the cabin erupts in applause. We made it *clapclap* we're here *clapclap* well done captain—thank you, thank you.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the flight attendant says, "Air Jamaica is pleased to welcome you to Norman Manley International Airport."

Outside my window, mountains rise in rich green swells against grey sky.

"The local time is 3:40 p.m."

The grass, the mountains beyond—all so green like evergreens in spring. I turn to the woman next to me.

"Are we here?" I ask.

She laughs. "Where else would we be?"

I keep searching as people stand, overhead bins popping open. I'm here, back in Jamaica. I'm *home*. I gaze out the window at the passing trees, bright and rich like Grouse on a clear day. I can't tell the difference anymore. It's all the same green.

"You're Jamaican?" the customs official says.

"Yes."

"What part?" he says, rifling through my birth certificate and passport.

"What part am I Jamaican?" I glance at my arms and chest.

He looks up, adjusting a strap on his vest. "What part of Jamaica are you from?"

"Here," I respond. "Kingston."

It says so on my birth certificate, but he keeps watching me.

"Where do you live now?" he says.

"Canada." Like it says in my passport.

"Why?" he says, still staring. He wants to hear me say it.

"Because that's where my father took our family."

"And your mother?"

I fidget with my backpack. "Dead."

"How?"

"Sickle cell." Like my brother.

"Where?"

"Here!" I exclaim. Exhaling hard, I smooth the front of my shirt to make myself calm. "Sorry. Here, in Kingston. Before we left eleven years ago."

He keeps watching my lips move in proper English, my accent all dried up. He smirks. "Yuh sure is Jamaica yuh come from?" he says, stamping my passport then signalling to the next person in line.

Walking towards baggage claim, I stuff my passport into my backpack. Behind me, I hear the *stamp-and-swoosh, stamp-and-swoosh* of the customs official clearing the line. It doesn't matter how I sound. I know where I'm from. Taking three long strides, I arrive at my carousel. I don't see my sister. She said she'd meet me inside.

"Mek mi help yuh, missus." A porter stands waiting in a black cap and maroon suit, his thin beard speckled grey.

I force a smile. "No thanks, I'm okay."

"Yuh sure?" he says, smiling back.

"Yeah, I'm okay."

"Mek mi help yuh. Cheap! Cheapa dan all dem smaddy dem," he says with a wink.

I glance at the other porters leaning against trolleys by the wall. He reaches out to take my backpack.

"I'm fine," I say again, yanking it away.

"Miss—"

"No."

He laughs me off like I've made an adorable mistake.

"Leave." Glaring at him, I set my face into a hard frown. "Go!"

The other porters chuckle. Smile cracking, he straightens up. He's taller than me, thinner, his arms too short for such a gangly body. I look at his hands, calloused and empty, then wonder if he's ever held a passport. I wonder if in all his years of carrying American bags, British bags, if he's ever packed up and carried his own. My suitcase arrives. He doesn't budge as I lean down and take it off the line.

"Move, please," I murmur, setting it on the ground then drawing up the handle.

He looks at the tag's long ribbon, YVR stamped on its tail—signalling I'm a foreigner, I'm protected, I am the commodity that's been lured here to spend and for him to serve. We both know what he has to say. "Yes, *miss*," he says, swooshing out of my way.

Nearing the exit, I can't hear the noise of Customs anymore. All I hear are suitcases clacking and the porters laughing as that one crosses the room, rubbing his beard and pretending he doesn't notice them. I touch my face, cheeks bunched in a sly grin, realizing that even though I shouldn't, I was born here so I know I shouldn't, I'm laughing too.

Stepping into the muted daylight beyond the sliding doors, I cough then clutch my chest. The sudden change from air conditioning to humid wind makes me wheeze. Coughing still, I walk to the curb, the crumbling concrete giving way to potholed road. Next to me is a woman in a teal church dress yelling at a man tying suitcases to a car roof with pieces of twine. Across the street is a patty stand with a long long line, and next to it are men in mesh shirts leaning against a wire fence, blowing smoke through their noses as they puff and puff and children selling Pepsi and coconut water from beat-up coolers and porters pushing too-full trolleys behind white families, their skin garish against all the black and next to me a child with black arms and black hair and "Akúa!" and down the sidewalk black and behind me black and I look and I look and "Akúa!" someone's calling my name as I pull my suitcase close, sneezing against the car exhaust and patties baking and peanuts roasting in the pit hitched to the bike parked behind Corollas packed with eight, ten passengers and tour buses boasting AC destined for resorts behind policemen wielding batons *move along move along* as so many people, black, black, the sight of us filling me till bursting. My God, I'm home.

"Akúa!"

Blinking, I turn around, holding my backpack close.

Someone honks. "Chile, yuh hearin' me?"

A few feet away, the exit doors slide open, rain clouds reflecting off the clear glass. I could go back. I could get on a plane and say *nevermind,* hiding my birth certificate in a place only I would know. A firm hand grabs my arm and spins me around.

"Akúa," my sister says, "yuh comin' in de car or what?"

My sister. Her hair falls in fat twists to shoulder length, silver hoops dangling from lobes scarred with keloided skin. She's wearing a silver dress bunched up to one side in some style I've never seen. But her face, though, that same face: bushy brows angled high over my same cheeks, nose broad and royal above thick lips. She smiles, her lower lids bunching round her brown eyes like Bryson, like me. She's lost weight.

"You've lost weight," I tell her.

"No," she says. "I've just grown up and stretched out."

"Makes sense," I respond. It's been eleven years. Squaring up to her, I realize we're the same height now. My neck tingles with memories of a childhood spent always looking up. "Is this the part where we do the tearful reunion?" I ask, trying to shake the tense quiet.

She chuckles, pulls me in for a hug. "Still trying to be the funny one."

"Hi," I murmur, smiling into her neck.

She rubs my back then holds me out to get a good look, studying me to see what's different and what stayed the same. I lift up my arms, giving her clear view of my polo shirt and boot-cut jeans and braids pulled back in a messy bun. I still have a soft pooch that Daddy insists on calling my baby fat. I have two orbs of keloided skin, like Tamika, from when I was twelve and tried to pierce my ears myself. Giving me a proud pat, she pulls my bag to the car.

"What took you so long?" she says.

"Customs." I shrug. "You know how it goes."

"Customs?" she says, closing the car trunk. "But you're Jamaican. Why dem giving yuh trouble?"

"That's a good question," I respond, sliding in to the passenger seat.

She starts the car as I lay my backpack across my lap. Turning the AC to full blast, she cranes her neck to navigate out of the arrivals line-up.

"Tamika," I murmur, unzipping my bag.

She doesn't hear me, honking at a tour bus that cut her off. Riding their bumper, she yells something at them, something snarled and angry,

patois weighing her words like layers of lichen. I have no idea what she's saying.

"You have grey hairs," I sputter, staring at the strands dipping in and out of her twists.

Still mad, she leans back into the car then responds to me in patois. I try to hear her, sensing the mood in the vibrations from her to me but not catching the meaning. I rub my ears, feeling like I'm listening through water. I don't know what she's saying. She notices my blank stare then exhales slow, giving herself a minute to let her voice adjust.

"Yes, thank you for reminding me of my age," she says. "Just what every woman wants to hear from her little sister." She flashes her brights in the bus's rear mirror then lets them go.

Am I Jamaican? I couldn't understand her, my own sister born of the same blood. Fiddling with my backpack, I take out the box and hold it flush on my lap. "Tamika, look."

"Look at what?" she says, indicating left but stuck at a red light.

I rub my hand over the dark wood. This box, I know. All this I've seen and heard cry and can still hear his voice, high-pitched and sweet. "Here he is, Tamika." I put the box on her knee. "Here's Bryson. I brought our brother home."

She nearly killed us. In the few seconds between seeing the box and screeching to a stop, we nearly died. She looked down. She screamed. She jammed on the gas like she was losing all her blood through the soles of her feet, the full weight of her in just those five toes. I'd never seen her so pale. You ever seen that? All her colour—gone. You ever seen a black woman turn *white as a ghost?*

"Stop it," Tamika hisses, her forehead on the steering wheel.

I keep laughing.

"Mi seh stop!" she yells.

The cars behind us keep honking, a few leaning out their windows to yell something dirty as they drive past. We nearly died. The insides of my thighs feel a little moist with something I shouldn't say. I can't help but laugh. Leaning over, I wind up Tamika's window to muffle the sound of their slurs.

"You look like a ghost, you know that?" I settle back into my seat. "A black-white ghost."

We're facing a concrete barricade. Tamika managed to stop before ploughing right through.

"Why didn't you come?" I ask her.

She kisses the lacquered grain of Bryson's box in a gentle *hello*.

"His funeral," I say a little louder. "Why didn't you come?"

Saying nothing, she straightens up the car and pulls into early afternoon traffic. I called her after he died. She said she was sorry. I couldn't stop crying. She said she was so, so sorry. I asked her when her flight would arrive, that I'd take Daddy's car and pick her up. Static crackled through the phone, punctuating the long silence.

"Daddy would've paid for your ticket," I tell her.

She's as quiet now as she was then, pursing her lips as our mother sometimes would. Daddy made all his plans for our departure after Mummy's death. He said we needed a new start, that it was what our mother wanted. Tamika asked him if he'd crawled into her grave and asked her himself.

"*I* would've paid for your ticket," I murmur.

She laughs. "How?"

I was a freshman. I would've found a way—but I don't bother explaining. Even if I'd bought it, she wouldn't have come. When our father came home with the visas to leave, she barricaded herself in her bedroom and wouldn't come out for three days. She was going to start sixth form right there, at home, like her and Mummy had planned. She'd gotten a scholarship. She'd already called and inquired about the fees for room and board.

"Why?" Daddy yelled, threatening to break down the door.

She wouldn't answer him. All she did was slide her scholarship letter under the door, day after day, the seal on the top waxy and bright. Hampton School for Girls. Our mother went to Hampton so she was going too and that's that. My father emptied the house around her, trying to smoke her out with silence. She sucked the smoke in and turned it back on us all. For eleven years, all I knew of my sister was her voice through the phone. But our brother had died. I thought he'd be enough to bridge this distance I didn't understand.

"Why didn't you come?" I ask again. Still silence, so I ask again, and again, till she turns on the radio and switches to the news. We are sisters, not friends. Our shared blood means there is nothing here to earn, to covet, to lose. We will remain sisters no matter what happens, no matter what we do or don't do or how many years we can withstand being apart. I want to scream but she isn't going to answer me, so I clamp my lips shut against the angry weight of all my questions. She keeps driving, sighing

with the relief of knowing I'm due no answers. My sister did not come to my brother's funeral. That's that.

"Where are we going?" I ask her.

As we drive along, I lift my left knee, then my right, feeling my sweaty skin slide all over the pleather car seat. I'm angry and I'm hot. The AC's on full blast and it's starting to rain but I'm still so hot. My pits are soaked and my legs feel slimy and now we're stuck in traffic. People pass us on the sidewalk as we wait behind cars backed up at a slow light.

They're hot too, the pedestrians, holding plastic bags and backpacks as shields against the rain. And the drivers in front and beside us wipe condensation from the insides of their windshields, then use the same rag, the same yellow rag to cool their shiny brows. Our skin and the sky all weeping, puddles forming in the dips above collarbones and potholes in the road and I remember now, I remember how much I hate this city. Kingston can feel so deadening in the afternoon, heat sitting stagnant as though taunting a hurricane to blow it free. I crack a window to catch some breeze, smelling rotting trash and fruit ripening in stalls I can't see. I hate this city, but the scent of sweet sop ripening in downtown heat still makes my stomach moan.

It's always so hot so we build our banks and schools higher, higher, many-storey buildings stretching into the sky to catch wah breeze. And we zoom too fast down thoroughfares and pick-up-and-run across deadlocked streets and *gogogo* cars honking and people yelling we try to stir the air with the sheer force of our skin.

*Beep!Beep!* a horn goes in quick succession, implying *Move nuh man!*

*Beepbeepbeep!* another goes, saying *'xcuse missus, move up a likkle an' mek mi pass?*

*Beeeeeeeep!* like *Woi! Yuh try fi kill me? Tek time round dat cawna, sah. Mi dehya.*

*Beep beep* with every honk of the *beeeep* Tamika too *beepbeep* announcing, *I'm here.*

*I'm here*, so don't hit me. *I'm here*, so let me through. *I'm here*, so move up and make space. We continue down the street with the press and pause of traffic. We wait at stoplights and crosswalks, windshield wipers squealing in the rain. We hop over sodden grass and clogged drains, school khakis creeping muddy from the hemlines up. We run and we yell and we *beep beep*, announcing ourselves to the hills and gullies and thickening heat. We are here.

"How much farther?" I ask.

Tamika forces a chuckle. "Impatient like wha."

We continue up, up, passing half-built houses with rebars turned black with rust. I turn to face her, my questions turned splinters burrowing deep into my insides. Leaning over, I kiss her on the cheek. She smiles then tugs on my braids, like she would when we were young. Silence fills the car like smoke, both of us choosing to let the moment pass.

We go then stop then go behind streetlights, the houses spreading farther and farther apart the more we drive. Tamika turns down a side street, pulls off the road then parks on a green bank. I turn to her. She smiles then turns the car off.

"Wait, so, we're here?" I ask her.

She chuckles. "Excellent deduction, your highness." Undoing her seatbelt, she slides the lockjaw into the grooves of the steering wheel then hops out of the car.

I look across the street at a series of houses, green roof then red roof then red roof, the first two with flowers and the third without. "Where are we?" I yell, climbing out of the car. "Where is this?"

"Lawd 'ave mercy," Tamika says. "Do you really not remember?" She grabs her umbrella then crosses the street. "This is our old neighbourhood. I thought you'd want to see our house."

I watch her walk ahead, umbrella spread out against the hot rain. I used to fantasize about coming back, about busting down the door then laying on the living room rug until the new owners left and my own family came home and we would run around and make all the rooms smell like us again. But now, standing on the side of the road, all I see are plain houses with clogged gutters and a stray cat strolling in between. I can't tell the houses apart. Putting Bryson in my backpack then zipping it up quick, I follow Tamika up the road till she stops. She turns into the driveway of a one-storey house with faded red shingles above cream-coloured walls, front gate crumpled to one side in a mangled mess. Tamika climbs the stairs as I stand by the metal swing set, watching the wooden seat rock back and forth, back and forth.

"Hello?" I yell.

Tamika disappears around the back of the house.

"Hello?" I call again.

I want to see who lives here, who now calls this place home. Daddy sold the house before we left. It was the only way he could afford to get us all on the plane. I press my forehead against a window to peer inside, but all I can see are red security grills and a white curtain pulled shut.

From somewhere inside, I think I hear a soft click, like the sound of a TV being turned off.

"Akúa!" Tamika calls.

I follow her voice to the backyard.

"I don't think they're home," she says.

"You know who lives here?"

She nods. "They let me walk through once, before they pulled up the flowers and gutted the front rooms."

I stare at the windows, wondering if my bedroom is still a bedroom and what colour the walls are now.

"That's where you fell when you were six," Tamika says. She points to a large PVC pipe jutting from the top of the wall and curving down into a concrete slab on the ground.

"You used the pipe as a slide," Tamika says, "which was fine. Saved Mummy and Daddy the trouble of having to expand the swing set. Then one day you fell. I don't remember how, but you fell from the top and landed on your face and knocked out your two front teeth. No one would have cared, except they were your adult teeth. They had just finished coming in." She pokes at my gums. I swat her away. "Mummy put your teeth in milk while I washed out your mouth and Daddy called around for a dentist. It was a Sunday. Do you know how hard it was to find a dentist on a Sunday?"

I stare at the spot where pipe meets ground, concrete giving way to weeds. I remember how upset Daddy was about my teeth, but I don't remember the feeling of falling. All I remember is the pain.

"We should go," Tamika says. "They're not home. We need to leave before the neighbours think we're here to break in."

I gaze up at the house. This is a place that's supposed to mean something, this squat little house with cracked tile stairs.

"Are they fun?" I ask Tamika.

"Hmm?"

"The people who live here. Are they fun?"

She chuckles. "They're a family. This is their house. What does *fun* have to do with it?"

I gaze up at the roof. "I hope they're fun." This is a place that's supposed to be deeper than feeling, stronger than blood. I hope the new family painted the walls orange, or red, and turned the bathroom into a closet and my bedroom into a disco. I hope they have a daughter, or a

full-grown son. I hope they do backflips off that pipe that would put my sliding to shame.

"Come on," Tamika says, walking back to the front of the house.

"I'll meet you by the car," I respond.

She nods then continues on. Once she's round the corner, I flip the latch on Bryon's box, opening it just wide enough to slip my hand inside. Daddy kept his room in Canada the same. The posters, the plastic figurines—they're all still there. Running my tongue along my teeth, I sprinkle a few pinches of my brother on the cracked-up concrete. The dresser's still stuffed full of his clothes, the handles covered in dust. It's the only room our father hasn't stripped to the bones. Spitting into my palm, I rub my hands together till his dust makes a soft paste.

"What're you doing?" Tamika says. I hadn't heard her come back.

Glancing over my shoulder, I hold up my hands.

"So you just," she pauses, "*brought him with you?*"

Turning back to face the house, I give her a small shrug. "I put him in my bag. I put my bag on the plane. That's that."

She comes a little closer. I open the box like she might join. She stops then turns around, standing guard around my privacy to do this thing she doesn't understand. So I wipe him onto the pipe, against the wall, into the grass and dirt and remnants of my old blood. I hope the new family laughs. I hope the new family fights, screaming till hoarse. I hope they mistake these streaks for filth, hosing it off and washing him deep. And when they come laughing, ready to play, I hope my brother grows into thick weeds that will break their fall, bones intact.

# CONTRIBUTORS

**Mallory Amirault** is an Acadian Mi'kmaq writer and performance artist from Mi'kma'ki, Nova Scotia. She is the Editor-in-Chief at *Discorder Magazine*, living and working on the unceded territories of the Musqueam, Sḵwxwú7mesh, and Tsleil-Waututh peoples.

**Faith Arkorful** has had her work published in *Hobart*, *Arc Poetry Magazine*, *Canthius*, and *The Puritan*, amongst other places. Her poem "Vacation" was recently selected by Hoa Nguyen for inclusion in the *Best Canadian Poetry* in English 2018 anthology. She was born in Toronto, where she still resides.

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**Jessica Bebenek** is a writer, bookmaker, & transdisciplinary artist splitting her time between Montreal & Toronto. Her third poetry chapbook, *Fourth Walk*, was published by Desert Pets Press (2017), and her collection of knitting patterns for poems, *k2tog*, is forthcoming from Berlin's Broken Dimanche Press (Fall 2018). @notyrmuse www.jessicabebenek.art.

**Jenny Boychuk**'s poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Best New Poets 2016*, *Copper Nickel*, *The New Quarterly*, *Room*, *Prairie Fire*, *Salt Hill*, and elsewhere. She holds an MFA in Poetry from the University of Michigan Helen Zell Writers' Program. She currently lives in Blind Bay, BC.

**Chee Brossy** is Diné from Red Mesa and Wheatfields, Arizona. He is a recent graduate of the MFA program in fiction at the Institute of American Indian Arts. He works and lives in Santa Fe. His story is from his fiction manuscript *Not That Way*.

**Cody Caetano** is a Pinaymootang First Nation and Portuguese writer currently enrolled in the MA in Creative Writing at the University of Toronto, where he is at work on a nonfiction manuscript under the mentorship of Lee Maracle. His first chapbook is forthcoming from Knife | Fork | Book in 2019.

**Emily Casali** is a Canadian writer from Airdrie, Alberta. Her nonfiction was longlisted for the 2016 CBC Creative Nonfiction Prize, and her

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Born in Jamaica, **Christina Cooke** is a fiction and non-fiction writer who splits her time between New York City and Vancouver. She is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop and a former MacDowell Fellow. Her work has appeared in *The Caribbean Writer*, *Epiphany: A Literary Magazine* and *Guernica* (forthcoming).

**Antonia Crane** is writer, sex worker, professor, and activist in Los Angeles. She is the author of the memoir *Spent*. She has appeared on CNN's *This is Life with Lisa Ling* and has been interviewed on *WTF* with Marc Maron, and Michael Smerconish on *POTUS* radio, where he compared dancers to Uber drivers.

**Mariah Lynne Dear** is a majestic woman who lives in Vancouver, British Columbia. She is a poet, a nonfiction writer, a feminist, a writing workshop facilitator, and the coordinator of the Vancouver Youth Poetry Slam. Since her spoken word poetry debut at age seventeen, she has travelled across Canada competing both individually and on a team representing the city of Vancouver. You can find out what Mariah is currently working on at mariahlynnedear.com.

**Mercedes Eng** is a mixed writer of Chinese-migrant/settler descent teaching and learning in Vancouver, unceded Coast Salish territories. She is the author of *Mercenary English* and *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes*, winner of the 2018 Dorothy Livesay Poetry Prize.

**Boston Gordon** is a poet and writer living in Philadelphia. They run the You Can't Kill A Poet reading series, which highlights queer/trans identified poets in Philadelphia. They received a Leeway Foundation Art & Change grant in 2017. They have previously been published in *Bedfellows*, *Tinderbox*, *Guernica* and more.

**Djamila Ibrahim**'s debut short story collection *Things Are Good Now* was one of *Now* Magazine's 10 Books To Be Excited About in 2018 and has made several CBC lists of Books/Writers To Watch For in 2018 as well as being reviewed favourably in many other publications. Djamila lives in Toronto and is currently working on a novel.

**Scott Jackshaw** lives and writes in Edmonton, Alberta. His work has previously appeared in *Glass Buffalo* and *The Capilano Review*, as well

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**Zak Jones** is a student at University of Toronto in the English and Creative Writing program, where he has completed a manuscript of poetry and is working on a novel about isolation in Southern Appalachia. His writing has been featured in *Palimpsest: Yale's Literary Arts Journal*, *Hart House Review* and elsewhere.

We are surrounded by stories and poetry, and **Sarah Kabamba** just wants to share some of them with you. She is of Congolese origins, and now lives in Ottawa.

**Claire Kelly**'s first full-length collection, *Maunder*, is available from Palimpsest Press. Her poem "Mother, What Should We Do?" was recently longlisted for the CBC Poetry Prize. She lives and writes in Edmonton. Her second book of poetry, *One Thing – Then Another*, will be released in 2019 with ECW.

**Jonathan Kemp**'s first novel, *London Triptych*, won the Authors' Club Best First Novel Award. He lives and works in London.

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**Zoe Power** is a settler Australian grad student, lured to Coast Salish BC by the mountains and the ocean and is somehow still here, despite all of the rain. She's interested in the ties between people, place, and story, and explores them via word and sound.

**Sydney Məlidi Roberts** is Kwakwaka'wakw; Ligwilda'xw/ Weiwaikum on her mother's side and Kwakiutl, Musgamagw Dzawada'enuxw, and

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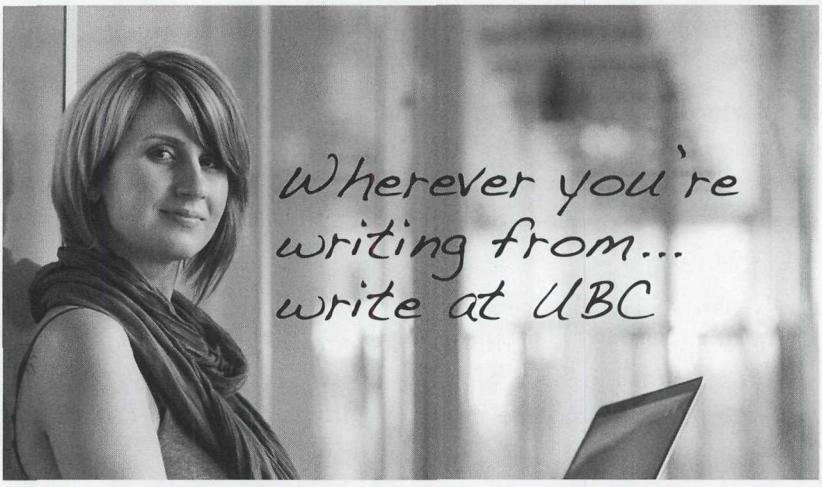
**Kat Savino** holds an MFA from Columbia University. Her fiction, poetry and essays have appeared in various publications including: *Narratively*, *Apogee*, *DIAGRAM*, and the *Los Angeles Review*. She was a recipient of A Room of Her Own Foundation's Orlando Prize in Poetry. She is writing a memoir.

**Emily Skov-Nielsen** is the author of *Volta* (Anstruther Press), and an MA in English/Creative Writing graduate from UNB. Her poems have appeared in numerous literary journals across Canada such as *The Malahat Review*, *Prairie Fire,* and *The Puritan.* She lives and writes in Fredericton, New Brunswick.

**Corine Tachtiris** translates literature primarily by contemporary women authors from the Francophone Caribbean, Africa, and Canada, as well as from the Czech Republic.

**Alize Zorlutuna** is an artist, poet, experimental cook, curator, intersectional feminist, committed pedagogue, and life-long learner. Working across disciplines, she investigates issues concerning identity and power, settler-colonial relationships to land, culture, and colonial violence, as well as intimacy with the more-than-human, and technology. She currently lives and works in Tkaronto.

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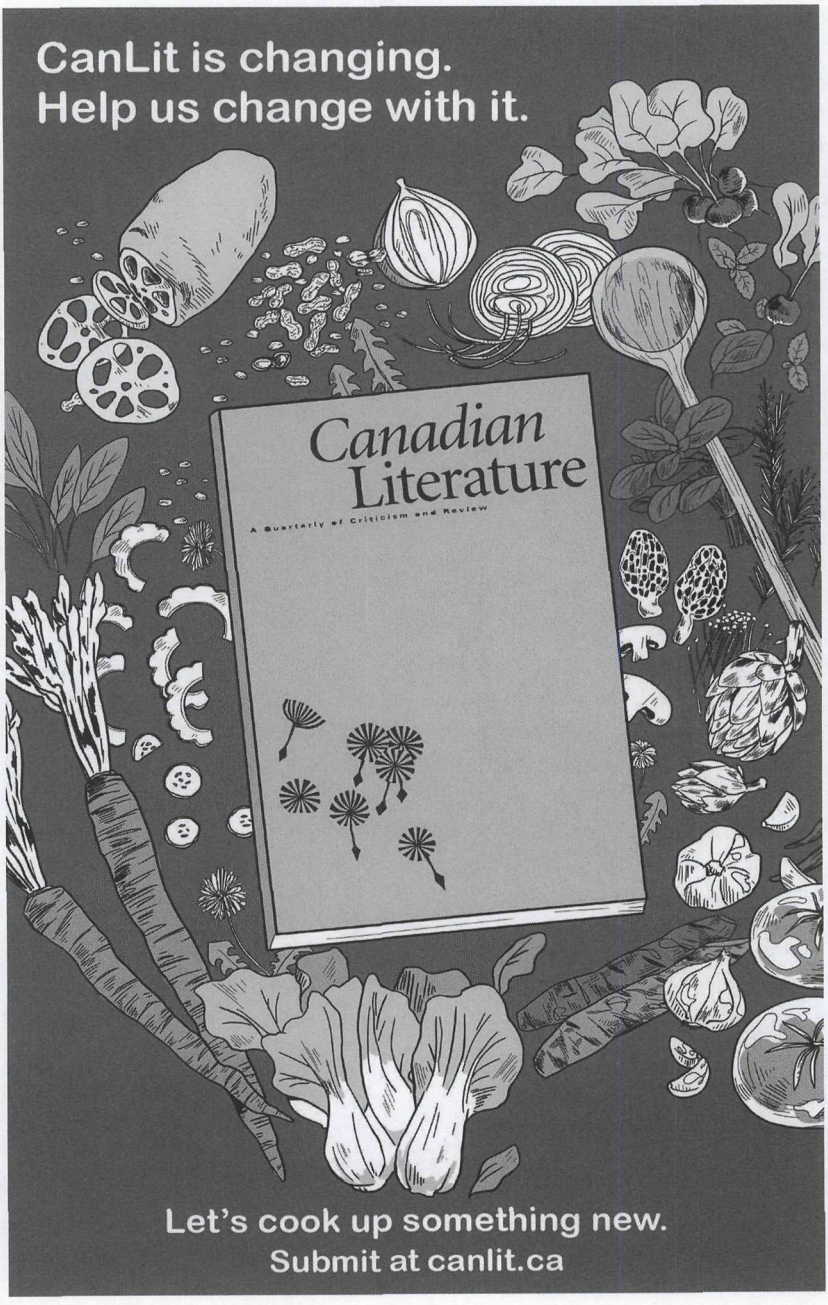
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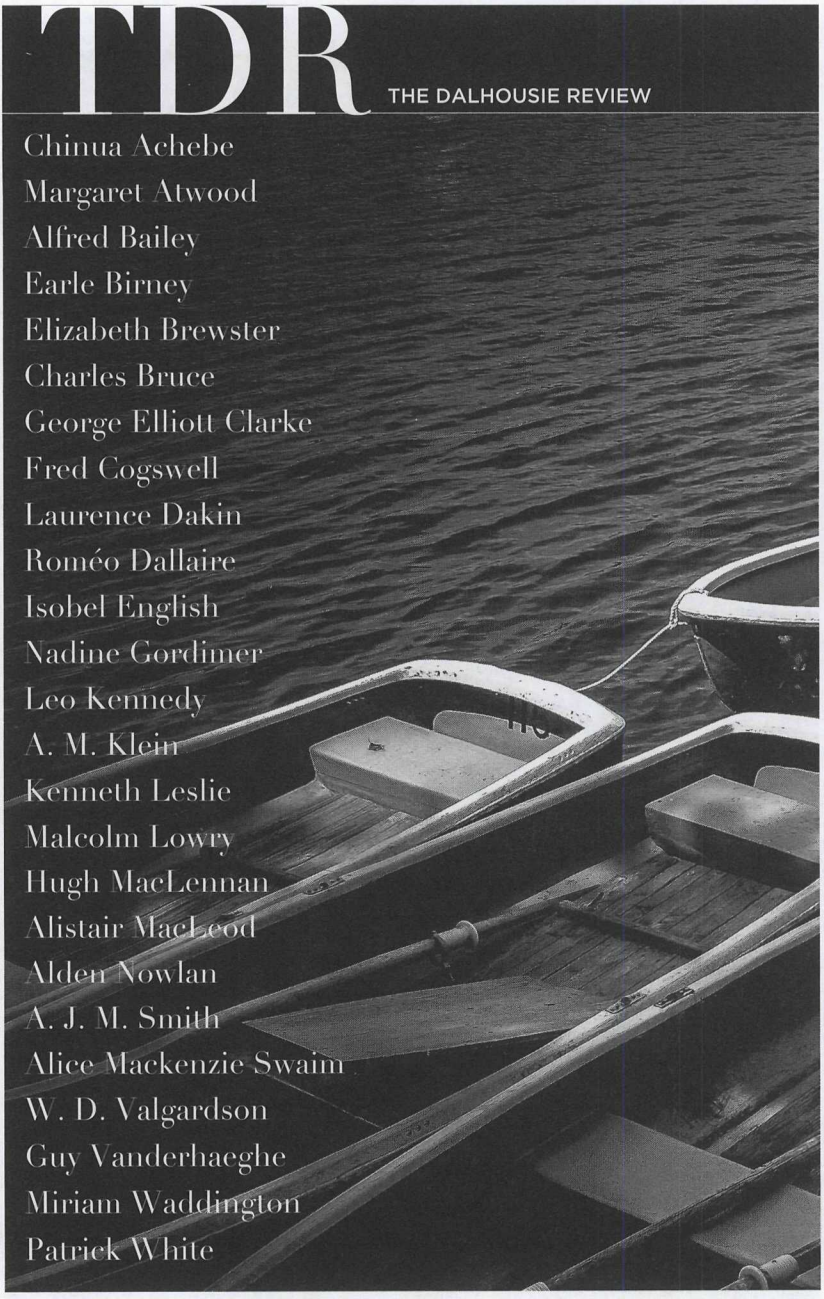

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—*Sarah Kabamba, "Field Notes on Grief"*

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