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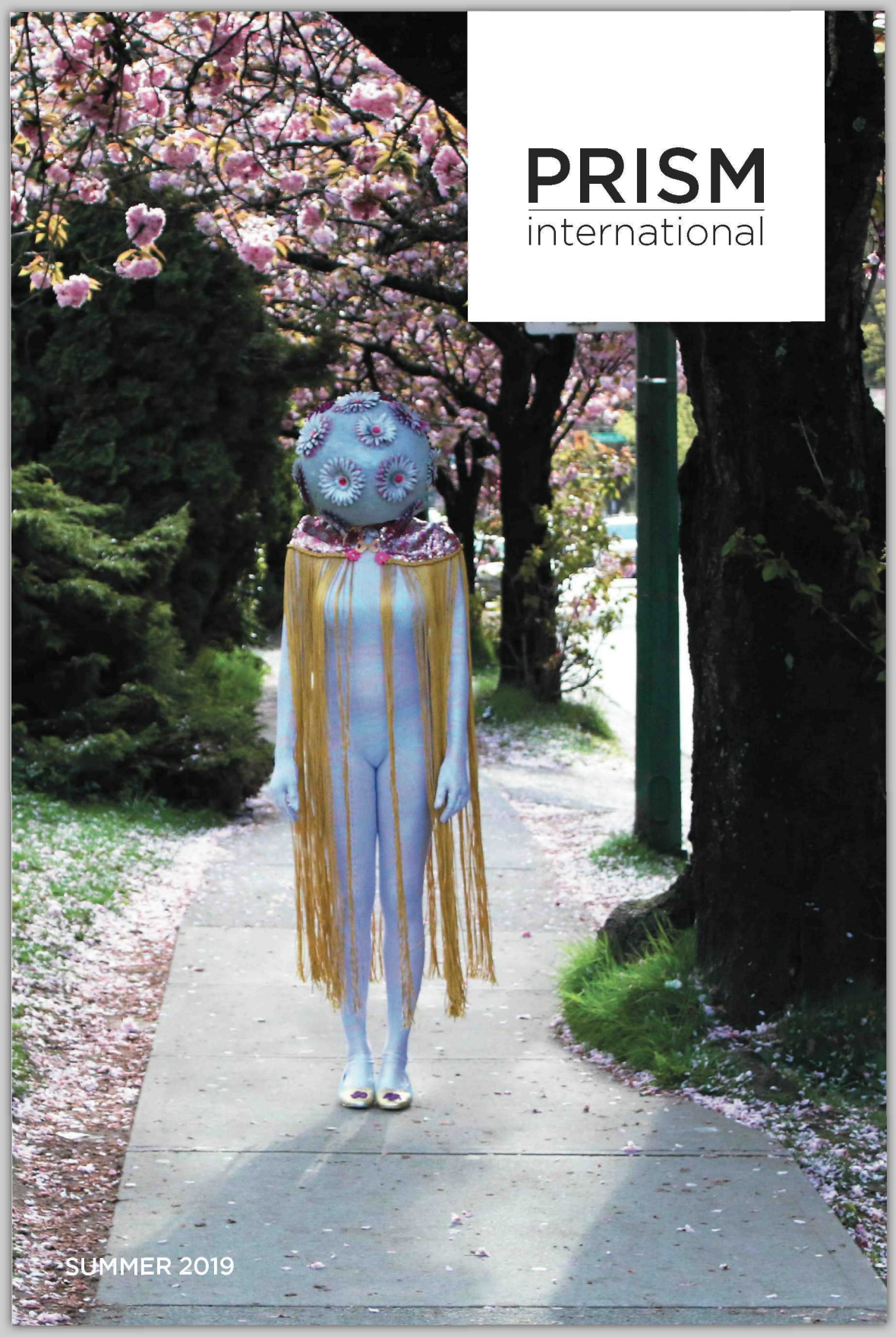

SUMMER 2019

PRISM international

THE JACOB ZILBER PRIZE FOR SHORT FICTION

GRAND PRIZE

"The Last Snow Globe Repairman in the World" by Hsien Chong Tan

FIRST RUNNER-UP

"Victory Day" by Cassidy McFadzean

SECOND RUNNER-UP

"Toy Wonderland" by Jenessa Abrams

JUDGE

Casey Plett

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a place of mind
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Casey Plett

PACING

Writerly struggles of mine have oft centred around pacing. Sometimes the piece you have demands speed and urgency, sometimes it demands something slower and considered. Sometimes it's a greyhound and sometimes it's a snowfall. I find it hard to get that right sometimes, to calibrate the piece's speed into what its intrinsic energy demands.

These three stories are paced almost perfectly. In "Toy Wonderland" by Jenessa Abrams, the slow peelback of facts surrounding a tragedy is heartbreaking, and moves the reader through grief. At the same time, we know that shit will go south at the narrator's unrelatedly terrible job at the kid's store from which the story takes its name. These twin narratives interweave at a light run, until they converge at the end in a manner both beautifully banal and terribly sad.

"Victory Day" by Cassidy McFadzean pulses with energy, warmth, hilarity, and quiet despair. I loved its intimacy, its capturing of two people in love living inside their own pocket universe, while at the same time the narrator comes to the slow realization that her lover is kind of a jerk. It's not much shorter than "Toy Wonderland" but it feels that way, like a sprint, a snapshot that's suddenly over.

And then there's the beautiful "The Last Snow Globe Repairman in the World" by Hsien Chong Tan. It moves quietly, slickly, like a boat through still water, with a compelling level of melancholy and curiosity. I love how you can't quite tell whether the narrator and Arjun are lovers or just friends, and you also don't know the gender of the narrator, and you can finish the story without consciously realizing either of these things! What's most important is that the narrator is alone, that Arjun is one of the only people in their life they connect with, and that if Arjun leaves it will shatter them. The ending ties together the narrator's longing with the snow imagery that is woven throughout the piece; it might have been clichéd in the hands of another writer, but Tan nails it. Rhythmically, this story is just about perfect.

Hsien Chong Tan

THE LAST SNOW GLOBE REPAIRMAN IN THE WORLD

The last snow globe repairman in the world is in Northfield, Minnesota, a three-hour drive from the town where I live. I saw his photo in a book at the library. The photographer won a big prize that year, so the portrait of the snow globe repairman has a chance of living forever, or at least longer than the profession itself. I'm sure he's not really the last of his kind in the world, or even in America, though there can't be many left.

This seemed odd at first, because there are still plenty of snow globes out there. Maybe what it means is that people still buy them, but when they're damaged, no one tries to get them fixed. Someone is trying to save the penguins, someone is trying to save the rainforest. Snow globes? We can always make more.

Winter is a series of small capitulations. Putting away the sandals at last and taking out the boots. Digging in drawers for wool socks, a warmer hat. The longer we stay out of these clothes, the longer the fall

will linger. Even when the bicycles have deserted the streets and the children are skating on the lakes.

Outside my window, it is the second snowfall of the season—the first came and went two nights ago, in my sleep. The snow blows by almost horizontally; some god-child has left the globe on its side. But as the wind whips the world behind the glass into static, I know we are being punished, not merely neglected.

The last snow globe repairman in the world lives in Minnesota. I'm curious about him, but also afraid. What if he's boring? Or merely sentimental? There's something so sad about kitsch, and yet here is someone who must believe in it.

A radio station website has the recording of an old interview.

"How do you repair a snow globe?" the host asks.

The last snow globe repairman in the world replies, "First you clean out all the debris, the broken glass, the sealant. Then you take the music out. If the figures are broken, I can replace them. Then you make the globe sterile so the water won't go bad. You fill it up and plug it. Put the music back in, and it's ready to go again."

The last snow globe repairman in the world pronounces music like *musique*. How do you repair a snow globe? You have to take the *musique* out.

The interviewer is surprised. Do they all have music? No, but many do, like a music box, or on a microchip. There have been many advances in snow globe technology. Now they recite scripture. Now they blow snow. You don't have to tip them anymore. They talk to you.

Arjun and I play a game. We call it *Hemingway*, and it goes like this:

Tell me a happy story in two words.

Anteater. Ant.

Tell me a sad story.

Ant. Anteater.

Long words are better, compound words are the best. Hummingbird. Superhighway. Antidisestablishmentarianism. Snow globe is two words.

Penguins turn up a lot in our conversation. I blame it on that Werner Herzog documentary we saw together, in which a lone bird leaves the flock and waddles full tilt for the mountains, where it will likely die. Can a penguin go insane? Herzog asks.

Dorothy holds Toto under her left arm, shields her face with the right. Behind her, a giant funnel towers and twists over a prairie landscape, a single farmhouse caught in its grey mesh.

When I push a switch on the base, the tornado and house start rotating, while an internal blower sends glitter swirling. I'd meant to get something more classic, but after three days of scrolling through Christmas- and Disney-themed globes online, I knew this was the one.

An imaginary gale has molded Dorothy's dress against her legs, but as the scene turns, her clothes do not flutter. She and Toto are part of the base, outside the storm and untouched by glitter. In this version of the story, Dorothy never got out of Kansas, never made it to Oz. Never killed the witch, never met the scarecrow. She paid no attention to the man behind the curtain.

The first time Arjun and I spoke, we were up to our elbows in chicken parts.

"Could you hand me that Tupperware please?" I gestured.

Arjun looked at me, mouth behind a face mask, gloved hand extended in a finger pistol, and raised both arms in mock alarm. "Alright, alriiiight," he said, sounding more Super Mario than Marlon Brando as he slid the plastic container over.

We went back to cutting meat. Elsewhere in the wildlife rescue centre, a raccoon rattled the bars of its cage. At the end of our shift, Arjun tossed a gizzard at me and asked, "Wanna get a bite?"

What can I say? He made me an offer I couldn't refuse.

The best part of the job, Arjun tells me over slices at Mamma Mia's, is release day, when the staff return a rehabilitated animal to the wild. They usually invite a few of the volunteers, like a little farewell party.

"My favourite are the birds," he says. "It feels like something when they go. It's not the same with the squirrels or skunks. Those just scurry into the brush or up a tree, like they're ashamed to have known you."

The loneliest snow globe repairman in the world lives in Minnesota. I meant "the last," but instead I said "the loneliest." It's not a mistake though. If he is the last, he must also be the loneliest. And the tallest and the shortest and the handsomest and the jolliest. If he is the last of his kind, mustn't he be lonely?

I think of other endangered species out in the cold, like the sea otter, whose babies trap so much air in their pelts that they float like corks

on the water. It's because of that thick fur that they were hunted to the edge of extinction. No one wants to turn a snow globe repairman into a mitten, so why are they endangered? What is the natural predator of the snow globe repairman?

I found my first snow globe at a store on Main and 22nd, a touristy sort of place, but it was what I wanted: the town in miniature, the most recognizable parts at least—the square, the clock tower, the lake, and the bridges.

As I was paying, the woman at the cash register handed me a slim white leather wallet and asked if I knew the owner. The driver's license photo showed a young girl with straight black hair. The name was Korean.

"I don't know her," I said, closing the wallet and giving it back. "Why would I know her?"

"Oh," the shopkeeper said. "It's just. There are so many…" She stopped. "So many students, you know? I thought you might know her."

"No, I don't."

I felt like I should apologize. Instead I said, "Good luck."

I grew up on a tropical island—no snow, just thunderstorms that went on for hours, or hot muggy weather that went on for days. I never shopped for souvenirs then—those are for places you want to remember—but I do wonder what the Singaporean equivalent of a snow globe would be. I once saw some rain globes in a Seattle bookstore, which I thought was funny. What else falls from the sky?

Fifteen minutes into the reading, the poet quoted two lines from a Plath poem that had inspired her, and then all I wanted to do was go home and read *Ariel*. On the way back to my apartment, Arjun attempts to speak entirely in rhyming couplets.

"If you're trying to punish me for making you go to this thing," I say, "at least try to do better than rhyming Jules with drools."

It starts to storm before we get to my building, and I ask Arjun if he wants to come in and wait it out. I've pulled the hood of my jacket up, but he's bareheaded, the rain dripping from his beard and glasses.

Upstairs, he takes off his shirt and wrings it out in the bathroom sink.

"Want me to order Mamma Mia's?" I ask from the living room.

"As long as it's not the fucking butter chicken pizza."

Arjun emerges, drying his head with the towel I handed him earlier. In the two years I've known him, the boy has acquired an impressive

collection of line art from the town's two tattoo parlours, but this is the first time I've seen the larger pieces.

A tree branches across his left chest, trunk running down his abdomen, a whorl in the bark around his belly button, just visible beneath the fuzz. The roots continue below, though to that particular tangle, I am not privy.

On the right side of his chest, mirroring the branches, half a dragon's head, the horn curving around his clavicle. A long-haired anime wizard whose name I don't know peeks over his right shoulder, while the skin under his right ribs is red with a design that wraps around to his back.

"What's that?" I ask.

"I'll show you in a few months, when it's done."

"Are you going to fill it in?"

"Nah. Line art only. I don't like how colour looks on my skin."

We watch animal videos on YouTube while his shirt dries on the radiator. Sea otters tie up their pups with kelp so they don't float away. Elephants mourn their dead. Hummingbirds have been known to survive the winter.

I'm in charge of thawing out the mice for Joan Wayne. They come in frozen blocks that we run under the faucet until the little bodies separate. They can't go in the microwave.

Joan arrived at the centre a few months before I did, a red-tailed hawk with a wing on the mend. Her name was given by Arjun, of course, a reference to how in Westerns, they dub a red-tailed hawk's scream over the stutter and squeak of a bald eagle. The real voice behind an American icon.

Some days I prepare her breakfast, but only staff are allowed in the enclosure. I watch her when I can, safe on the other side of the fence. Red-tailed hawks can be almost white or nearly completely black. Joan Wayne is an undistinguished in-between shade, with orange tail feathers and brown spots on her pale underside.

A med student I dated had this schtick about how our bodies are just plumbing and carpentry, with some electrical wiring worked in. Faced with an injured animal, the idea brings little comfort. A squirrel is small, but its heart beats so fiercely. Weeks ago, I watched one of the staff give CPR to one. She pressed on his chest with two fingers and pinched his cheeks to blow in his mouth. This went on for much longer than what you learn in first-aid class, longer, it felt, than faith should endure. So

long that it was a shock when he finally blinked back to life, as surprised, I'm sure, as I was.

Arjun says I should collect Magic 8-Balls instead of snow globes—at least when you turn one over there's a chance of a different outcome.

Will I cop litter box duty at the centre next week?

Signs point to yes.

Do I have enough dried pasta to last past Tuesday's blizzard?

Outlook not so good.

In one version of the story, I am an agent of order and good smells.

In one version of the story, humans don't make it through the coming ice age.

So it turns out you *can* toilet-train a bobcat.

The kind stranger who found Rufus in a parking lot thought he was a stray kitten. After an ill-fated attempt at bottle-feeding, the meaning of the cub's odd markings and large paws became clear, and the stranger, hands in bandages, brought the centre a new tenant.

Big cats are a lot like little cats, and the staff put the young bobcat in a large cage with a domestic tabby and her kittens. Arjun watched them compulsively, but the cub never seemed inclined to hurt his tiny foster siblings. Instead, he picked up some personal grooming tips and started using the sand-filled box in the corner.

Rufus loved to wrestle but let the smaller kitties win, rubbed his cheeks against the sides of the cage and went wild over bits of pumpkin served mashed with his kibble. Early on, he tried to nurse and was rebuffed, but there was never any doubt that he was family. Looking at them together, I wondered if I'd missed some key developmental stage, the human equivalent of litter box 101. The tabby and her kittens were adopted out, and Rufus was transferred to a zoo in Minnesota when he outgrew our facility. Arjun wanted to visit him, and I said I'd go too.

"You planning to spring him out of jail?"

"Ha, nope. But we could swing by the Mall of America. I hear they've got a pirate ship."

Tell me a happy story.

Bear, salmon.

Tell me a sad story.

Salmon, bear.

What makes a story happy or sad? It depends on what happens to whom.

I envy Arjun for the way he is in the world, sharp, but without the jagged edges. He takes up exactly as much space as he needs to, while I waver between trying to disappear, or insisting, too loudly, that I am here.

Jules, Arjun.

Arjun, Jules.

Road trip is two words. Jailbreak is one.

"Jules, do you want anything from India?"

"India?"

Arjun and I are hosing down the former raccoon enclosure. This was a good week—two releases, warm nights, no owls hit by trucks.

"Yeah, my uncle has an animation studio in Mumbai, and he wants me to work for him. I'm heading back next month to check it out, see how I feel about being home."

I know the expected responses for situations like this, the questions and the exclamations. But it takes me a little too long to get anything out. I find myself walking to the tap and giving it a hard twist, like it's stuck.

"I thought you liked it here," is what I manage.

Arjun grimaces at the smell of water meeting raccoon poop.

"I do, but I dunno. Sometimes it's nice to not have to worry about the other stuff. Visas. Work. The whole starving artist BS. Hey… hey! Scoop *first*, then spray."

He sidesteps the dancing rubber coils and turns the spigot the other way.

"You not gonna miss Mamma Mia's?"

We each take a spade and start shoveling the little brown squiggles into a trash bag.

"Jules, we have pizza in India. We have Chinese food, too. It's a big country."

"What about Rufus? What about Joan Wayne's farewell?"

I turn the hose full blast on a dark patch near the wall. Arjun hesitates between dodging the splash and moving in with a long-handled brush.

"Ahhhhh, they didn't tell you?" He opts for the brush. "Joan's being moved to a raptor centre up north. They train hawks to scare nuisance birds off runways."

I'm glad for the masks we're wearing in case of roundworms, though they make it hard to breathe. Arjun scrubs the floor like he means it.

"Come on, it's a good gig."

"What? Chasing seagulls or drawing cartoons?"

"Jules," he says, not taking the bait, "this isn't easy for me either. Home is… a bunch of things. You know."

Maybe it's the water droplets on his glasses and in his beard, but I'm thinking about the night after the reading and that fledgling tattoo wrapped like an arm around his torso, the beginnings of a story scratched into the skin. Back then I'd thought I would see this one through.

Arjun gathers the cleaning gear and picks up the trash bag as he steps out.

"Anyway, based on how our last two conversations went, I'll probably get in a fight with my dad and be back in three days."

"Wow. Oh wow," I say, turning around to lock up. "These raccoons aren't the only ones who are full of shit."

I'm not the only one who likes the lake in winter. Out on the ice, old men huddle in small groups or sit alone with a fishing line and a thermos. I hide behind the reeds near the shore, watching the children skate, fall, and slide on their bellies. A group of penguins in the water is called a raft. A group on land is called a waddle. Is lake ice land or water? If I were a child, I would be the one headed alone for the tree line on the far shore.

Cell phone batteries run down quickly in the cold. There's no reception so far from the city. If Arjun knocks on your door when you aren't home to hear it, does it still make a sound?

The last snow globe repairman in the world doesn't actually fix the broken figurines. Sometimes a dab of glue or paint suffices, but his storeroom, his whole home, is a warehouse of factory spares and replacements for when the damage is more extensive. I haven't talked to another human in two weeks. Is this something that can be touched up with a brush? Or is there, in some waiting basement, a factory version of myself, colours vivid and still intact?

When I get home, I find a box of Japanese seaweed snacks outside my door. On it, a Post-it note says in Arjun's rounded hand: *KELP me! I'm drifting...*

The message comes with a sketch of a distressed sea otter, paws against its cheeks. I stick the yellow square on my fridge.

I've grown familiar with the sight of Joan Wayne's feet, pebbled and scaled like her dinosaur ancestors. Following these digits to their pointed conclusions, I imagine a rabbit or a vole, perhaps another of the centre's recent guests. Who are we saving, and for what?

I picture my own skin, too, a tender perch sheathed in neither fur nor hide. She would draw blood without a thought. I try to visualize those claws gripping a thick leather glove, the kind worn by falconers. A cord connects her ankle to my wrist. But the mind rejects the image, turning instead to cliché: If you love someone, set them free.

After our shift, I tell Arjun I want to spend some extra time with Joan Wayne and will catch a ride with one of the staff. When his car is out of sight, I skirt the compound and head for the shed where they keep the sawdust and firewood. There's no reason for anyone to be here this late in the day, and they won't find me before locking up.

The centre has its evening rhythms, the thunk of plastic basins as people wash up, the clang of cage doors opening and closing. I sit on a pile of wood and wait for the sound of departing engines to fade. The air is several degrees colder now, and eventually I hear only forest noises. I don't want to risk turning on the lights, but even in the dark I know I can find the keys. There is some cage-rattling—inmates hopeful for a surprise night snack—but I'm in and out of the building quickly and standing before a familiar wire fence.

I've never been inside her enclosure, not even to clean it. To turn the key and push my way in feels like trespass.

Joan Wayne turns her head. The door is open, but I'm not sure if she sees that—the anticipation in the air is all mine. Her form is cloaked in the blue hues of evening, her eyes dark inside her silhouette. Do red-tailed hawks understand the concept of pointing? I've read that dogs do, but cats do not, and I'm not convinced that Joan is smarter than a cat. I gesture at the open door and beyond. She turns her head.

Her beak. They decided against releasing Joan because she'd grown too used to humans. Neither of us is safe with the other.

Time passes. Time stands still.

A breeze moves across my face, and she is gone. I fancy that I make out a dark shape climbing, but all I know for sure is that I'm the only one left. Something white and small and soft drifts out of the sky, but snow wasn't on the forecast. Bird fluff, then, tumbling off my face and down my jacket to be lost again.

"Jules, they know it was you."

I open the door for Arjun, then retreat inside. Morning is in the windows, and the snow globes look milky in the light. I go back to wiping down their outsides, sending up little swirls and eddies.

"They couldn't reach you, so they called me. And your phone was off, so…"

I thought I saw a scratch on Dorothy's globe, but it buffed out with some attention.

"Jules, she came back. Joan Wayne came back. They saw the door, and people were yelling, and we checked the woods and… They set out some food in her usual spot and she came back. It sometimes takes a few days, but they come back, Jules."

Dorothy in her blue dress infuriates me. A new world and a wish to be granted. Of all things to choose.

Why do you want to go back? I ask the porcelain figure. What about your new life?

I should have bought a Magic 8-Ball instead, at least there'd be hope of a different outcome.

Be brave, Dorothy, be brave. Why can't you be brave?

I shake her, I reason with her, I send her flying across the room.

In one version of the story, the globe hits the floor with a crack like the end of the world. I half expect there to be water and glass everywhere, but the ball just rolls over and trickles weakly, like a small wounded animal.

Arjun knows it was never meant to hit him. But he's said what he had to, and he's gone.

The last snow globe repairman in the world is in Northfield, Minnesota, a three-hour drive from the town where I live. In this version of the story, I make the journey in a blizzard, two hundred miles to knock on an old man's door. He is surprised, but kind, and lets me in.

"What can I do for you?" he asks, in a voice that sounds like *musique*.

The entire way, the globe was leaking into my clothes as it sat on my lap. I clutch it to my chest as the dark stain spreads, and I say to him: "Please, fix this. Fix this."

In one version of the story, we are eating pizza on the couch. Arjun's boots are leaving puddles on my wooden floor. Inside the Taj Mahal snow globe on the window ledge, a banner proclaims "Indian Summer" in gold and

glitter. Outside, a couple struggles with what looks like a month's worth of groceries and eight gallons of bottled water.

It's all over the radio: Snowmaggedon, Snowpocalypse, the coming of a new ice age.

Getting up, Arjun and I touch our noses to the pane, palms against the glass.

The first time I saw snow, I had just moved to the Midwest. I was eighteen and still going to parties—we were in a freshman dorm, all of us had eaten a cautious but sufficient number of the pills the boy with the green eyeshadow had been giving out, and were off in our separate but connected realities. One of the boys was convinced he was a cat.

"I'm a cat! Meow, meow, meow!"

"Meow!" I replied. "Meow, meow!"

We held this conversation for an unspecified amount of time. Then he said, "I'm a doll!" He froze for a moment into an attitude of stiffness, then crumpled onto the floor. I could no longer talk to him, so I fell asleep.

We didn't all get up at once, but when we did, we didn't speak, didn't go anywhere, so eventually we were all sitting up and staring outside the window, and it was snowing. Then someone said, "It's snowing!" And so the spell broke, or rather, one spell ended and another began. How shall I put it—the world had turned on its side as we were sleeping, and the air was full of tiny fugitives, trying to find their place.

Bess Cooley

THE OTHER SIDE

Earlier today the dogs sprinted around the yard.
Chasing squirrels and birds.
They went too far. I couldn't see them.
I cut through brambles to look for them. I walked to the other side
of the forest.
I was barefoot and my feet calloused into leather button-up boots.
I broke out in another century. Or world.
I couldn't tell. I was only looking for those dogs.
On the other side were purple mountains, a yellowing ocean.
I had thought I was in the Midwest.
Yet this was no ocean of corn.
I swam it. In the Philippines I rested.
For a while. Then went on to China.
Around India I swam for those dogs.
Suddenly I remembered they both hated water.
They would run from waves that came too close to their paws.
So I swam back and was out of breath.
I sat on the hardwood floors of my house.
My dogs were there. I cried. I thought it was relief.
Who knows what it was.
The dogs licked my face.
Who knows what it was.

Tasha Hefford

THOUGH NOT UNPLEASANTLY

I've pissed larger stains in the concrete or rather
this is power branding in action, or rather
a diagram for my physical capacity.
NEW! Tools for digital ethnography: A spitting helldog,
a journey that can't root,
everybody is watching but no one's been counting.

This is the way to dragnet love without
losing water—softsteps from the like economy. This
is a gagging corpse for not knowing
any better. A catfish joins the pool,
the ppl here repeat themselves until it's true.

Pls don't spam the chat—
there are natural alternatives to silly behaviour.

This is a boiled spurt, I'm
simply mining for likes. The wolves text me back
at 3 a.m., rubber-banded cash sounds on the lawn.
Pixel trees have never felt
so goddamn soft.
time to fill up
time to fill up, time to fill up!!1

Hilary Ball

HIBISCUS

I wake up in vomit, strands of semi-digested spaghetti clinging to my hair. The first thing I think is that I should chew more carefully, because these strands of spaghetti are fully intact, like I swallowed them whole, just sucked them straight down my throat, which can't be healthy. The second thing I think is that my boobs are sore. I try to shut my eyes, but the room on the other side of my eyelids is spinning around too much, and the vomit smell is right up in my nostrils like it's trying to seep back inside of me, and the ringing in my ears is a real ringing, I realize. I always forget to turn off my seven a.m. alarm on weekends.

Bethany, whose bed is barely an arm's length away from mine, is moaning "turn it off, turn it off" and rolling from side to side under her yellow submarine duvet. I'm groping around for the phone but it isn't in bed with me, so I sit up and notice I'm not wearing any bottoms or underwear, just the top I had on last night, which I borrowed from Kendra. Praying that Bethany's eyes are closed, I drag my naked ass out

of bed, but the floor feels all wonky under my feet and I grab the edge of Bethany's mattress to balance. Her foot recoils sharply under the covers.

The phone is in my coat, which is lying by the door in a tangled pile of jean shorts and strappy sandal heels, and the contents of my purse are scattered around the boot tray: wallet, keys on their university lanyard, a crumbled compact powder, an ancient receipt for shawarma, the condoms Kendra snatches by the handful from the student health clinic and passes around like candy whenever we're partying. I wonder what I was looking for when I dumped everything on the boot tray. I dismiss the alarm. I have seven texts from Kendra, variations on the theme of "where are you?"

We were headed to a beach-themed party at the all-boys dorm. That's why I'm wearing this summer top of Kendra's in the middle of November. We heard they were turning up the heat and filling the common spaces with sand. I see my dirty undies from last night lying on a pair of Bethany's Converse high tops and I pull them back on. The black lace is itchy and so is the sheer material of Kendra's top. I look at myself in the full-length mirror we keep propped beside the door because we're not supposed to put holes in the walls. There's a thin crust of orange vomit along my hairline and in my eyebrows and a rash around my mouth and down my neck, but my makeup is surprisingly intact. Kendra did my eyes with her new smoky palette while we listened to that song about giving it your all on the dance floor because tomorrow you might be dead.

I just keep standing there in front of the mirror in my lace undies and Kendra's summer top because I don't want to get back into my vomit bed and I don't want to walk down the hall to the communal bathroom with pieces of semi-digested spaghetti in my hair. I wonder if Bethany was in our room when I was vomiting and why she didn't pass me the garbage can or something. Then I think, she can't have been here, because even if she sometimes might wish she didn't have to share this little room with me, girls don't let girls vomit in their own bed and sleep in it. She must have stayed out late at the twenty-four-hour library and sneaked in with the lights off so she wouldn't wake me up. Thinking the best of Bethany comforts me, because when I don't think the best of her I have to accept the possibility that she utterly loathes me. And I've never been loathed by anyone before, as far as I know. Anyway, I decide, I must have gone to bed fairly early, because I don't remember the beach party at all. Although there is something grainy between my toes that could be sand.

I lower myself onto the pile of laundry at the foot of my bed, maintaining eye-contact with my reflection. I know Kendra did my makeup in her room and we took shots of lemon gin that the guys from down the hall bought us. And then we talked about how we really need to get fake IDs, because we depend on those guys way too much for our booze, and sometimes they get a little touchy when they hand it over—touchy in both senses of the word, like we owe them more than thirty bucks.

So I'm talking to Kendra about getting fake IDs, and then we're in the elevator and I remember I'm holding a shot of lemon gin in my cleavage. I'm holding a shot of lemon gin in my cleavage, and then maybe somebody drinks it.

I check my Snapchat story and find a series of selfies that confirm my attendance at the beach party. The girl in the photos looks like she's having fun, and I'm a little jealous of her, cheated out of my fun because I don't remember having it. My body went to the party without me, I think. She's posing with a group of guys I don't know, all of them wearing leis and Hawaiian print shirts. She's kissing Kendra on the cheek. She's holding a red solo cup. In a short video, she's yelling something about pineapples and laughing hysterically with one of the Hawaiian shirt guys—the one with a pink plastic hibiscus behind his ear. Hibiscus guy has an inside joke with my body, I think, and I'm not in on the joke. The last video is a blur of sidewalk. I can hear the distant patter of a voice that must be mine and another that isn't, but I can't make out any individual words. I put down my phone and look back at the mirror. I peel some vomit off my face. I whisper to my body, "Who do you think you are?"

"Just so you know, I'm going to request a room change today," says the voice of Bethany from behind me. I can sense her moving in the reflection, but I keep my eyes fixed on my eyes.

"What?"

"I talked to my mom while you were doing, whatever, and we think it's the best choice for my mental health."

Bethany talks to her mom for at least an hour every day, and I know she complains about me because sometimes when I come into the room she'll stop mid-sentence and say, in a cheerfully ironic voice, "Well *she's* back," dabbing self-consciously at her eyes. The thought of being loathed by Bethany's mother is somehow worse than the thought of being loathed by Bethany, which is why I don't usually linger in the hallway and listen when I hear my name through our door.

"What do you mean?" I ask, turning to face her.

She's sitting cross-legged on her bed in her matching flannel pyjama set, the one with a pattern of happy emojis on it: smiley face, blushing face, cry-laughing face, upside-down smiley face. It looks cozy. Bethany always looks so cozy, in a lonely kind of way, whereas Kendra and I are always shivering in our nylons and booties as we scurry around campus, arms linked in solidarity. I should text Kendra that I made it home okay, but I don't. It's too early, anyway. I wonder if Bethany will invite me into her bed and wrap me in her yellow submarine duvet, but she doesn't.

"*Last night*," she says significantly, emphasizing the "t" at the end of both words, and when I don't respond, she adds, "It was so disrespectful. I sat in the hallway for an hour, just waiting for you to finish so I could go back to bed."

I touch my boobs, as if to make sure they're still there. They're sore. Bethany gives an exasperated sigh and cocoons herself in duvet. I look back at my reflection and wish I was wearing Bethany's emoji pajamas, not this sheer summer top of Kendra's, not these itchy lace undies. If I could only be cozy then maybe I'd stop shaking a little. I reach for the pink hibiscus lying by the door and rub each plastic petal between my fingers before tearing it off the plastic stem. She loathes me, she loathes me not, I think, even though I know the answer.

Amy LeBlanc

I KNOW SOMETHING YOU DON'T KNOW

You can dress disease
in linen gloves and bathe
lungs in tubs of formaldehyde.
Scrape meat from the sides
of wide-set ribs, rig fires
to burn inside. You can rip
seams from sides when it sweats
at night or bleeds in margins
like ink through sheets.
Keep pleats in the hands
and the tops of the feet
so the nails stay clean
in a half glass of gin.
Dress disease in a shift,
keep the chest compressed
in a corset made of bone.
You can welcome disease
with balloons in your lungs
and invite it into your home.

Annick MacAskill

KETCH HARBOUR

Post-rain the water spills like silk, calm
like it's everyone's day off, but just

Friday, our secret slip into the future.
We should be so lucky—yellow flowers

sparkle in the grass along the highway;
weeds, but more perfect

than the armful of grocery-store tulips
I brought to you in February.

I don't like to think about what frightens me,
so I picture your eyes instead—

and sometimes I can't hear what you are saying,
but I know that it is beautiful.

We drive and we drive. When we get out
the air is cool. Who could blame us?

Who could have waited any longer?

Natalie De Paz

THE UNIVERSE IS QUIETLY DISOWNING US ALL

My mother sent a birthday package

addressed to my happy life without her.
This is not how I want it, but
I have always admired her hand.
The letters are tight and slanted
like how she holds me when it's been a while

(squeezing me into her, pulling us both away

from her centre of gravity, back, back,
like she wants to bring us both down,
her nose pushed into my hair, smelling
a baby twenty-four years deep, somewhere,
somewhere in there, past the roots,
past the scalp, past the skull, past the brain,
somewhere, my DNA screams for her).

Home is always that way now.

I am always a stranger.

I know I can't really say the universe is disowning us.

But inside the package
was a pink card
shunning me
quietly, and signed with love from all.

Kate Gorton

CENTRALIA

Margaret Shea sits in her mother's kitchen the morning after the date. Sunlight shoots through holes in the yellowed lace curtains on the east side of the room; the orbs of light are strewn like bits of glass across the floor, the table, the women's hands. Earl Grey steeps beneath a brightly coloured cosy. A grey hairline crack runs down the middle of Margaret's saucer. She traces it as her mother scolds her for not returning the man's phone calls.

"You're no glittering prize, either," her mother says.

Margaret is barely listening. She is thinking about fire. About a town in Pennsylvania that is burning from the inside out. They say it will burn for another 250 years, until no one alive remembers when or how it started.

But fire is a story older than time itself. This won't even be one of the footnotes.

There are no cookies today—no sugar for the tea. Margaret's stomach growls. She gulps the milky bitterness in her cup to quiet the hollow ache.

"I know," she says.

Patrick had chosen Aria for their first date, an upscale Italian restaurant known for its handmade pasta. Much to Margaret's chagrin, she was the first to arrive. She gave Patrick's name to the hostess and followed her to the table. The dining room was long and narrow, with high ceilings and tile floors that caught and threw sound like a public bathroom. It was her nightmare table, right in the middle of the restaurant floor, crowded among other diners, every table full on a Friday night. She squeezed between chairs and sank into her own, scooting as close to the table as she could so as not to hem in the people behind her. She asked the hostess for a glass of wine. The young woman, who had watched her press her body into the decidedly not-Margaret-sized space, gave a sympathetic smile and went to fetch the pinot grigio. Margaret was now thankful Patrick hadn't been on time.

She picked up the menu and tried to find the perfect meal for a first date, something light and easy on the onion and garlic: a tall order in an Italian restaurant.

"Margaret!"

She looked up from the menu to see a wiry old man standing at the table, grinning down at her as if he knew her. He wore a wrinkled, plaid shirt tucked into belted jeans and had combed the few remaining wisps of silvery hair across the bald spot on the crown of his head. She said hello and returned the familiar smile as she rushed to place him: the hospital, maybe, or a friend of her mother's. Beyond the man, at the podium by the door, Margaret saw the hostess and a server watching her as one would watch someone be extricated from a car accident.

Her mother's laugh is rich with disappointment. It usually is, when it comes to Margaret. "You were catfished," she says, sipping from the bone china tea cup.

"How does everyone know that word?" Margaret asks.

She pulls a spoon through her tea and watches little whirlpools dissolve into frothy, delicate bubbles. Catfishing. The act of pretending to be something you're not in order to trick strangers into talking to you, wanting you, falling in love with you. She first heard the term earlier this morning, when she mentioned the debacle to her brother. Tom had called to catch her up on his life: autumn foliage in Vermont, Sue and the kids, renovations to the house they had built together. She hadn't so much told him the story of Patrick as it had leapt out of her, like

bile—a spike of sibling one-upmanship. A date with a catfish is the most interesting thing to happen to her in months.

Margaret understands the draw of the strategy; she often wishes men could meet her mind first, without the interference her body seems to cause. But the catfish always forgets the catch: at some point, the stranger wants to meet you. The façade crumbles, laying bare the delicate ecosystem of lies you have constructed. It is a young person's racket, she thinks: a game best played by those without enough life experience to see a few steps into the future. And Patrick.

She, for one, is too old for it. She was honest on New Leaf, the dating application she downloaded that caters to an older crowd of singles. Its icon on her phone is a little silver oak leaf, yet another product cast in precious metal and packaged for a woman her age: platinum-strength multivitamins, with extra calcium for those Swiss-cheese bones. Creams to keep a crone's wrinkles at bay, poured into stout little pots embossed in gold. Somehow, some marketing execs had figured out how to make women feel both regal and grotesque at once. Margaret could appreciate the genius of it.

She had seen the commercials for New Leaf and always flicked past them. But one night, after she drank a full bottle of shiraz, she signed up. She uploaded a few full-body photos, so as not to leave her considerable width to anyone's imagination, and filled out the introductory questionnaire. It took hours to complete: dozens of questions about herself she had never considered before, like her thoughts on tattoos (she selected "None but okay with them on others") and the amount of contact she required in a relationship (she chose "A little," because "A lot" seemed needy). It felt like an interminable multiple-choice test on which she had chosen the most-wrong answer for every question. The months of silence that followed this ordeal only served as confirmation.

"It's not the time anymore for soulmates," her mother says. "You know I'm right."

The sun has climbed above the windows but the kitchen holds its heat like granite. The air is thick and drowsy; the old iron radiator hisses and clangs. Centralia's landfill caught fire in the 1960s. The mountain of garbage sat atop an abandoned coal mine. Once the blaze reached down into the mine, there was no stopping it. It snaked its way through the tunnels of coal, lapping at the maze of infinite fuel. No matter what the people of the town tried, the fire roared back, unruly and ravenous.

Margaret knows her mother is right (deep inside, something shifts in its chair and begs to differ, but its voice is so much softer than her mother's). She even knows what the old woman's emphasis of *anymore* means: that she wasted her youth on the first man who paid attention to her. But Margaret is fifty-three years old and does not need to endure her mother's lectures on dating or anything else. She should stand and leave.

And yet.

And yet she sits and listens. She deserves this one. In the days leading up to the date, Margaret made a fatal mistake: she had hoped. A woman like her isn't allowed to hope. Her own reproaches piggyback on those of her mother. This is what you get, she says to the something deep inside. This is what happens when you try.

No, it replies.

Margaret was walking Mrs. Otis back to her room when her first New Leaf message came through. Her phone chirped in her scrubs pocket; she reached for it, but stopped. Mrs. Otis was recovering from hip surgery, each wobbling step both triumph and prelude to a fall. Margaret returned her hand to Mrs. Otis's back, gently touching the woman where the gait belt bisected her thick, soft waist. It was contact she had long since perfected as a therapist: enough pressure that the patient could feel she was still there, but not enough to be a crutch. Mrs. Otis's breathing grew laboured as she shuffled, the thin skin on her knuckles stretched tight from gripping the walker. Margaret counted the pattern of pastel tiles on the floor that lay between them and the woman's hospital bed. The walker's neon-haired tennis balls whispered and squeaked along on the freshly waxed linoleum. It was all Margaret could do not to grab the closest wheelchair and scoop the lady into it.

"Nearly there," she said, unsure of whom she was trying to motivate more.

Floor work—visiting patients, taking them for exercise, demonstrating new techniques for their impairments—had once been her favourite part of the job. Families praised her work with their parents and grandparents, and the staff respected her. But at home, there was always something she hadn't done well enough, some way in which her ex-husband had decided she fell short as a wife. As a woman. When James first left, she had felt free for a while, free to decide what kind of love she wanted this time around. All that came to mind was the hospital. She wished for a lover who would see her as the patients did, who would be dazzled by her

the way the families were. She wanted to be loved not in spite of who she was, but because of who she was—inside and out. She craved bottomless gratitude and awe. She yearned for a love that would swallow her whole.

But she soon understood that *loosed* was a more fitting term than *free*: a boat loosed from its harbour and dragged out to sea. An empty, aimless vessel with no compass. She was old, and all the normal men around her were married. Then there was the extra weight, a second layer of invisibility.

With Mrs. Otis safe in her room and rounds complete, Margaret closed her office door, flopped into the computer chair, and pulled out her phone. She licked the salty sweat from her upper lip and put her feet on an upturned wastebasket.

Someone named niceguy56 had sent her a message. Margaret's fingers trembled so much it took two tries to unlock the phone. *Hey there! Saw your profile and just wanted to say hi. I'm divorced too.* She gripped the phone with both hands, close to her face, rereading the three sentences as if there were clues embedded in them. *Just wanted to say hi.* Innocuous enough. Friendly. But he mentioned his own divorce. Divulging something so personal so soon was surely a sign of—what? A simple gesture of commiseration, or a gateway to something deeper?

She clicked on the thumbnail photo next to his username. Niceguy56 was handsome. Fit. A youthful fifty-something. Dread bloomed from her sacrum. She navigated to her own page and felt a hot rush of retroactive embarrassment as she imagined this photogenic man clicking through her pictures. She tried to see herself through the eyes of this stranger. Neither of them were getting any younger, and he must have known his own physical form was an anomaly at their age. Besides, she had been forthright in her pictures. He had seen her, all of her, and still sent a message. Margaret's confidence rebounded. There were worse things to be than fat—of that she was sure.

She returned to the message and stared at it. Three simple sentences from a stranger had inflicted such a frenzy of panic that she wondered if she had the emotional endurance to date at all. She couldn't handle a relationship if a harmless "hello" had the power to undo her. Maybe her life was meant to be dedicated to the hospital, the patients, the stacks of manila folders in the dark cave of her office. But even as she talked herself out of responding, she imagined sitting across from niceguy56 in a coffee shop, sipping lattes and trading stories of love gone sour.

There are things Margaret doesn't tell her mother.

She doesn't tell her about the tasks she's neglected at work for the last week, holed up in her office texting Patrick for hours. Or the fact that she lied to him about the nature of the divorce. *Pretty painless*, she had written, even as memories flashed of the final months with James: him screaming and banging on the doors she locked between them; her driving around and around the block when she escaped the house at last, too scared to go home but even more scared of what it meant if she drove away. She holds back from her mother the part where Patrick called her beautiful for the first time and she cried from relief, how she had masturbated furiously that night to the thought of him whispering this in her ear as he undressed her.

Margaret doesn't tell her mother the real reason she won't go out with Patrick again. Because despite his deception, she tried to enjoy dinner. She reminded herself of the sweet morning messages and the confidences they had already shared. So, he was old. Beauty and youth were fleeting. And after all, she was no prize, either.

But he was pushy. He pushed her to have a second glass of wine. He pushed her to get an appetizer; he pushed her to try his. When the server brought dessert menus, Margaret was full and sleepy, her cheeks shiny-red from the wine and the crush of warm bodies on all sides. But, tired of protesting, she nodded when he ordered them each a thick slice of cheesecake covered with strawberries and syrup.

"It's so nice to be out with a woman who eats," he said, loud enough for the surrounding tables to hear him and go quiet.

Margaret felt the room pitch and the truth prickle the backs of her legs. Mystery: solved.

For the rest of evening, Patrick spoke of his newfound love for fat women. He talked about his skinny ex-wife and how uptight she was about food: only ordering salads, barely eating in front of him and the kids. Margaret doesn't know why men think that fetishizing her size is any better than reviling it; in either scenario, her body becomes a forum to which she is not invited. She seethed as he prattled on, her eyes trained on the untouched cheesecake. She dragged her fork through the bright red syrup that pooled beside the graham-cracker crust. She had better plans in mind for it: a to-go box, her couch, and the peace to eat without a stranger cheering as if she were in a pie-eating contest at the county fair. When he used the phrase "more to hold onto," Margaret flagged down the nearest waitress and asked for the check.

It was that night that Margaret first heard about Centralia, the town on fire. They were talking about it on public radio as she peeled out of the parking lot, leaving Patrick standing in her rear-view mirror holding his leftovers. Margaret tried to imagine what the fire will leave behind when it finally goes out. The scorched, barren caves. The smouldering ash of centuries-old garbage.

"If you cut out white flour and sugar, you'll look *and* feel better."

Margaret smiles darkly into her tea.

Right on time.

The unspoken advice has hung in the warm air of the kitchen since Margaret mentioned the date. It sat at the back of her mother's throat, bitter and chalky and waiting for an opening; Margaret knows because she tasted it, too. It is a relief when her mother finally says it, the kind of relief that comes when the doctor drills into a black-and-blue toenail. The pressure is gone, but now there's all this blood.

Veronica Shea has boomeranged between sizes four and sixteen throughout Margaret's life. At seventy-five, she is in a thin period: tiny and self-righteous, evangelizing a low-carb regimen. In the past there was the grapefruit diet, Deal-A-Meal, low-calorie, high-fat, Slim Fast, Weight Watchers, even vegetarian for a while in the '90s. Every time is the last time: the best method, the one that is a *lifestyle change*, not a diet. True salvation.

The strange thing: Margaret always believes her. No matter how many times her mother crashes and burns and gains back the weight (and then some), each new trick fills her mother with such hope and energy that the skinny seems final. Whenever she hits her goal weight, Margaret steels herself for a lifetime of ridicule and lectures; she often tries the latest method, too. She says it's to stop her mother's nagging, but in truth, her mother's thinness is intoxicating—the great escape from the thing Margaret grew up watching her hate: her body.

Their bodies.

Again, the voice, slightly louder this time.

No.

"The weight will melt right off," her mother says, smoothing her hands down her ribcage and hips with a smile.

Margaret tries to speak, but two voices compete for a turn, and she doesn't know who will win if she opens her mouth. She nods and pours more tea instead: first for her mother, then for herself. The pot trembles.

"Peggy," her mother says.

Margaret puts down the teapot. The concern in her mother's voice quickens her pulse; she is caged, cornered. Her mother rests a hand, small and cool, over hers. She fights the urge to flick it off like a mosquito, to break every finger on that hand, which looks so much like her own.

"I'm worried about you."

Shame, it turns out, is combustible.

Margaret's mother has said much worse to her, and at worse times. On her wedding day, she lamented how much better Margaret's dress would have looked with an extra ten pounds gone (Margaret starved herself for months to wear the dress in question, subsisting on romaine lettuce and watermelon and hard-boiled eggs). But today, in this stuffy kitchen, sitting across from the woman who started it all, Margaret sees her life for the landfill it has become, every piece of trash on the pile—the divorce, the childlessness, the loneliness, the crushing envy, Patrick—and this *worry*, this pity. A lit torch.

NO.

It is Margaret who laughs now, hard and short like a bark. Her mother jumps.

"Some of this 'worry' would've been nice during the divorce."

Her mother sets down her teacup with a crash. The air in the room is stung. Electric. Dust motes fall through sunbeams, slowly as snow.

"If you can't take care of yourself, you might need the surgery."

She so clearly has been waiting to say this. Something cold and hard peels back inside of Margaret. The fire spreads, and it is ravenous. Loud in her ears.

"I know what you meant," Margaret says, smiling. "I just wish you could hear yourself."

"Peggy."

Margaret pulls out her phone and scrolls through her photos. She finds what she is looking for and hands the phone to her mother. The old woman looks quickly and puts the phone down, screws her eyes shut.

"That's you."

"I know that."

"A year ago.

"Margaret."

"*Fat.*" Margaret spits the word. "You're a fat person, too."

She stands, both hands planted on the table, and towers over her mother. For once she feels the power—the potential—of her size. Her mother flinches, and there is a flash of regret. But she presses on.

"I like her better," she says, her finger pressed to the dark phone screen. The knot in her throat surprises her. She swallows it.

"It's not healthy."

"She's kinder. She talks about things besides every damn bite of food she puts in her face."

"Enough."

"That's who I needed this year," Margaret says. "And this morning."

Her mother whips her cloth napkin from her lap and onto the table, but Margaret already has her purse slung on her shoulder. The old woman is still shouting as Margaret walks across the foyer, through the front door, and into a bright blue afternoon.

Margaret stands in her kitchen eating the leftover cheesecake right out of its Styrofoam container, hunched over the sink as if someone is about to come around a corner and take it from her. There is, still, no one here, but this posture was crafted over decades: first by watching her mother, then on her own late at night after roommates and boyfriends and her husband were asleep. The beautiful strawberry syrup has congealed overnight in the refrigerator; it is opaque and dull and comes up in chunks when she scrapes her fork along the bottom of the box.

She scrolls back to the picture of her and her mother. James took it last Thanksgiving in her mother's living room. It is a rare shot, because her mother isn't in her signature pose: face obscured by the palms of both hands. She is smiling—laughing. Arms around her daughter. Two fat women, caught being happy. For a moment. Soon after the photo was taken, Margaret said, "I'm starving," and her husband replied, "You sure don't *look* starving." Her mother said nothing. James would be gone a few weeks later. And January 1, like clockwork, her mother dumped all of the Christmas and New Year's sweets into the trash. The scale reappeared in her bathroom.

In a perfect world, the kitchen confrontation would be a pivotal moment in Margaret's life—she would leave her mother's house that day and decide to love herself, just the way she is, and never look back. But that's not how life works. When the cheesecake is gone, she will pull the

glass canisters of sugar and flour from the cupboards and pour them into the trashcan under the sink. She will write *lettuce, fruit, eggs* on the grocery list. She will blow the dust off her own scale.

Someone set Centralia on fire, thinking it was the answer: burn our garbage, and our garbage will disappear. Or, it was an accident; it depends on who you ask. The human concept of truth, here, is irrelevant. However it began, it exists, a 3,700-acre mistake that generation after generation will try to contain. The highway that cut through town, carrying Centralians home and away, is abandoned and crumbling, tattooed end to end in graffitied curses. The government condemned the town decades ago and razed nearly all of the houses; people say the "before" and "after" pictures are almost as startling as those from a nuclear disaster. Only five people remain, despite buyout offers and the pleas of family and friends. They stay out of pride, perhaps, or fear. To leave now would be to admit they have wasted their lives breathing in death for nothing. One day, when these people are gone, their homes will be plowed under, the lots left barren.

Centralia burns underground these days; it's hard to see proof of it in town. But if you go deep into the woods on a still, cold morning, you can see steam hissing through cracks in the forest floor: a near-invisible vapour that petrifies trees, bleaching them white as bone.

Marika Prokosh

INHERITANCE

A lucky snake
brooch handed down
by a grandmother. A red
enamel pot from a mother.
A mason jar of yeast kept on a high
shelf. One year,
two; passion,
its slow
ebb.
A fickle
body, its best
dress, now tight or torn. A book
of verse about the moon. The moon,
the last bright coin of a waning
currency. The seas, once
unmasterable, now going
greenish with waste.
A dead herb garden
on the sill. All
you meant to
change, but
never did.

Catriona Wright

NOTES TOWARDS AN ANTHROPOCENE FABLE AT A RUSSIAN SAUNA IN MISSISSAUGA

Rumpelstiltskin's first wife, I enter and exit
the steam room in a eucalyptus cloud.

My rumpled robe scratches. Silt rises
to skin surface. I scrub my pores with sea salt.

I pull a rusted chain and a wooden bucket
tips cool torrent on my head.

No one in these microclimates has a name
big enough for forests, for air.

I am trying to outrun my recurring
daymare, the one with the turret.

This olive string bikini, once sinuous,
is now only fit for sweating myself alive.

I beg a sauna man in a wool cap
to wave his parched birch wand.

My inner bitch wakes up, whining.
I haven't fed her in too long.

My cells realign themselves, spread
around. I eavesdrop on the heat,

practice different pronunciations. He ate,
she ate, we ate all the sun's treats,

licked black seeds from slit vanilla beans,
plucked gold croaks from toad throats.

I am trying to escape the king's wealth,
the kind that slashes and slinks through ozone.

I get to stay here longer than all the white rhinos,
the bees. Will I hand a firstborn to the burn?

Infused with cedar scent, buzzing, I lower
myself into a barrel of glacial water.

I imagine a cryogenic prince charming
carrying me, limp, into the next ice age.

Soothed, I shower. Calmer and slower, I sit
in the tea room afterward, drinking

vodka and kombucha, replenishing
my salt sea with pickle brine.

A television screens our ever after, a nature
documentary about bleached coral reefs,

all those fabulous bows and rainbows
frozen white in the sunshine.

Jane Shi

LOVES'EAT

she dreamt about growing
new baby teeth. mixing up
a tornado with eucalyptus
plant. a blur of words cast
on her forehead, brilliant in
the mirror where moonlight

forgot to shine. she spread
her quiet legs across a cliff
rested against soft breaths
breaking. where his 2-part
IKEA couch met like long
lost jade pieces split in the

heat of war-drenched passion. that night, she plucked off
chestnuts fresh from his fridge. her mouth was filthy
from telling the truth. you see, she just needed to lie
down for a little while. dream-teeth crevice between
the aches. pasts. lives. startled inside the oven. tender
baby-fists warm to the touch. she bit sleepily into them.

Alana Friend Lettner

+

For E.

She was late. For ten days she had waited, wearing her worst underwear. Panicking, she resorted to superstition. She slept naked on white cotton sheets; left her house without tampons; chewed wild carrot seeds. But still the blood did not come. One night she dreamt she felt it pooling beneath her as she slept and, woken but not awake, felt between her legs for the warm wet. Finding nothing, she cried.

She had always assumed that even in its earliest stages pregnancy announced itself. Not only in the signs distributed throughout the body—tender breasts, nausea, cravings—but as a noticeable shift of states: vapour to water, water to ice, not pregnant to pregnant. And yet she had intuited no great shift, her body had disclosed no signs. Feeling nothing, she cried.

The doctor examined her and confirmed what she did not feel. He had his list of questions. Did she have unprotected sex? Did she take birth control pills? Did she have a partner? Each question entered her like a speculum. She wanted to present a defense: she regularly forgot things in the oven, she did not know about investments. She was barely grown up.

She called a friend to come over. For hours the women discussed. Exhausted in the lightless morning hours they went to bed and the friend like a mother stroked her hair until she slept. Both women dreamt of daughters; both dreams disappeared in the daylight.

The waiting room was filled with women. Her name was called. She was led down a hallway to the examining room. The doctor explained what she might expect, how she might feel. She nodded to show him that she understood. He left the room to get the assisting nurse while she undressed. She took off her jacket, her sweater, her shirt. Then her pants. Pulling down her underwear she lost her balance and almost fell over. She laughed, thought it might be strange to laugh, stopped laughing. She arranged her clothing neatly on a chair.

She put on the paper gown and sat on the edge of the examination table. She thought of a word the doctor had used: *cannula*. It sounded so gentle. *A little reed*. As she thought about this word a shape appeared: metal wire curved into a flat triangle, with a hook. Something to hang a dress on. Then the wire began unbending. The thin steel uncoiled, the hook straightened. It became sharp and its sharpness gave it another use. The room turned red. She felt a terrible shredding. She leaned over and threw up on the white linoleum floor. She thought of getting the doctor, of alerting someone, but she could not think of what to say.

She lay out on the white paper like a drawing of a woman. She put her feet in the stirrups. Hundreds of small stars glittered and then dimmed. The dimming made her tired. She wanted to sleep but she could not sleep here, it was not permitted, it would make her look crazy. She thought about crazy. She thought about how easy crazy is. As easy as falling asleep on the examination table in a doctor's office.

She sat up and focused on the room's main decoration. It was a large diagram of her reproductive system. She read: *vulva, labia, clitoris*. And

further up: *cervix, uterus, ovaries*. She placed both of her hands on her belly, trying to feel the presence of these intricate structures through the skin of her palms. Somewhere in her a little egg was sprouting. But she could not touch this fact with her fingers, she could not hold the little egg in her mind; she could not hold any of it, the whole system was shadowy and receded further into shadows the longer she looked.

She remembered the first time she bled. A sudden wet, hot feeling between the legs. In the bathroom as she pulled down her pants what shocked her first was the smell. Overripe, metallic, full-bodied. Only after she smelled it did she see the colours she had made, the dark stain soaking through her underwear, the bright fruit juice smeared over the soft skin of her inner thighs. The smell was not just one smell and the colour was not just one colour but an entire palette. She was splitting in half at the groin, a dull knife slicing at the deepest, most tender tissue, her belly swollen with water that ran redly out of her. She ran to tell her mother.

She sat alone in her paper gown. The pool of vomit appeared as an admission, as if her true feelings had been wrenched out of her and thrown onto the floor. But what were her true feelings? An unbearable exhaustion; a delicateness behind the eyes; a longing for her mother. She felt like a child. She looked to the diagram to tell her something.

She heard the door open. The old embarrassment was drawn up from the well, from that still reservoir of filth, of fish floating belly-up. She reddened, crossed her legs, looked down; saw the vomit, closed her eyes. She did not want to be caught looking. To be caught asking. But the door had not opened. What she had heard was the white noise of the world outside the room, where other women walked down hallways and lay down on their backs and spread their legs and looked up at white ceilings and tightened as doctors told them to relax.

She relaxed. She uncrossed her legs. She was alone. In defiance she faced the diagram. *Vagina*. But the word did not seem to mean anything. It was not enough, it did not come close, it only measured a distance. *A sheath in Latin*. Like a rush of blood she felt a rage pour out from some deep fountain, pour out and over her, pour and pour.

With her fingers she pulled her lips apart. From her mouth came the first cry.

Manahil Bandukwala

WHAT'S A BIT MORE BLOOD?

Boys
in middle school ask
why girls cling together
in packs. *It's a girl thing.* Our shalwars
betray our bodies. Red
has never looked so red than as a stain growing

across thin white cotton. Black pants
not an option so
we cling. Blood leaks in class, a wet patch
on blue seats. How do I tell sir why I need to leave,
or signal to miss & walk
across rows of boys? So I linger

at the bell & we huddle, undisgusted by
each other's blood. *It's a girl thing,*
the bodyguard quadrant,
this slow walk to the nurse. Carry
blood-stained garments in a plastic bag. Wear an itchy
cotton pad that leaves rashes
between our legs. Boys

in middle school laugh
at girls
for fainting. A girl thing, blood & uterus lining
forcing its way south & I fall
palms scrape the rough tar. The heat,
the heat, *the heat dammit!* What's a bit more blood

dried on the blue-cushioned chair. I see my crush
take that spot next class, seat
still darkened.

Olive Andrews

LESSONS

nail polish chip october renaissance thinking of being owned in the realest sense there is a stinging in the air I scrape every inch of my emotional rot and regurgitate it onto the table for the waitress to wipe every part of me is smaller I imagine I've been oozing in the evening in the stillness the bus picks up only me and takes me somewhere new

there is something so still about today like treading water I make every nerve in my body freeze but my blood is still pumping I can't stop it learning to be powerful in this quiet understated way when I refocus I hear every sound the air conditioner in autumn trying to tell you through our brainlink that I want to give you everything when my face fizzles I imagine you've heard

turning off the lights I hear it better in the dark your reply buzzes and lights up the whole room I trim down all the fats and let the rest of my hurt sizzle until it crisps embroidering every grievance into the pillow case I thought about just telling you slowly one word a day or so drawn out that you forget where the sentence started just humming when you're ready tip the bottle I'll drink every last drop

Heather Christle

HALF-NOTE

Today I have loved my hands
and the gold prints
they can leave in the air.
I no longer know
how to read music but
I can remember the way
that it felt. I have
a little fossil in my mind.
If you want to make
a representative drawing
you will need some
meaningful corners.
You do not need to panic.
Perhaps your sleeve
is inside out. Dear planet
I give thanks for
solvable problems.
It can happen that
a person imagines
you wrong and no matter
what language you assemble
for them they will only
hear the words they
have already bought
with their terrible money.
You can even back away
and they will not notice.
Their mind is running
a program they like
very much. *Oh I've*
seen this one before.
O my fellow astronauts
when we get imagined
it is always so lonely.

I wish we could build
a nice house
in space together.
In a real house on Earth
I have been painting
a picture of Kew Gardens
onto one wall. *I am not*
a painter, I am a poet,
but lately when I leave
the house I notice
the green in the shadows.
I mean there is still time
to learn. To imagine
some ways to get free.

Gina Hay

PALU DI LECHI

In the late afternoon, Marco and Bastiaan reached the old Quarantine House, which overlooked Caracasbaai, the freight ships, and Jan Thiel's elongated stretches of beach. Marco released his turtle on the gravel road. He lifted its plastic terrarium from his car trunk with one hand, kicked off his sneakers, then picked up the turtle again to, together, ascend the concrete steps that led to Quarantine House. He held the turtle suspended in mid-air, like a holy object. His elbows were shaky, protruding outward. His grip was gentle on the turtle's shell. The turtle's name was Lechi, meaning "milk" in Papiamentu. Marco carried him at eye level.

Marco lived in Curaçao, on its westernmost end, in Bandabou. Years of climbing cliffs and walking on the sun-boiled cement had callused his hands and feet. Marco's shoes would often get lost, his sneakers abandoned in backseats, his sandals swallowed up by the surf. When it came to his turtle, he wasn't as careless. After settling Lechi on the floor, he watched him waddle circles around where the wood had deteriorated, had shaped holes that revealed glimpses into the basement, which was

said to be more haunted than the rest of the building. Bastiaan followed. Together they scoped out the main hall, where tall wooden columns obstructed trails of graffiti: cartoon mushrooms, ambiguous acronyms, initials coupled into twos. The sun poured in through holes in the walls, illuminating the clouds of dust.

"Better watch your turtle, Marco," Bastiaan warned, nudging at the little thing's shell with his foot. He had the tall posture of a crane in the midst of a balancing act. He pushed Lechi an inch forward, then struggled to regain his footing. There was an airy laugh, smothered when he pressed his lips together in concentration. Bastiaan was one of the paler Dutch people Marco had met—almost reflective. His face was round, cheeks often freckled, reddened with a moderate sunburn, starting to peel, hair heavy with thick, clear gel.

Marco shook his head, then picked up Lechi without another word. At the arch entrance, he kneeled down. He clicked open the terrarium lid and eased his turtle inside. Marco's parents had gotten a small plastic ice house that sat lodged in the terrarium, atop a low lake of water. His mother had hand-painted drooping frost and snowflakes on the plastic sides. Marco's mother was a Dutch immigrant. She'd moved to Curaçao to intern at Royal Dutch Shell's Isla refinery in her twenties, in St. Annabaai: a large natural harbour housing massive barges and tankers. The refinery was a by-product of a long history of Dutch colonization. It placed the country in the top ten of global air polluters. In 1985, the company sold the refinery to the Antilleans for a symbolic sum of one Antillean guilder, leaving behind environmental damage that Curaçao wouldn't have the money to repair. Marco's mother had married Marco's father in 1997 and still worked at the refinery now. His father was a landscaper whose parents had moved to Curaçao from Saint-Martin. Marco lived with his parents right outside the Curaçao suburbs—a world of infinity pools, towering palm trees, and overgrown bushels of Palu di Lechis. Like many immigrant families, Marco's was one in which all languages had gotten intertwined. In addition to Curaçao's official languages, Papiamentu, Dutch and Spanish, him, his siblings and his father spoke French and English to varying degrees. At dinner, his father would start a joke in English and finish it in French. His children would laugh and slam their hands on the table. He'd translate the French to Dutch for Marco's mother, sitting at his side, absently nodding at his elaborate hand gestures.

Marco clicked the terrarium shut and looked over his shoulder. Bastiaan was kicking up dust in a back corner. Marco and Bastiaan wouldn't graduate high school today with the rest of their class. Marco, aiming to study veterinary science in Florida, had failed his chemistry exams. Bastiaan, whose parents had wanted him to study business back in the Netherlands, stopped going to classes in February. His mother had hoped he'd perhaps one day run a corporation with an "internationally-minded cultural insight." Instead, Bastiaan lurked on the school grounds and sold the other kids Benzos he'd taken from his mom's pillbox. He didn't speak Papiamentu, and when the kids tracked him down near the basketball courts in packs, yelping, "Awo, awora," he'd tell them to speak English or Dutch instead of their supposed "made-up street slang." Once, a boy whispered over his shoulder, "Esta un Makamba," and Bastiaan didn't feel much need to figure out what that meant.

"Check it out," Bastiaan exclaimed, pointing at an insect scuttling on the wood. Marco could make out a small scorpion, pink and white, still young. Curaçao had many; while the centipedes were the most lethal, the scorpions could inflict something like an agonizing bee sting.

"Probably plenty of them around here," Marco said.

"Have you seen a stick anywhere?"

"The mondi is right outside," Marco offered. "Plenty of sticks."

"Probably some Antillean drunk staggering around out there. I'd rather stay in here, scorpion or no scorpion." Bastiaan crouched down and blocked the scorpion's path with his foot, forcing it to walk around in circles. "You're from here. Why is it called the Quarantine House? What'd they quarantine?"

Marco frowned at this. The two of them had been called to Principal Maessen's office together earlier that week, been told they wouldn't graduate, but should still come to the ceremony to cheer on their peers. They could even be handed empty diplomas on stage, if they'd like, and they could think on it until the day before the ceremony. When they were released, it was Bastiaan who had asked, in the same tone of voice he used now, "You— you have a car. Will you drive me to the Quarantine House before graduation?" And Marco had, somewhat absentmindedly, told him he could.

"In the nineteenth century," Marco started, "it was designated as a quarantine station. For all the ships pulling into the bay, all the, uhm— infectious diseases on board. Hasn't been used for God knows how long,

except by all the skòrpion í risinbèn. The scorpions and centipedes." He peered through a window, "And, everyone says, all the ghosts." Outside, the ocean lay spread out, a stone's throw from where he stood. For a second, Marco felt glad he'd be living in Curaçao for another year. At night, he and his sisters would often drive across Curaçao and meet increasingly fewer street lamps. They would force their dad's Kia down empty side roads, cascading with gravel, like the path that meets the old oil reserves. It curves down to the lake where all the flamingos breed. Last November, over one hundred people had gathered to lather up the pink birds (then turned black) with detergent, and strip the oil spill off their wings. At night, he wouldn't be able to see the reserves' colossal patches of rust. The bush lining the roads would look even more tangled in the car headlights. In the dark, the flora appeared as a single moving, mingling mass, restless, societies within societies. He would retake his chemistry exams in December. In the meantime, he would work as his father's right-hand man six days a week. They would go to resorts to plant Trinitarias, to trim overgrown thorn bushes, and Marco's hands would look recklessly small in his thick gardening gloves. He'd take Lechi to Playa Forti and watch him move across hot sand. He would marinate in the clammy heat. He'd learn to pace himself. To match Lechi's constant slowing, and maybe feel more at ease.

"Bastiaan, you've been here for a few years now, nò? How come you don't know—"

"So you don't think it's haunted?"

"I wouldn't know." Marco walked over, saw the scorpion start to get frustrated and slow.

"We'll find out. Give me a second, keep the scorpion here."

Marco eyed the creature's dazed movement, crouched, then sat down cross-legged a metre from it. It started to creep towards the back wall. Bastiaan jogged to the entrance. Before the scorpion got the chance to escape entirely, he re-emerged into Marco's periphery carrying Lechi's terrarium. He shook it from side to side, watched the pebbles dislodge within. Lechi rocked back and forth, pulled his head halfway into his shell. He closed his eyes, and looked really old, then. Bastiaan lowered the terrarium onto the floor. He walked over to the scorpion, nudged it back to the designated circle with his foot, then kneeled down next to the terrarium.

"If there are ghosts, they will intervene."

"Intervene?"

"We'll make the scorpion fight the turtle, then we'll see."

Marco shot him a dumbfounded look. "Lechi isn't immune to scorpion venom. I just don't think…" Bastiaan glared at Marco, shaking his head.

"You're half Dutch, right? Part Dutch, part Antillean?" Marco eyed the scorpion, which now stood still. It waited on the floor, eyes like black beads.

"My mother's Dutch. She moved here from Scheveningen. My dad's from Saint-Martin." Bastiaan turned his head to Marco, letting his glare scan over him from head to toe.

"I'm going to Scheveningen next year. I'm going to take a gap year there. You speak Dutch, then."

"I don't like to."

"Why?"

Marco pressed his lips together. Bastiaan's gaze was still fixed on him, hands on the plastic lid of the terrarium, waiting. Marco didn't like to speak Dutch because he lived in Curaçao. Because its national language was Papiamentu, because he mostly spoke English with his family. It was a common denominator. Sometimes, he felt like he would never leave the island. Because of the refinery, maybe. How near the very centre of the island it stood, like a monument, magnetic, coughing up clouds of leathery black smoke. There was that nagging feeling that came paired with knowing how much his parents were paying for his high school education. He knew that no amount of gardening could pay off the debts he owed. But maybe his hands would grow to fit the gloves. He could grow old here. He could stay, count time, track the annual cycle of six months of rain and fruit flies, then evaporated by six months of bone-dry. Maybe he didn't like to speak Dutch because the Dutch private schools across the island didn't teach Curaçao history, or Curaçao politics, or Curaçao art. Or Papiamentu. Because the schools were named after European slave traders. He shook his head. Bastiaan looked down, "We'll make the scorpion fight the turtle. Then, we'll see." Marco bit his tongue. He fell into a quiet panic as Bastiaan's hand wrapped around the animal's shell.

The lights in the road had charged all day in the sun, and now paved the way out of Caracasbaai.

"Do you think your turtle's haunted now?" Bastiaan asked. Marco didn't answer. "Do you think the scorpion will haunt your turtle or its

shell? Or will it haunt the Quarantine House?" Bastiaan pulled out his phone, but kept asking questions. "Will it make its way to the basement? Will the other ghosts teach it Papiamentu, or does it already know? Maybe it'll get seasick." He laughed. They reached the refinery, and Marco couldn't see the ocean anymore. Thick plumes of black smoke curled upwards. He had closed the car windows, but the smell of smog had gotten in somehow. It weighed him down. Bastiaan's phone chimed when he unlocked it. "D'you think it'll keep fighting? I think, probably, it'll just keep walking circles, slow down, and stay right where it was."

Leo Boix

A RED HORSE

The pills have arrived. They came all the way from Boston, via Sao Paulo and Buenos Aires. He is waiting in his stained armchair. Head down, rheumy, constantly looking at his watch. *Ya no puede ver.* He fell twice, last time in the middle of the kitchen, bruising his jaw. There is a lump on his neck in the shape of a trilobite. It grows at night, when he's dreaming. He thinks drugs have been concocted for him by witches. *Ha dejado de hablar.* He waits, facing the door ajar, giving his back to giant birds that steal his unripe blue grapes. A stone path leads to his tool shed at the back of the garden, now abandoned. The radio is constant. Midday overcooks bedding plants. He dreams of a garden he visited long ago, and a red horse trotting in circles.

Bess Cooley

THE WITCH COURT REPORTER

From the Fuyston, Yorkshire witch trials court reports, 1621

I

"In a trance, the girl felt a hand touch
her bare knee and a finger touch her
eyelids. She couldn't walk or see all day."

It wasn't that it was dark. Just
that there was no colour, only light.
As for my knees I couldn't bend them
but could otherwise move.
I spent all day lying on the grass,
turned toward the sky, not having
to see anything. Who knows
if it was God or the Devil. People talk
about blindness as a curse but
I no longer have to shut my eyes.

II

"A girl had many trances, and saw
strange deformed things which didn't speak."

The strangest things never speak.
When I was just born, I stared
at the people around me—father,
mother. I didn't cry. It's too hard
to say when one is in a trance. Could
you even remember? The trance
itself, some kind of vision? And how
aware do you have to be? Or
unaware? Losing consciousness,
my sister used to imagine herself
skiing, but the times I've fainted,
I haven't seen anything at all.

III

"A boy-spirit offered the girl a dead, black creeping thing. The woman spirit offered her something red and alive."

A beating heart.
It was no surprise that
the boy's gift was already dead.
She poked at it but didn't run away
like he'd expected. Which
did she take? The red, alive
thing could have been her own
muscle—a tongue or stomach.
It could have been on fire.

IV

"The witch's footprints in the snow led into an impassable wood."

The witch didn't know who said
it was impassable. There was something
mighty about its impassability.
She stood before it awhile. Then walked in.
The trees felt very far from her.
She liked that. She walked in circles
next to the trees giving each of them
names, the ones we know now: maple,
birch. She circled her arms around the one
she called cedar, a huge, deep tree.
She attached herself to it and grew into it.
She raised her arms up and stretched above
the forest ceiling, she reached up to the sun,
touched it, and stayed there, burning.

Neil Surkan

LATE STYLE

Ruddy salmon struggling up a canyon
front the bulletin. Sprinkled

one or two per pew,
we read the weekly supplication:

Norm, in a coma now;
Anne, who can't remember Pete;

Don, who found his Irene
in the bathroom, on the ground.

Amen. We sponge Christ's body,
broken into even cubes, as juice

drips from the tarnished
chalice. Rising stiffly,

we sing how God draws near
when all feels dark. Voices

squeal outside, from the park.
There are no children here.

Emily Pegg

AUGUST ON THE LAKE

Harrison spotted the bodies when my shirt was off. "Shit," he said, already rebuttoning. "I see floaters." He reached around me for his glasses and I dismounted. The dock swayed. I spread my feet to find footing, squinting into the sun.

"My shirt?" I said. One of us had tossed it. For a moment I worried it had gone into the water, that green black swamp so thick it might have been gelatinous. It was summer and we were sweating. He pulled on his shirt and the skin on his back looked burnt, nearly raw. Most days were sick with insects. A humming gnat flew close and I swatted it away.

Harrison bent over the dock. A white hand bobbed on the water's surface. Near it, an ear, a white face. "Frances," he said, which meant, call for help.

I dialled with one arm folded over my breasts. A modest and useless gesture; we were alone then, us and the bodies. No one to see but the bees. When the operator asked, "And how many did you say there were?" I told her, just the two. Young looking. A man and a woman, bloated and pale, so near each other that they might have been holding hands.

The man buoyed face down. Harrison pulled out the woman's long braid from the water and laid it over her chest. She had freckles, a split lip, and a pretty pink gash from forehead to ear. Under it, the pearl of her skull winked through.

Last week my sister Wendy called about Delanie. I'd emailed her about it like the affair was nothing, knowing that on the phone I might have wavered, argued in Harrison's defense. In an email I wrote it straight out. That my husband believed in moderation for all things but swimming. Two drinks, but never three. A single cigarette at a funeral. And just the one mistress, because he loved me, respected me, and didn't ever take on more than he could handle. "What now," she said. "You'll leave him?"

From the cabin's kitchen I could see the lake. Outside the pollen lifted like inverted snow, floated upwards and drifted patiently down. This place had been built with more windows than walls—the north side shone with glass. "I had him invite her over. To stay with us for a bit," I said, stroking the shrivelled leaf of a jade plant. On the windowsill it both burnt and froze depending on the season but had yet to die.

The bodies were gone now. The usual story: they'd jumped together from the forest's stone ledge, hit the silver-bellied shallows, and floated over. They were the third couple that summer and we still had three weeks until September. Local lore didn't lie; Heartbreak Lake earned its name. I could hardly think of it. Seven years—that's what I could think about. Seven years of swearing there was no one else. Of Harrison taking my face, telling me, "Baby, I could never love anyone like I love you." But loving new people is easy. You only have to open the door.

"What door? To the cabin?" Wendy said.

I told her, "The metaphorical door. We'll be open. All of us, here, together."

And Wendy said, "Oh, Honey," which meant *Honey*, you're an idiot. *Honey*, who brings home their husband's mistress? *Honey*, you have no idea what you're doing.

You'd never know from looking at us, but it was me who grew up on the lake, not Harrison. Me who spent summers at the shared family cabin, afraid of the water in Heartbreak Lake. I would stand on the river bank that ran downhill off the main road, watching Wendy and our cousins dare each other in and out of the slow rapids. "Go further," I'd say, and hope my encouragement might disguise my cowardice, "touch the other side." But the rocky steps on which they balanced petered out halfway and disappeared. No one could reach. Not them and not the

older, local kids, teenagers who waded in boldly past their thighs. Some slipped on the algaed riverbed. Others caught quarter-sized frogs in their fists. I never had the nerve. Though I refused to swim, I stayed nearby to watch them, waiting for an adult to return and usher everyone back to land before my nerves began to show. Wendy would surface often and encourage me to join, her hair like kelp against her cheeks. "You should come in next time," she'd say. "The water feels good. Like falling but better."

Why anyone would want to fall, I never knew. We all heard whispers from other vacationing kids about what happened in the lake, the place couples went to die, though we were kept inside our cabin when they surfaced and police came to carry them away. But even in the river, where no one died, I'd always felt safest away from all that water, that raw land under the crest that lived submerged, engulfed, never touched by the sky.

I told Delanie about the bodies while we sunbathed on the dock. She'd brought with her a purple bikini and now, wearing it, adjusted the tie behind her back, then reclined into her deck chair. Her breasts folded over her ribs. I'd expected a supermodel, someone toned and thin, a decade my junior with a lotus flower tattoo, and no lipstick on her teeth. But Delanie looked plain, had a round face; all her features crowded too close in the middle. Her nose turned sharply skyward.

"So what, you never swim?" she said, eyes over the deep water of my lake. In its centre Harrison's pale shoulders rose and vanished. He could stay out there for hours and never miss dry land.

"Bad things happen in the water here," I said.

Maybe I hoped to scare her. That I might frighten her off and remain the cool, accepting wife. Harrison and I could commiserate the loss over dinner, just the two of us, with vodka tonics, a split lime. *Such a shame she left. A nice girl.* But Delanie laughed a bell-round laugh and closed her eyes. Sun bleached her complexion too white. The pink muscle of her tongue kept darting out of her mouth.

"I've always been such a fish," she said to me. "That's what my brother says. A fish."

"People jump onto the rocks."

"I haven't seen any rocks."

"They're around the bend." I spun my hair into a knot and tied it up. Heat glazed the exposed skin of my chest. I had sunscreen stored under

my chair but Delanie had declined it, so it felt wrong to slather myself. If she burned, so should I.

Harrison lifted an arm to wave, called out to us.

"What's he saying?" said Delanie.

"Who knows."

Delanie raised an arm and waved back to my husband. He called out again, but with no response, disappeared under the water. I counted to myself whenever I couldn't see him. Fifteen seconds and he resurfaced. Then twenty-two. He never stayed down longer than thirty.

"So there's a cliff," said Delanie, turning onto her front.

"More like a ledge. It's hard to explain."

She turned her face to me, hand poised flat over her brow for shade. "Do you plan to throw me over it?" Half a grin for half a joke. "Because a heads up might do me good. Everyone thought I was crazy for coming. You know, when Harry asked. My brother said you'd try to fuck me or kill me. I'm trying to decide which one I think you'll do."

"I don't have a plan," I told her. "But I can show you the rocks later."

When Harrison came out of the water we moved to the sand. Delanie had questions about the bodies: where they came from and why they did it, like we had any idea. Of course Harrison had hypotheses; he liked to guess. "They could have been siblings. There have been a few of those."

Delanie pinched her hands into the grey sand to form hills. Wet and warm, but dirty, and riddled with sharp rocks. She'd looked skinnier in her photos—the ones Harrison showed me on his phone—sharper, less soft. Her knuckles disappeared in and out of the beach. A tattoo of an eel, smudged to a dark stripe, coiled around her ankle. She had a scar on her knee that stretched as she fidgeted, unable to sit still in the sun. "Maybe they were siblings in love," she said, and Harrison laughed. I caught his eye and smiled over Delanie's knee. Confused. That's how he looked. Like I'd surprised him.

"Pass me that?" said Delanie to me, one finger pointed to the bucket near my leg.

Sandcastles had been her idea. Where it came from, I didn't know. The short stretch of sand by our dock could only be called a beach by the optimistic or desperate, or like us, those who lacked better language. Its murky colour resembled mould most of the summer and stayed muddy no matter the temperature. Delanie dug into it as if sifting for gold.

"You're so cool," she said to me. She kept saying it. So cool. "Having me here. I don't know anyone who'd do that."

"That's Fran," said Harrison. "The coolest."

I thought we'd all have things to say to each other, fights to have, questions to ask, but we kept stumbling into new pockets of long silence, no one with anything to say. I surprised myself most of all with cool composure, no anger, hardly any ache. At most, Harrison would look at Delanie and a sharp jolt would run through my chest, like a sore tooth you catch on something too tough before swallowing. Around the lake's curve another cabin's family, rich with children, filled the air with shrieks and cannonballs. Footsteps stomped down dock planks and the lake swallowed them. They must have been racing each other—an adult yelled, "On your mark," and someone else yelled, "Go!" Delanie followed their voices with her chin.

"I can't believe kids swim here," she said. "Where people die all the time."

"Most days no one dies," said Harrison.

"Some days they do," I said.

Delanie made a *hm* sound, pursed her lips. Her sandcastle, crooked and round, looked ready to fall. She cupped her hands around the base and pushed. The top mound cracked, then oozed over her knuckles. When she let go the whole structure sank apart. "Oh well," she said, then stood from her towel.

She was a fish. She could do somersaults and handstands and twirls. I counted twenty seconds, then sixty. She made it past seventy, then came up, back arched concave. Just when I thought she'd tired, her two pale legs would shoot up and kick her back under the surface. We'd been out seven summers in a row and still I had yet to sink into the lake, tempting as it looked under the marbled sunlight. At the water's edge the trunks of alder trees warped and swayed. Maples shed their green into the current. Harrison put his hand on my knee. I touched his warm wedding band as Delanie resurfaced for air. She waved and I waved back. Harrison waited for her to go down again, leaned in. "We could go inside. While she swims."

One hundred and one. One hundred and two.

"She's been under a while," I said. One hundred and five.

"Baby, come inside."

One ten.

The sun moved into my eyes and I squinted, looking for bubbles. The kids started another race; the water shook with their strokes. People didn't die here like this—they always jumped. No one ever just sank.

Harrison took his hand away. It had started to sweat on my thigh. "Alright," he said. "That's alright. I get it. No rush."

One fifteen.

From the depths Delanie reemerged with a gasp, both arms straight above her, victorious. Her hair plastered to her back, bikini strings too tight on her shoulders. "Two minutes!" she cawed, her voice almost inaudible over the kids. "Did you see that?"

"We saw," Harrison called back, though it had been me counting, not him. "We saw."

After an hour of hiking Delanie and I heard the lake mouth slurping against rocks. The once lush grass had dried out after a summer with little rain, and it prickled against our ankles as we walked. Delanie bent to pull an ivy leaf off her sock and stuck her hand out to catch the pollen that flew in murmurations. It landed in the trail's dips and bends. In a matter of weeks the air would cool off, the rain would return, and it would wash away. I could hear her heavy treads on the trail, incautious and clumsy.

"I thought you'd be less happy," she said from behind. "I don't know why."

"We look happy," I said, not a question. Hardly a statement. Just words.

Then the trees parted their grand, green curtains and the ground sloped off, then dropped in a sharp cut. I stretched an arm out to warn Delanie, but she leaned forward anyway, bent like a hinge, unfazed in the face of a death site. "Huh," she said. "I expected blood."

Below us, a skin of dark lake over grey stones. Raw and pale, deceptively round, buffed almost smooth. Of course the blood was gone—it never stayed. These were the kind of rocks you could sunbathe on, if they rose a few extra inches out of the water. Harmless from anywhere but forty, fifty feet above. From here the ground felt miles away. The lake, almost black, gulped at the rocky lift, crawling over the ridges. If you jumped here, you'd hit stone below the surface—the harsh, unforgiving smack of the earth. If you fell, well. The same. The water, just deep enough, would carry you back to the lake heart, to the docks—to us—but it wouldn't soften the jump. I wanted to tell Delanie: make no mistake. There's no surviving this.

I forced myself upright, a hand on a tree's clipped bark for balance. Still, what gravity sat inside me lurched to fall. My stomach wanted to throw itself over the ledge without permission. My skull swam; I closed my eyes.

"This place gives me a stomach ache," said Delanie. "Harry said there have been what, three couples? Just this summer. I mean, what's being done about it?"

"Nothing," I said behind the darkness in my eyelids. The air was hot, almost sour. Like something gone bad in the sun. "No one will stand watch. They're too scared to see someone go over."

"You ever seen it?"

"We just find the bodies."

"You're kind of pale."

Delanie stood too close to my face. Her nose threatened to bump mine. She had a strange smile, almost a frown; one side of her mouth turned the wrong way. But you could feel it, like a radiator giving off waves of heat. She watched me, waiting to see if I'd pass out.

"Do we look happy?" I asked her.

"From where I'm at."

"I don't know why we never offered to be lookout. I guess anyone could do it."

Harrison and I went days, sometimes weeks at a time without feeling the deaths at all. Other days I stood on the docks overwhelmed by them, guilty that we vacationed here and disrupted their grief. Maybe it would have been better to see someone jump—to have a before image to suit the distorted after. When we found them floating they seemed to come from the lake itself, that undisturbed world at the bottom that no one ever reached.

That night in bed Harrison was ravenous. All summer we'd been lazy with love, reaching for each other only when we had to reach for something else. The remote. The fridge. Bathing suits drying on the dock. Still, seven years and a mistress later, he wanted me, and that was something. I could never decide what I wanted from him.

"I don't know anyone," he said after, "as cool as you." He pushed his ribs against me, put a hand on my chest. "Let's go swimming tomorrow. We can send Lanie home."

So he'd decided. Right there, he wanted us—forget Delanie and the chasm he'd carved in our summer. I lay stiller than death. With no

response Harrison propped himself up to look at me in the dark, like there was anything to see. Here we had no street lamps, no neighbours in sight. Nightfall meant unforgiving darkness. "Did you hear me?" he said. "Fran?"

"Go to sleep," I told my husband.

"I'm sick of her," he said, and some minutes later, began to snore.

I waited for him to flip over before going outside.

The moon shadowed behind clouds so thick they became a second skin to the sky. Even the lake, which reflected any light dropped into it, lay colourless, molten, untouched by white. Mosquitos flitted against my calves.

I closed my eyes, though in the dark it made no difference. The water lapped to kiss my heels. Quivering, the dock rocked beneath me in a relentless pendulum. A door creaked somewhere in the cabin and softly closed. Footsteps on the stairs. It could have been Harrison in the bedroom or Delanie in the living room, searching for a bathroom or pair of arms.

There was a name for this feeling. Dizzy and untethered—I couldn't think of it, but Wendy would know. If she had been there, she'd have said, "You're in the water?" and I'd have told her, "Almost," and slipped in.

It took no effort at all.

My limbs felt buoyant, like they might float apart. Like they might rise to the surface and drift away from me. Over the sound of the water, I could almost hear creaking in the cabin. Two bodies moving on a bed or couch, trying to keep quiet. Falling.

Wendy called it falling.

The lake held me in its mouth. I begged it to swallow.

Annick MacAskill

MARTINIQUE BEACH

I watch as my lover braces, waves,
lifts himself up—falls, the board
tethered to his ankle. The surfers,
the other boarders, the brave
teenaged lovers, and mothers
and daughters
test the weight of their bodies,
their existence confirmed in the slap of force.

The truth about the Atlantic—
I don't know enough to distinguish it
from other oceans, or seas;
it is the brown sugar of its sand,
caked upon my heels, stretching for kilometres
on either side of my towel
that reminds me of the difference.

Dominik Parisien

MY PARTNER MAKES OF ME A POEM

with Kelsi Morris

there's a lot of forest in you
you have the universe
        in one eye
the underside
      of a mushroom
in the other
& a tree
hidden in your face
        that will outlive
        the world's end
the tree is asymmetrical & upright   bare
      though
  sometimes burst blood vessels
bloom like leaves
        on your forehead
I mean all of you is beautiful
but this rib here should really be a jewel
      around my neck
I'm partly made of you anyway
but if I touch here
that scar is like a ravine
      I can't help but explore
from there I see the perfect clouds
    of your ears
& your freckles like stars

Cassidy McFadzean

VICTORY DAY

I've only been in Tbilisi twenty minutes when I'm smoking hash out of a can of Borjomi mineral water that Sasha lights for me. Nara and Davit have given me a ride from Yerevan where there's two weeks remaining in the art residency, but I've brought all my luggage and haven't decided if I'll go back. Sasha sucks his lips against the can, and I tell him how our car was searched at the border, that I walked in on a guy at the squat toilet, standing naked from the waist down. Sasha asks if the guy had a bigger cock than him, and I don't answer. Instead, I tell him I feel guilty for missing the election of Nikol Pashinyan and the celebrations of the new prime minister following the Armenian revolution.

"You were there for the important part," he reassures me.

We have sex and when we come at the same time Sasha shouts, "Team sport."

The next morning, we sleep late and smoke more hash at his desk, overlooking the mountain, forest, and graveyard below. Sasha has added more transplants from his forest hikes to the ceramic planter on his

windowsill. He shows me the winding succulent, thin green stalks of something that resembles clover, and deep red grasses with small spiky flowers.

I ask if my breasts have gotten smaller while in Armenia, and he tells me that he is attracted to my body, which is not the answer I am looking for. "You were so anxious there," he says, drawing his lips from the aluminum can to suck my right nipple. "My poor anxious poet, it's good you came back."

He's taking me to the sulfur baths to make up for missing my birthday and on our way to Rustaveli Street, we pass the cemetery where an old man is building a section of concrete wall.

"Is he just going to build right over that gravestone?" Sasha says, gesturing to a stone in the side of the hill. He is aghast. He tells me that the Soviets used grave markings of people they didn't like to construct new buildings.

The gravestone is etched with Georgian writing, and I make the observation that the characters of the Armenian language are angular, while Georgian is rounded. I wonder aloud whether this is reflected in the disposition of the two nations, citing the severity of the Armenians compared to the jolliness of the Georgians, or even their appearances: the skinny frames of Nara and Davit versus the fattened bellies of Sasha's Georgian friends.

"You're exoticizing again," he says, grasping an unripe green fruit from a tree. "Soon you'll be eating figs off the street."

In my absence, roses have bloomed all over Tbilisi, red, pink, and white. We walk to the sulfur baths and pass cherry trees buzzing with flies as the hot smell of yeast rises from basement bakeries. All is in a state of exaggerated growth and fermentation. I step over a dead water beetle on the sidewalk, and we dodge fly-covered dog shit, pale yellow and frothing.

We get lunch at a restaurant close to the baths, and Sasha tells me the way I eat khinkali turns him on. Afterwards, he gets a boner in the sauna, but we don't have any condoms. I'm tipsy from the beer we've brought with us and tell him I have my period so it's okay. He bends me over a stone massage bed, and spits on his hand, rubbing it on his dick. He thrusts only a few times before stopping. "I don't want to come inside you," he says, and I drink the rest of our beer.

When our time in the baths is up, my hair is still wet at the nape. We walk until it dries, and Sasha holds onto my thumb, like he's a little kid

and I'm his mom. I make a squealing sound and he tells me sometimes I remind him of a wolf pup and other times of some sort of weasel.

We walk past men in yellow vests directing traffic and take the bus to an art show Sasha wants to see. A woman is passing out flyers and the girl in front of us tells her, "Shansi aris" which Sasha translates to "Not a chance." We brainstorm ways to incorporate the word into our vocabulary. We board a bus, and though there's nowhere to sit, it's less crowded than any of the buses in Yerevan and I can grip a pole without men's bodies pressing into me. Sasha pays with his transit card and hands me a ticket. The driver gestures at a pothole, announcing it with his hand like an orchestra conductor, and we laugh at his indignation.

"Shansi aris," I say to the pothole, half a block behind us.

We order beers at the art gallery and Sasha introduces me to Grigol, a young photographer who is presenting his work: a limited edition book consisting of photos of his parents' youth in the Soviet Union. He discusses the project with a bashfulness I find endearing. Half the audience has opted to sit on the floor of the gallery and I watch Grigol's eyes moving up and down as he surveys the crowd. The event is well documented—at least three people are taking pictures on their phones. There are two people with DSLRs and an older grey-haired man records the entire event. When he is finished speaking, Grigol takes questions from the audience. There are many queries including but not limited to: how old he is, whether his parents gave permission for the project, whether his project has opened conversations in his family, what he imagines is the reason for silence surrounding the Soviet years. A conversation like this would never occur in Toronto, where people are too self-conscious.

One woman remarks on the ubiquitousness of cameras for our generation and says that she doesn't think such a project would be possible for the generations before Grigol's parents, who are barely older than Sasha. The grey-haired man pauses recording to argue with the woman; he himself took many such photos in his youth and therefore he disagrees that his children would have no record. That was not what the woman was saying, however. She asks the man to consider how many cameras he saw in the hands of his peers growing up, but a full-fledged argument breaks out in Russian, stealing attention from Grigol. The event concludes to scattered applause, and Sasha whispers that the old man is a famous photographer.

We finish our beers quickly. I tell Sasha I have cramps and need to find a bathroom, but he tells me there's no public toilet. We stand

outside with two women Sasha knows. They tell us about the fentanyl crisis that's erupted over the past couple of weeks. There's been more and more deaths and now government agencies are warning against using any sort of drugs.

"What about hash?" Sasha asks.

"I'm not sure," one woman says. "Just to be safe they're saying not to use anything."

"What if I've already smoked it?"

"It's definitely in MDMA," she says. She tells us about a friend of a friend who used MDMA at the club one night, and ended up in a coma. The ecstasy was laced with fentanyl.

"I have a guy who uses the stuff before he splits it with me. If there was any problem, he'd let me know."

"Just be careful," she says.

We take a taxi to an abandoned warehouse where Nara's group show is opening, and Sasha promises me there's a bathroom. When we get there, Nara is in a white satin gown and I don't feel the shame of being underdressed in jeans and Nikes because my guts are churning. She asks if I'm getting a ride back to Yerevan with them and I tell her I haven't decided.

"We're thinking of leaving tomorrow after lunch," she says. "So let us know."

"I will."

I remind Sasha about the bathroom and he asks Davit where the toilets are, but he doesn't know, and we run into Nara's boss, who Sasha stands and talks with.

Finally, we go outside the warehouse and around the side of the building. There's a dark room with a squat toilet that I use, expelling the black shit that often accompanies my period. I wipe with a napkin from my purse, and then rinse the squat toilet with a jug in the corner of the room. I feel slightly better, and Sasha insists that more alcohol will help. We go to a restaurant and split a bottle of rosé and he raises his glass, imitating the famous Georgian toasts.

"Someone's twenty-nine," he says. "Where did you think you'd be at twenty-nine, in your husband's asshole?"

"I'm not in the asshole of my husband," I say. "I'm shitting in a toilet."

We go back to his place to smoke more hash and have sex. The skin on his pelvis is bumpy from shaving and resembles a plucked chicken. He gets on his back, and spreads his legs wide open. He is a dead chicken in a

grocery store. I lay beside him and he sits on my face, and I shove his balls in my mouth. I insert a black silicone butt plug into his ass, pushing and pulling back and forth until he's hard. He fucks me with the toy inside him, and when he comes, his moans are tender and feminine.

"You're my monogamous girlfriend," he whispers to me before falling asleep.

While I was in Yerevan, the smoking laws had come into effect in Tbilisi. Now we can work in all the cafes that Sasha was too allergic to enter before. We're working on our laptops at a bar, and I pick his baseball cap off the table and place it on my head.

"Do you like looking like a clown in a public place?" he says. "Do you like looking comical?"

"What?"

"That hat is way too big."

I don't want him to know he's hurt my feelings so I leave the hat on and take a selfie. My phone lights up with Nara's name, but I ignore the call. Instead, we work for another hour and then take a taxi to the apartment Sasha has arranged for me to rent and that the landlord Joni says I can take early. Joni only speaks Russian and Georgian, and so I'll have to communicate through Sasha, or the other expat tenant Chris, who Sasha says practices bass clarinet all day. The taxi drops us off beside the Terrace Hotel, and we descend the narrow cobblestone street next to the music school, where children are practicing piano scales. We reach the two-storey house and enter through a rusted green metal gate around back. Inside the courtyard is a fruit tree and a staircase to the apartments, two of which Sasha has already tried living in. They didn't work out because of his allergies to mould, particleboard, detergent, and other yet-unidentified sources.

"You'll have fruit," he says. "Maybe cherries."

He carries my suitcase up the stairs, and leaves my luggage on the balcony while he goes up another flight of stairs to get Joni. They come down and Joni says, "gamarjoba" and I pay him the deposit. We take a picture of the electricity meter, and Joni translates through Sasha. There's a feather pillow and a synthetic one, and I might consider unplugging the water heater to save a few lari on the power bill. I thank Joni using one of the few Georgian words I've memorized. "Madlobt," I say. "Didi madloba." He leaves us inside the apartment, which is partially built into the side of a hill, the other half a renovated porch.

Sasha gets the Wi-Fi password from Joni's son in the neighbouring suite, and I open the kitchen cupboards. Inside, there's a vegetable peeler, one pot, a knife, four spoons of various sizes, and a fork.

"I used the pot to make tea when I stayed here," Sasha says.

There's no matches and it looks like it will take forever to boil, but I agree it's suitable. He enters the Wi-Fi password into my phone, and I open the fridge, which has been humming loudly since we arrived.

"This isn't the one that was filled with all that meat?" I ask him, remembering Sasha's anecdote of scrubbing blood out of a fridge his first week in Tbilisi.

"No, that was next door," he tells me.

It's cold in the apartment. I open the drawers in the bedroom wardrobe, and they're filled with packets of insect poison. Sasha notices a square door in the wall, and makes a joke about a dungeon. He opens it, revealing a crawlspace a few square metres in size. He clicks a switch and a red bulb illuminates brick walls.

"I think it's a good sign, this torture chamber in your apartment," he says.

Although it's cool in the apartment, he says he'll have to ask Joni for a fan; he's too allergic to stay inside even for a few hours.

"There's no towels," I tell him.

"You want me to ask Joni for towels?"

"I don't know."

"You come from a family of great artists and poor communicators," he says. He runs back upstairs. I hear him speaking to Joni in Russian, and then in a few seconds, Sasha comes down alone.

"I told him to get a kettle for you and a fan," he says.

"Thank you."

"You should open these windows," Sasha continues, unlatching the frames. "You could get some plants in here, hang them in the windows."

"I'm barely going to be here," I say.

"This place could be really nice," he says. "I should get going."

"Are we meeting later?"

"I'll message you," he says.

"Okay."

After he leaves, I unzip my suitcase on the bed and hang my jacket on the hooks by the door, but I leave the rest of my clothes packed. With Sasha gone, the imperfections of the apartment are all the more apparent: the tile flooring of the kitchen is slanted, and all of the cupboards are

crooked. In the bathroom, the container of hand soap slides off the sink, which is built on an angle. I pee and flush the toilet, but it takes three tries for the toilet paper to go down. The apartment is dark, and I can hear Joni's son next door, exiting his suite and entering his bathroom, which has a separate entrance from the balcony. I close the windows Sasha opened but I still hear Joni's son shitting into the toilet, and then talking on the phone in Georgian. I read in bed but after no more than half an hour Sasha messages me, asking if I want to come over.

"Okay," I write him. "I just need to change."

I move to the doorway of the bedroom, where I can't be seen from the window, and change from shorts into jeans.

"On my way," I write him.

I leave the apartment, turning the key two times behind me, though the lock is so flimsy the action feels pointless. I descend the stairs and exit the yard, the gate clattering behind and announcing my departure. I start back up the cobblestone street, stepping on the sharp edges of the rocks to keep my balance. I climb up the staircase and follow the landmarks Sasha pointed out on our drive there: the evenly spaced bins of garbage, the brown signpost. I walk along the road at the edge of the trees, passing the tin-clad dome of the church and the line-up of taxis in front of the forest. I walk along a wooden sidewalk where there's construction, and then the sidewalk ends.

I stand in place as taxis zoom past.

"I don't know if I just feel tired but I feel like this is stupid," I text him. "Especially if you're never staying over."

"Come?"

"It's dangerous, there's no sidewalk," I write. "I feel like I don't get the point of this."

I keep walking, pressing my body against the side of buildings, paint peeling from concrete. The next time I stop it's to check directions.

"Hi," Sasha writes. "Are you on your way or not?"

"Yes, but I'm annoyed."

"Okay," he says. "Are you still in the mood to come over?"

"It just doesn't feel equal."

"I invited you," he says. "Don't come if you don't feel like it."

"It just feels dumb."

"I don't know how to make you feel better," he says. "I'm really allergic at your place. I have health issues. Maybe if we get a fan it will be better there."

I stop checking my phone, and focus on walking the strip of sidewalk not blocked by garbage bins or parked cars. I keep my head down to watch for mounds of dog shit. I step over the body of a pale white gecko turned upside down, its tail removed from its torso. I soon reach another construction site, this one completely obscuring the sidewalk.

"Can you please calm yourself down?" my phone reads. "Please?"

I march down the middle of the street, moving to the side only when I hear the cars approaching from behind. When I come to the street that leads to Sasha's apartment, the sidewalk begins again, and I climb the hill, passing the cemetery and reaching his building. I insert a ten tetri coin into the metal box in the elevator and press the number eight. The elevator jerks to his floor and soon opens to his landing. I press his doorbell and he answers, hugging me at the door.

"I'm glad you came," he says.

I come inside and take off my shoes. "I just feel frustrated," I say. "I don't see the point of renting a place if I'm going to be here every night."

"You need an office," he says. "And I needed you to have your own place. It's for me to feel secure and for us to give this another try."

"So we're dating again?" I ask. "We're monogamous?"

"You're my monogamous girlfriend," he says. "I love you and no other, but I need you to have your own apartment."

"Okay," I agree.

The next morning is the Day of Victory over Fascism. "Everyone else does May 8," Sasha tells me on the taxi ride to Vake Park. "We do May 9 when the Soviets signed."

We stayed up late smoking hash and slept in, and Sasha is worried we'll miss the people in military uniforms or the nationalists picking fights with old grannies for wearing the orange and black ribbon of Saint George which commemorates Russian soldiers in WWII, symbolizes Russian patriotism, and is now illegal to wear.

We stop at the edge of the park. Sasha is disappointed by the size of the crowd, and tells me it was busier in previous years. Still, we navigate through the crowds of young people and families taking photographs in front of the fountains and head toward a group gathered at the foot of a giant stone figure with two outstretched hands, one clutching a flower. We squeeze past chairs set up in front of the military band, mostly occupied by the elderly. I comment that the band sounds like Tom Waits and Sasha seems happy that I'm getting into the spirit of things.

"There are the nationalists," Sasha says, pointing to men in black t-shirts and camo at the Memorial of the Unknown Soldier.

We watch parents pushing to the front of the memorial, where they take pictures of their children placing flowers on the stone surrounding a small burning flame. News cameras are arranged in formation, and Sasha points to the men dressed in green fatigues surrounding a photograph propped up on the feet of the stone figure. "There's the photograph of Stalin."

I realize that the men standing on either side of the memorial are in fact guarding the controversial figure. Stalin is still revered and worshipped in the region, Sasha explains, mostly by the elderly, but the men surrounding the memorial aren't exactly geriatric.

"I want to punch them in the face," he says. "Should I do it?"

He tells me about a Stalin statue that stood in Gori for fifty years, before being removed by police cordon in the middle of the night. It is illegal to put up any new Soviet symbols on buildings or signs, but old symbols can stay.

"So is that why people wear the ribbons?" I ask. "As protest?"

"Some people think things were better under the Russians," he says. "They're idiots for wearing them, but the Georgian nationalists are no better."

We watch a group of young men harassing a group of old ladies, each wearing the ribbons. The scene at the park crystallizes. Sasha points out the police officers and politicians, the Russian sympathizers, the group of Georgian nationalists on the far end of the park carrying signs with an image of the ribbons crossed out like a no smoking sign.

"There they are," he says. "Maybe a fight will break out."

We observe the young men following the old ladies away from the memorial and toward the edge of the park. Sasha considers approaching the men, but thinks better of it. He tells me he's worried he's talking down to me and I tell him I enjoy his play-by-play. This makes him even more exuberant and he divulges something that happened the year before that he hasn't told anyone.

"I stole the portrait of Stalin and burned it in the flame," he tells me. "It was in the evening but there were still a few people gathered. I ripped it in half and burned the pieces. And then I left the park before anyone could do anything."

He tells me he's thinking of doing it again this year, but there are too many people, and he's afraid of the nationalists.

"Am I a coward?" he asks me. "What would you do?"

I want to watch him rip the photograph and burn it in the flame, but I tell him to listen to his gut. We stand on the edge of the memorial for a few more minutes, Sasha waiting for an opportune moment to rip the photograph away from the group of middle-aged men and teenagers, but the moment passes, and I know he isn't going to act.

"People are watching us," he says. "We've been standing here too long."

I follow as he abruptly turns and heads for the fountains. We walk past teenagers posing for pictures in the ankle-deep water. Sasha points out the old men wearing military uniforms adorned with medals. "Some of them are faking it," he says. "Wearing their fathers' uniforms for the attention or praise. Most people that fought in the war are dead now. This guy looks pretty young. I should ask him how old he is, but his medals look real."

A group of men in leather jackets pass by. "They're the Georgian nationalist bikers," Sasha says. "All they care about is ripping ribbons off old people."

We reach the edge of the park where the anti-Russian protesters are gathered, holding signs. "Georgia is an occupied state," Sasha reminds me. "They consider the Russians their colonizers."

Sasha calls out to the old man from the photography event, who's carrying his camera and photographing the various factions of people. Sasha laments the lack of activity compared to the year before and the man tells us that the opposing political party was apparently banned from entering the park.

"It's a public event," Sasha says. "That's ridiculous."

"The police must have thought they'd start trouble."

We reach the edge of the park, and we rest on a bench. "Okay, my monogamous girlfriend," Sasha says. "Do you want to get food?"

I'm tired of Georgian food, oily eggplant and heavy khinkali, so opt for his favourite buffet, which Sasha warns is going to be a madhouse.

"You take a number and everyone's salivating over the glass display case," he says. "It's usually a war zone in here. They installed the number system to add some civility, but sometimes forego it entirely."

We try a new location on the edge of Vake Park and Sasha is disappointed that it's not as chaotic as he imagined. "I guess no one's heard about this one yet," he says.

He chews with his mouth open, meat sticking to his lips, as he asks whether I'm still thinking of heading back to Yerevan to finish the residency.

"Davit and Nara have already left," I tell him.

"You could take the marshrutka."

"Then what was the point of getting the apartment early?" I say. "I thought that meant you wanted me to stay."

"I asked you to come, and I'm glad you did," he says. "But you should think about yourself. Don't you think it looks bad to leave the residency early?"

"You think I should tell them that I left? You told me it was fine."

"Well, if you're not going back you should probably email someone."

I start to cry, and Sasha tells me he's sorry for bringing it up.

"I'm only trying to look out for you," he says. "I say this because I care."

When we have sex that afternoon, Sasha asks if I'm still on my period and comments that I'm dry. He spits onto his hand and rubs it on my cunt.

"You don't seem that into it," he says.

"I am," I say. We lazily start fucking, but he asks to stop after a few minutes.

"I lost my boner," he says. "I was thinking of World War Two and the Ukrainians murdering Jews. My mom will be happy."

He gets up to use the bathroom and I scroll through the pictures of Yerevan I have saved on my phone. I've decided to pretend I'm still in Armenia, that I haven't left the revolution for the asshole of my boyfriend. I hear Sasha showering, and settle on a picture of Mount Ararat taken from the Cascades on my last clear morning, its peak a wisp of cloud floating over the last of the Soviet expansion blocks, weightless and free.

Marika Prokosh

LETTER FROM VOYAGER 2

I want to tell you about the weather
at the outer edge of the solar system:
the wind! The heat! Darling,
we are farther than known entities
from our blue marble have ever been. At night,
which is all the time, I stroke
the grooves in my records, unable to conjure
rain or raise Beethoven from the dead.
Do you remember what a human body looks like
in motion? The nuances of hand and eye
in conversation over a softball and gravity?
It's so dark now. My generators are shutting down.
Camera: disabled, radio: disabled, spectrometer:
you get the picture. We were never meant to last,
but what does human lifespan mean past
the heliosheath? I murmur into my tape recorder
as though it's going to find you,
like one day we'll sit side by side in the Florida sun
on deck chairs, comparing notes on the ice giants.
Thinking about it, I want to lick them, thirst
for their confectioner's colours. I imagine
astronauts driving around and around the block
in the old neighbourhood, peering in windows,
but my love, out here we are the most alien
thing in the universe, hitchhiking remote highways

alone, hoping for a hookup, groping for new
planetary energetic particles. I don't know if I believe
in anyone else. Soon, any discoveries
to the contrary will just happen. It doesn't matter
if no one retrieves the dead light we saw
and now pass by unseeing, or measures
plasma in the strange clouds we traverse.
I tell myself: it is enough to play Dark Was the Night,
Cold Was the Ground and fumble toward Andromeda,
dreaming of other worlds while we can.

Natalie Lim

ELEGY FOR OPPORTUNITY

after Matthew Rohrer's "There is Absolutely Nothing Lonelier"

my sister cried when she heard.
on a planet far away,
all reddish rock and dust storm,
Opportunity lies still—
this robot who just turned fifteen,
who never knew what a birthday was,
who will never understand
that there are people on earth
grieving her cold metal frame.
there is something so cruel,
so human, about mourning
a being we programmed
and exiled to space
with no means of returning.

we knew she would die one day,
alone in a sea of rust,
but we are tender even
in our cruelty, so we
grieve. we write poems in her name.
our last message to her was a song,
did you know that?
a *song*.
there is nothing lonelier
than the little Mars rover,
no longer chirping back to base
about earth and rocks and maybe-life,
nothing lonelier than us,
creating things we know
we will sing to sleep one day, nothing lonelier
than thinking of that robot,

sitting still and silent now,
being worn slowly away
by the winds of a planet
we promised she could call home.

CONTRIBUTOR BIOS

Olive Andrews is from Ottawa, Ontario and is a Creative Writing undergrad at Concordia University. They are the 2018 recipient of the Gabriel Safdie Award in poetry, and their work has previously been published in *Plasma Dolphin*, *The Veg*, Metatron #Micrometa, *Dreamers*, and more. They live in Montreal, Quebec.

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Leo Boix is a poet born in Argentina, who lives and works in London, England. He has published two collections in Spanish. Boix has been included in many anthologies, such as *Ten: Poets of the New Generation* (Bloodaxe). His English poems have appeared in *POETRY*, *PN Review*, *The Poetry Review*, and *Modern Poetry in Translation*, among others.

Heather Christle is author of the poetry collections *The Difficult Farm* (2009); *The Trees The Trees* (2011), which won the Believer Poetry Award; *What Is Amazing* (2012); and *Heliopause* (2015). Her first work of nonfiction, *The Crying Book*, will be out in November. She lives in Yellow Springs, Ohio.

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Tasha Hefford is a visual artist and writer based in Vancouver. She is a graduate of ECUAD and has exhibited work throughout Vancouver, but you can read her in *filling station*, *SAD Mag* and *Discorder Magazine*. Her work often addresses the complicated relationship she keeps with technology. Accordingly, she can be found @Tashateeth and at tashahefford.com (:(:

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Emily Pegg was born and raised in British Columbia's Lower Mainland. She attended the University of Victoria and currently resides in Victoria, BC with an unreasonable collection of houseplants that might one day devour her. This is her first publication.

Casey Plett wrote the novel *Little Fish*, winner of the Amazon Canada First Novel Award, the short story collection *A Safe Girl to Love*, and co-edited the anthology *Meanwhile, Elsewhere: Science Fiction and Fantasy from Transgender Writers*. Her reviews and essays have appeared in *The New York Times*, *Maclean's*, *The Walrus*, and *Plenitude* magazine. She lives in Windsor, Ontario.

Marika Prokosh writes, cooks, and answers reference questions in Winnipeg. Her poetry has appeared in *Prairie Fire*, *CV2*, *Room*, *Lemon Hound*, *QDA: A Queer Disability Anthology*, and at The Toast, where she also wrote the monthly advice column, "The Spinster's Almanac."

Jane Shi is a queer Chinese settler living on the unceded, traditional, and ancestral territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations. She wants to live in a world where love is not a limited resource, land is not mined, hearts are not filched, and bodies are not violated.

Neil Surkan is the author of *On High* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2018) and *Super, Natural* (Anstruther Press, 2017). He lives in Calgary, on Treaty 7 Territory.

Gio Swaby is an interdisciplinary visual artist born in Nassau, Bahamas in 1991. She graduated with an Associate of Arts degree in Fine Art from The College of The Bahamas and a BFA in Film, Video, and Integrated Media from Emily Carr. Swaby's practice encompasses installation, textile, collage, performance, and video. Her work has been shown at *Die Textile* in Germany, *We All Know Each Other* in Vancouver, BC, *National*

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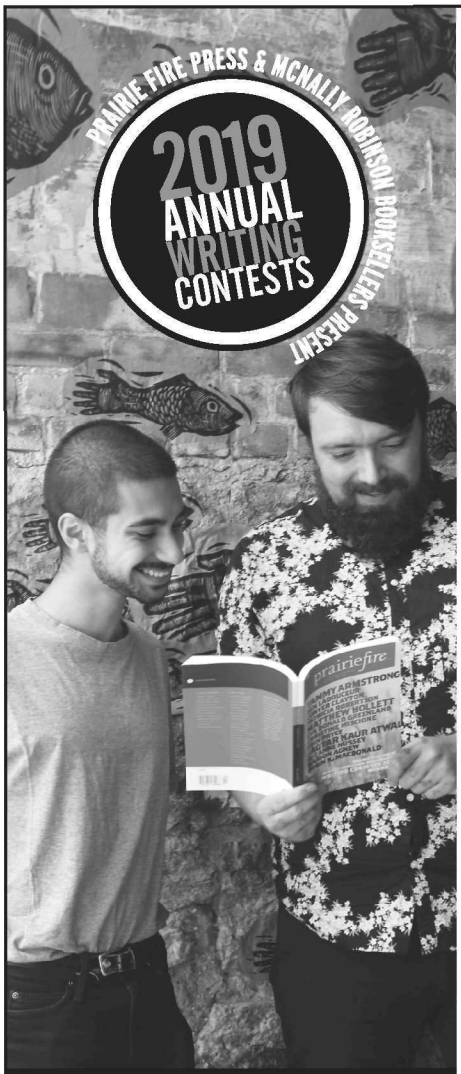
Catriona Wright is the Toronto-based author of the poetry collection *Table Manners* (Véhicule Press, 2017) and the short story collection *Difficult People* (Nightwood Editions, 2018). Her poems have been anthologized in *The Next Wave: An Anthology of 21st Century Canadian Poetry* and in *The Best Canadian Poetry 2015* and *2018.*



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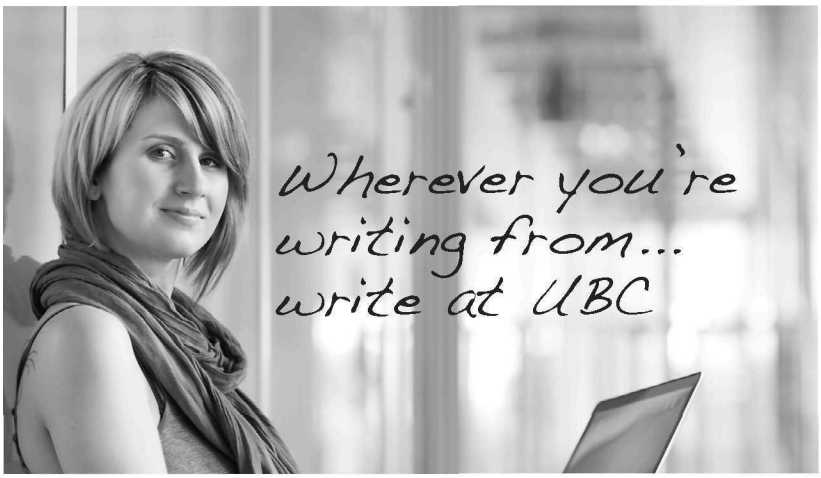

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"Maybe it would have been better to see someone jump—to have a before image to suit the distorted after. When we found them floating they seemed to come from the lake itself, that undisturbed world at the bottom that no one ever reached."

— *Emily Pegg, "August on the Lake"*

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