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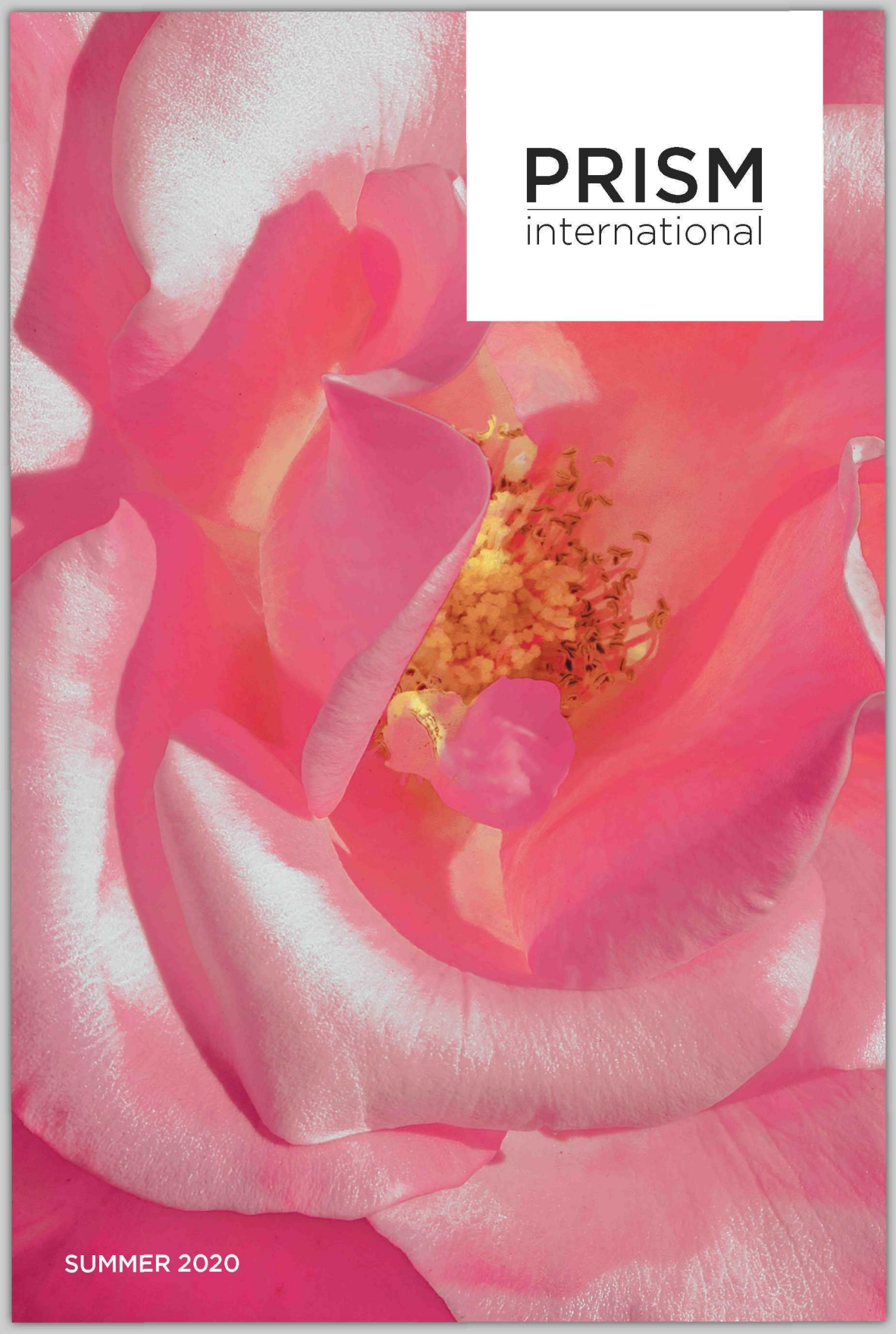

SUMMER 2020

PRISM international

THE JACOB ZILBER PRIZE FOR SHORT FICTION

GRAND PRIZE

"Bears and Other Beasts" by Kate Finegan

FIRST RUNNER-UP

"An Iconostasis" by Joseph Pearson

SECOND RUNNER-UP

"Vigil" by Susie Taylor

JUDGE

Kristen Arnett

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PRISM international, a magazine of contemporary writing, is published four times a year by the Creative Writing Program at the University of British Columbia, Buchanan E-462, 1866 Main Mall, Vancouver, BC, V6T 1Z1. Specific back issues can be ordered from the Executive Editor, Circulation: circulation@prismmagazine.ca. *PRISM* is printed in Canada.

Website: prismmagazine.ca

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Cover image © Xuebing Du, "Mother of Pearl"

Subscription Rates: One-year individual Canadian $35, American $40, International $45; two-year individual Canadian $55, American $63, International $69; library and institutional one-year $46; two-year $72. Single issue by mail is $13. US and international subscribers, please pay in US dollars. Please note that US postal money orders are not accepted. Make cheques payable to *PRISM international*. All prices include GST and shipping and handling. *PRISM* occasionally exchanges subscriber lists with other literary magazines; please contact us if you wish to be excluded from such exchanges.

Submission Guidelines: *PRISM international* purchases First North American Serial Rights at $40 per page for poetry and $30 per page for prose. Contributors receive two copies of the issue in which their work appears. Submissions are accepted online or by mail. Electronic submissions are preferred. All submissions must adhere to our submission guidelines, which can be found at prismmagazine.ca/submit, or can be requested by mail at the address above.

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Our gratitude to Dean Dr. Gage Averill and the Dean of Arts Office at the University of British Columbia. We gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the UBC Creative Writing Program, the Canada Council for the Arts, and the British Columbia Arts Council.

July 2020. ISSN 0032.8790

a place of mind
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UBC CREATIVE WRITING PROGRAM

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We acknowledge the support of the Province of British Columbia through the British Columbia Arts Council

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Kristen Arnett

REIMAGINING PLACE

When thinking about short fiction, I am often drawn to setting. Not the idea of place in terms of regionality, necessarily, but of how characters orient themselves inside these spaces. How they fit inside them. This idealization resonates with me in the very best stories when it comes to the five senses: sight, of course, but also taste, sound, touch, and smell. How has a character forced me to recognize place through their own movements and interactions with the created world?

In "Bears and Other Beasts," place is immediately recognizable in how it is viewed through a young girl who struggles within it. Home becomes a place of lack. It is rife with danger—created or otherwise—but it's how this character fits inside the abandoned home that allows setting to fill up every nook and cranny. "An Iconostasis" takes a look at place through immersion in the senses, but also in how the travelers view the space versus the man who lives there and considers it home. How he is seen when he is with them in the Airbnb versus how he is seen when he is without them, in the local bar. It is through this juxtaposition of setting and viewership that the complexity of place is truly revealed. In "Vigil," narrative is constructed around the particulars of loss. The vigil itself happens outside a gas station, but the body is not connected with it outside of how people choose to remember when it was actually present. This reimagining of space—specifically when paired against the stasis of the convenience store—makes for an interesting exploration of what space can mean in fiction. All three of these stories play with the idea of setting and place—what home can mean, how bodies orbit their boundaries. What makes them successful is not only how they choose to locate the bodies within the stories, but how they move the readers around the page. That's the most interesting kind of writing there is.

Kate Finegan

BEARS AND OTHER BEASTS

Her report was supposed to have been about bears. Every student in sixth grade was assigned an animal to study. They drew them from a hat, then made a poster presentation of the sort you'd find outside a zoo enclosure: scientific name, range, habitat, diet, protected status, along with interesting facts about life cycle, family patterns, or cultural significance. But Sage learned quickly that bear mothers sometimes eat their young and then she learned that hamsters do the same, so her report centred on that—a catalogue of postpartum cannibalism in the animal kingdom. It was her first C-minus. Her first anything less than an A.

At home, all that greeted her was the wild boar her dad had shot in Big South Fork. July had said he should take Sage, should have Sage pull the trigger. July always wanted her daughter to pull the trigger. Sage didn't like the mounted head, the curved double-pair of tusks. She knew now what pigs could do; she knew farmers culled sows only if they savaged more than one litter of piglets. It was said that music might help soothe them, to turn their teeth away from what they were supposed to suckle. There should have been a cat she could coax from under the

couch, or maybe just provoke to the point of scratching. But July had taken Patchouli on the morning she left. Patchouli was forever hiding, so Sage hadn't noticed at first, not until she opened a can of tuna and the cat hadn't come running.

Her dad had been on the road then, too—driving frozen peas and such to Canada. Since then, he hadn't given up his long-haul routes, because of course, this would be temporary. Of course, July would come to her senses. And besides, Sage was old enough to watch her little cousins; she'd be fine five nights a week.

"A lousy C-minus," she said to no one, then put a Pop-Tart in the microwave. She liked them soft, not toasted.

She'd even memorized her presentation. All the other kids used notes like little morons. As the Pop-Tart spun around, she stood on one foot in tree pose.

"We all think of mother bears as nature's fiercest protectors," she said. *What a great opening line.* "But a polar bear at the Nuremberg Zoo ate her first cub, and the zoo planned to leave the other two to die. This is the reality of nature, for many of our most beloved species."

In her presentation, she had pointed to a photo of this tiny naked-mole-rat-looking thing, a baby polar bear. Her teacher put a hand over her mouth, so Sage knew she was doing a great job.

The microwave dinged. Sage released the pose and took the Pop-Tart on its damp paper towel to the table. She opened the honey pot and pulled up the dipper to drizzle a Z across the frosting. Then another Z and then another. July insisted on organic home-cooked meals, although the cooking often fell to Sage, so dinner would be free-range eggs or whole wheat noodles. Pop-Tarts were a new addition to the household pantry, a small comfort in the absence of a mother.

Sage bit into the Pop-Tart. The wild boar's head kept watch beside the front door, so Sage stared into the honey pot. A moth had fallen in and was stuck to the top, an amber fossil in the making. Sage wondered whether it had drowned or died of panic. She guessed the latter, as its face wasn't submerged. She stuck her finger in to fish it out, but only pressed it further down. The bees had been July's project. She'd bought everything the prior August. Sage was the one to answer the door to find a box on the stoop—buzzing.

Now it was April, the month when many black bears would emerge from hibernation with their cubs. It's not true that bears sleep all winter. Mother bears nurse. "They lose over one-third of their body weight," Sage said to the empty kitchen, or maybe to the moth and boar. Her mother had a false front tooth, to replace the one she lost in nursing, so she didn't like to smile. She always recounted the story of the tooth on birthdays just after Sage blew out the candles. But usually she said it with a laugh. At Sage's most recent birthday, she hadn't. Instead, she pointed wildly at her tooth and shouted, "See what you leech from me!"

The bees always scared Sage, and her dad refused to touch them.

"One day," July said, "I'll have a bond with them, so I can tend them without my suit. Tend them with bare hands."

"Don't know if I'm allergic," Dad said. "Never have been stung and don't plan to start now. And Sage—"

"We can get an EpiPen," July said.

"A box of bees just shows up while I'm gone. What am I supposed to say to that?"

"I'll go tomorrow for an EpiPen."

"Shouldn't have to stab myself for bees I didn't want."

July had this way of winning arguments against her high-school-educated husband. She looked toward the ceiling before striking.

"Epinephrine," she said, "is an effective temporary emergency treatment for anaphylaxis, which is triggered by the release of Immunoglobulin E in reaction to an allergen. Because this immune response involves the dilation of blood vessels and constriction of airways, epinephrine counteracts these effects by raising blood pressure, increasing heart rate, and relaxing the sternocleidomastoid and scalene muscles in the neck, among others, to ease breathing." She smiled.

"Just don't know why you do these things without any warning," Dad said.

Patchouli purred in July's lap. Sage sat there, silent.

The next morning was Saturday, thank God. Sage couldn't bear to go to school after her humiliation. She woke up and took a bath. The bathroom didn't have a shower. She never felt clean after a bath, but July said it should give her time to think: *Slow down, Sage, and think*. Sage ran her fingers over the pink pucker on her right knee from when she slipped off the monkey bars, fell hard and slid on the woodchip-covered playground

at the elementary school after dinner. Tessa—first to have a cellphone—had called July, who came with tweezers, gauze, and Neosporin and told Sage how to treat the wound. All the other kids stood around flinching as Sage pulled splinter after splinter from her bloody knee. She had to rub the Neosporin on herself, and it stung.

"This is how you learn," July said.

Sage blinked back tears. She couldn't cry in front of everyone, least of all her mother.

"You're fine," July said into the silence. "Tell me you're fine. Say it so you know it's true."

"Jul*yyy*." Sage hated how her mother was staring at her, that deep crease between her eyebrows. The kids whispered among themselves. July just kept on staring.

"I'm fine," Sage said. "I'm fine."

"*I can take care of myself.*"

Sage swallowed hard. Her knee stung in every place the tweezers had touched.

"I can take care of myself," she said.

No one had talked about the wound come morning. No one had asked her how she was. Instead, they asked about her mother.

"That was harsh," one said. "Does she hit you?"

"You looked like you were going to cry. Does she like to make you cry?"

And most of all, "Why do you call your mom July?"

She always had. July didn't want her name taken away. She didn't want to be just Mom.

Sage was draining the bathtub when the doorbell rang, a sickly sound like a songbird with a rock stuck in its throat. Her parents said she should never answer the door. But she remembered the piano. Her mother had found it in a kudzu-tangled trailer on the sprawling property and hired movers to get it into the house. July was upset that it would take so long for them to carve time out of their schedule.

Two weeks.

July had left the morning after she found out what date the movers would be coming. She had been gone for two weeks. Two whole weeks. Only two weeks. Sage didn't know how to feel about that number, didn't

know how to relate to it. She pulled her pyjamas back on and went to the front door.

"Hi," she said to the two men. They looked like they could—each of them—carry a piano single-handed.

"Are your parents home?" This one was wearing a button-down shirt, the sort teachers wore at school, only it was unbuttoned to reveal a black t-shirt underneath—a t-shirt with a bear on it—and had the left sleeve rolled and pinned at the elbow. Sage realized she was staring. She needed to answer the question.

"They're at work." She knew she was supposed to say her mother was in the shower. But that was for the phone. These men would come into the house. This would probably take a while. How long could her mother stay silent in the shower?

The one-armed man picked at a thread. Sage watched his agile fingers. She was a little kid in little-kid pyjamas, and she couldn't wait to change.

"All right, well, we're here to move a piano. Did she leave you money?"

"A cheque." She would forge her mother's signature. She wanted the piano—ravenously, she realized. She hadn't wanted it, not until this moment. It had been entirely for her mother, who played piano all through school until she got serious about her studies, determined to become a doctor, and cut out all her pleasures. The other man didn't speak or even seem to hear their conversation.

"Well, you'll show us where you want it?" The one-armed man looked over her head into the house.

This is how murder happens, Sage thought. And Patchouli wasn't around to scratch their eyes out. "Come in," she said, and the man who spoke nudged the man who didn't. They made their way into the kitchen, through the dining room, and into the sunroom. Her mother hadn't wanted it in there. She said sun would warp the sound once she got it tuned. But Sage wanted to play music in the light of day. She didn't want to hibernate. She would open the windows, let in the springtime air.

"Here," Sage said, touching her toe to a scuffed spot in the corner of the floor.

The silent man nodded. The one-armed man said, "It's in a trailer?"

Sage nodded. Kudzu tangled in her throat. What would her mother say when she came home and saw the piano in the sunroom? Sage told herself she looked forward to it.

She showed the men the piano. As much as she wanted to stay and watch to see how the man with one arm managed, she had to get out of her pyjamas. She ran back up to the house and put on a button-down shirt. Maybe the man would see how similar they were. His lower lip had a little dip in the centre, where a bead of saliva glistened when he talked. She wondered if he had noticed her staring at it. She didn't have any clean bottoms, so she waved a pair of jean shorts through the air and sniffed them. They smelled fine. She put them on then went to her parents' room and forged the cheque.

She reached the front door just as the men were manoeuvring through it. Two more men had joined them. *Good thing I changed my clothes.*

"Quite a piglet." The one-armed man nodded toward the boar. Sage said, "Quite," just like a grown-up. She followed them to the sunroom, where they set the piano down then stepped back and took a look.

"How's that?" he asked.

Sage directed them in little movements to get the men to stay. Finally, she could tell they were exasperated. So she had to offer something else.

"Would you like ice water, or kombucha?"

They looked at each other, then nodded slowly.

"What's kombucha?" the one-armed man said, and Sage stared at the bear's open mouth and all those teeth, stretched tight across his chest.

"It's made with bacteria and yeast and tea. It's fizzy."

He wrinkled his nose. "I'll try it."

Sage's palms were hot-water kettles, whistling. She poured water for the other three then pulled the jar down from the cupboard.

"What's that?" the man asked, pointing to the SCOBY, which floated on top like an inert jellyfish.

"That's the mother. It's what makes everything happen by eating the sugar. Do you like bears?"

"They're fine."

That was Sage's invitation. She spoke as she poured, she spoke as he drank, she spoke after he finished—her full eight-minute report on bears and other beasts who eat their young. When she finished, the men all looked at one another. The one-armed man stood first.

"Thank you kindly." He took his cup to the sink and set it just beside. "You take care."

The others followed suit then stood just inside the door, waiting. The one who didn't speak moved his lower jaw from side to side. He opened

and closed his palm and Sage caught his meaning. She ran to get the cheque. As soon as she was out of the room, she heard their laughter.

There wasn't a piano bench, so Sage carried a kitchen chair to the sunroom. She sat down, ran her fingers over the fallboard. It was surprisingly smooth for having been neglected in the musty trailer where moss grew in the sink. It hadn't been inhabited for some time, but the piano seemed to hum, so ready to be played. The piano made the house feel full.

It was an upright. July had lamented that it had only eighty-five keys instead of the customary eighty-eight. It wasn't beautiful. It was the sort of thing you'd find in an underfunded church, not a grand concert hall, like the one in Maryville, where Dad would take July once a year, at Christmas. Sage had gone just once, and the pianist played without sheet music. She played like the piano was a muscle in grave pain, the keys pressure points that ached.

Sage didn't open the fallboard. She had no clue how to play the thing. She knew July had a box of her old books and sheet music, but Sage didn't know where. She'd have to look for them, amid the taxidermy in the attic. She couldn't merely improvise.

Her dad didn't come home as scheduled, but he did manage to call. Sage was outside pulling weeds from the overgrown garden—as if her two small hands could make a difference—so she missed him. She wouldn't have known what to say, anyway. Her mind was lost in music, and mother bears, and the one-armed man and all his friends. Maybe someday she could play for them, and they would sweep her up together in all their entangled arms.

When she called Dad back, she got no answer.

"Another snowstorm," his message said, but she checked the weather and the entire map showed sun.

He called the next day and got through.

"You taking care?" he asked.

Sage nodded. But of course, he couldn't hear her.

"Well, I don't know when I'll be home exactly." It sounded almost like he was speaking from someone's balled up fist. "But you have Joe's number."

Sage nodded again.

"Love you," she said.

"You too, sugar snap."

The line went dead. Joe was Dad's best friend. Sage never told Dad that Joe would ask her to sit on his lap when Dad left the room, how he bounced gently, and she would want to cry, though she couldn't quite say why. She would never in a million years call Joe. Dad had always been on her side; now he was lying about snow to stay away.

On Monday, she doodled in the margins of her notes, even took a chance and drew a lightning bolt on the corner of her desk. The teacher didn't notice. The kids teased her on the bus, but she set her jaw and stared quietly ahead as a piano concerto unfolded in her head. She still hadn't touched the keys.

Back home, the silence in the house was loud. It had gained depth and texture. The boar smiled open-mouthed on the wall, and Sage picked up the phone just to hear the dial tone. She missed her dad's voice, the way he'd insert her name into song lyrics; if he'd just come back, she would never act embarrassed by it, never ever again. The handset hung, buzzing from its cord as she microwaved her Pop-Tart. A sheen of powder surrounded the moth inside the honey pot, so she used a knife to slide the mess of death to one side. So little was left; soon, she'd have to don her mother's suit and veil. She'd have to tuck the suit's cuffs into her socks and gloves, so her body wouldn't swarm with bees. She looked at the boar and said, "Quite a piglet." Her dad had paid to have the tusks whitened. July ground her teeth at night. She'd come downstairs and remove her nightguard at the kitchen table, plop it in a glass of vinegar. When July had left, Sage tore her bathroom apart, searching for the nightguard, but she'd taken it; she'd taken it for good.

Sage took her Pop-Tart to the sunroom and sat on the floor in the corner, away from the piano. She watched it like a hunter, like it was something she would have to tame. She found a moth's wing on her snack and tried to pick it off with her pinkie, but it fell apart in little pieces. A bee landed on the Pop-Tart, and its buzzing was so loud, Sage let it have the sweetness, wing and all, even though her stomach rumbled.

In the morning, Sage awoke to three bees buzzing against her window, on the inside. She knew that the average person swallows eight spiders a year while sleeping. She stared at the bees and felt the buzzing in her throat, in her stomach. She was certain she had swallowed one.

She had to go to school, to face another day of teasing. In the mirror, she pressed her smile into a flat line and saw her mother's face but

younger. July would be mad that she had swallowed one of her beloved bees, if July ever returned. The bathwater wouldn't warm up, but she climbed in anyway. A bee landed on her shoulder, but the cold water was sting enough; she didn't feel afraid.

Downstairs, a mouse had chewed through to her last Pop-Tart. She checked all the traps, but the only corpse she found was so long forgotten, it had all but turned to dust. Her stomach rumbled. Outside, so did thunder. She went to her parents' room and opened all the drawers to search for lunch money, but the only item of any interest was a handgun. She picked it up, heavy in her hand. July always wanted her to pull the trigger. She aimed at the bee that she followed down the stairs. She heard it then—a buzzing, a swell of drones and workers, the sound that told her she was too close to her mother's hives. It sounded like an orchestra tuning, matching their tone to the first-chair violinist.

Or maybe the piano.

The bee flitted toward the sunroom. Sage followed. The piano teemed with bees. They must have nested in the trailer, gotten in through a weak spot in those rusted walls, an unsealed window frame or ripped screen. And now all those eggs had hatched. Sage knew queens could lay fifteen hundred eggs a day in spring. She had read that when July first got the bees and knew she would not forget it. All those eggs weigh more than the queen's entire body. If her workers lay eggs, she eats them. Sage didn't mention that part in her science report because these weren't the queen's own offspring, so it would have been off topic.

The piano movers' invoice was still on the kitchen table. Sage dialled the number.

"Hello?"

She knew it was the one-armed man. Kudzu grows one foot per day, and the vine inside her chest could choke her. She cleared it.

"Good morning," she said, pleased with her formality. "This is Sage. You moved my mother's piano."

"Oh, yeah. What's up?"

She wondered where he was, what he'd been doing when she called. She wondered if he had a cellphone, or if she'd caught him at home. If he were her boyfriend, she would be at liberty to ask.

"There are bees in the piano."

A long pause, a crackling somewhere on the line. Voices in the background.

"Bees?"

Sage nodded then said, "Yes, sir." She shouldn't have said *sir*. It only underlined their age difference.

"I'm not the man for that. That's not my expertise. Get your parents to call some kind of exterminator. That's all I can say to do." A long silence. She waited for more guidance, a kind word, an offer to come check it out. "Anything else I can do for you, kid?"

Sage bit back a gasp then shook her head.

"You take care now," he said.

She put the phone back on the cradle, gently, then picked it up again so she could slam it.

True to her word, July had bought an EpiPen. It lay there on the corner shelf, just beneath the phone. Sage set the gun beside it then tucked a tea towel around the weapon. She didn't want to look at it. The buzzing was a constant, now that she had heard it, had seen the bees clinging to the edges of their singing home. They were surely walking tightropes, tucked inside amid the hammers, bridge, and strings, safe from the storm that shook the windows. If bears were still in hibernation, surely the thunder's boom would wake them up. The cubs would emerge with their mothers, the ones who had survived. The mothers would continue to care for them—until, one day, they wouldn't.

When Sage jumped or cowered at the sound of thunder, her mother made her go outside and stand, soaked, in the maelstrom. July told her what lightning could do, but she also assured her of slim odds. She had a lot of time to tell her things. She had flunked medical school, couldn't put scalpel to skin in gross anatomy. She'd had to prove herself, stay busy, ever since, make sure her daughter would be stronger, smarter.

Between the thunder, buzzing.

Sage took the phone off the hook, let it dangle from its tangled cord. She had curled the kinks into it, calling July's cellphone, listening to it ring and ring. The mouse had nibbled just a corner of the Pop-Tart. July would say the rest was good, unless her little girl was squeamish. Sage cut the corner with their sharpest knife. As her breakfast spun inside the microwave, she opened the honey jar—that panic-killed moth without its wing, the thinnest golden layer in the very, very bottom. Not enough to eat, even without that small translucent death inside.

She left the phone off the hook and slipped the EpiPen into her pocket. The microwave turntable was off-track; it clunked and clattered

as she walked toward the buzzing, honey pot in shaking hand. The bees hovered in electric air, every one of them too heavy for such fragile wings. The microwave dinged. The hive buzzed like a dial tone. The thunder roared like bears.

Rhiannon Ng

[EULOGY FOR ROADKILL ON A YUKON SOLSTICE]

a wound pulsates under noonday sun
draining blood and silt over expired dogwood.

a spruce tree creaks. highway signs lean
toward Dawson City—hollow, static.

two miles from the road, in our dim home
I run my fingers over Selia's back

in search of a protocol for memory,
to collect the cinder flowing

from every chalice in the room
condense it all to a single moment.

the elk wails.
entropy unspools.

downstairs, Selia delivers a eulogy
as I soak sinew in lime dye,

trace probabilities in circles
over a waxing moon.

its rind glistens with cartels and women
and species whose tendons diffract

in the arctic flume—
an oceanic devolution.

I fall asleep to the sound of rain.
Selia lights a candle and privately,

we ache for the day we no longer hold
our mothers accountable for who we are.

time in its tectonic sky waives tradition,
heaves with the waning of the moon.

of sexuality, of lesbianism: each pigment
strikes the sky, a tonal clamour

before it trickles down quasi-shelves,
rests between us.

the elk keels at our doorway, brume in its antlers
its memory viscous, dipped in cold clockwork.

Selia knows how to sculpt the water
that leaks from dying bodies. with tenderness,

she collects droplets from a thaw
four days away, two hand spans away,

one bedpost away, repeating—
there is no distance that aches more than a year.

now she is cold, and the elk has regressed
to oily rain and carbon earth.

the water is narcotic. it pools
on the underside of the evening.

and when I open my eyes, I see
their bodies reflected upside down

in raindrops on my windowpane,
dissolving in the northern hemisphere.

Kai Conradi

AFTER MY MOM LEFT MY DAD HE TOOK ME TO THE MALL

Before or after he went to jail, I don't remember. I don't know why we went there. We never went and we both hated it. I picture him wearing a purple v-neck sweater he didn't even own yet. I don't know how he dressed back then.

My mom got an apartment. She called it the Party Palace and she said: I'll be the cool mom who lets you eat potato chips for dinner. What she did was visit the thrift stores every day.
She bought an electric organ and a mint green milkshake maker and a blue couch with wooden arms. Every time she bought something she told me about it. Actually I think she was very sad.

At the food court with its too-bright signs and white tiles with Pepsi spilled on them we sat between the Chinese chicken with red sauce and the orange cheddar popcorn. When I came back from the bathroom my dad said: Sometimes I think it would be easier to love a man. In my friend's favourite movie the main character remembers his dad coming out and pictures him wearing a purple sweater. In the food court at the mall there were many men, and also my father.

At the Restore my mom was lying on an orange couch with her feet in the air like two bars of soap blocking out the sun. In some other parts of town it was raining.

After the mall but before the police showed up I sat in the hot tub in my dad's backyard feeling the jets on my skin and listening for ambulances. On a different day before that day, we were in the car: my dad, my sister, and me. My dad said: I shouldn't kill myself, right? Right, I said. In my dad's backyard I could see tiny white and purple crocuses spitting out their orange tongues.

At the Party Palace my mom was drinking mezcal and singing Al Green while she played the light-up organ draped in Christmas lights. It was March and she looked happy.

Joseph Pearson

AN ICONOSTASIS

In a corner of the wine-shop;
behind the wooden partition.
.....
We partly undid our clothes—there weren't many

—Constantine Cavafy, "To Remain" (1918)

1.

We met Manos on an app. A figure on a screen, except most men don't have face-pics in Crete. They write: "straight—looking for same." "No car sex." "Discreet." "Be a man" or "masc man." Manos writes: "Friendly Top, 29." He'll be closeted and self-hating and he'll beat us up after he's come. But Sebastian shakes his head and remarks of his cock shot, "He looks hot."

At the end of the port, we've been reading books in a café. Sebastian pores over Zweig and I scan the inevitable local verse: Cavafy. But I prefer to flirt with the waiter, who corrects my pronunciation of chymós, or juice. I like the shape his lips make: *hoo-mos*.

As the sun falls, we walk along the breakwater to a Venetian lighthouse. To one side is a protected harbour; beyond, the open Aegean. We climb a few steps to peek over a bastion and are instantly flecked with drops of cold sea. Through the salt curtain, we spy a distant, departing ferry. We continue on the sheltered walkway to the end of the mole, the tower as slender as the city's minarets. At the base, we watch its illuminated tip. The light throbs.

I feel the heat rising in me, the phone in one hand, as we finalize our meeting. The lighthouse pulses our desires to him, "4 km away." Discreetly, of course. He did use that word several times: "discreet." Soon, the electronic impulses will materialize into a body. Those private pixels will rub up against us before becoming, once more, luminous, flat chimeras in our phones.

"What are you grinning at?" Sebastian asks, as the stars come out.

"I can't quite believe it!"

"It's an off-season deal."

"Does this all-inclusive get good reviews?"

"Look at the photos!"

At the breakwater, I wonder why this beautiful man—who says he is twenty-nine—should be interested in us, more than ten years older. We are late in the season. Are the pickings slim in Chania in November? Is the problem our fear of aging? Should I pay attention to that prickle of anxiety; maybe it's a set-up? Or could it be…that he likes us?

2.

Our Airbnb does not provide the ideal atmosphere for a sex date. Its online name is "Grandma's House." Grandma lived here until her arm went bad and she couldn't climb the stairs. Now, her son Mikhalis rents the place to us temporary people.

Grandma's house is hutch-full of china cups, draperies in Cretan cross-stitch, artificial flowers in crystal vases, and needlepoint. The structure is flimsy and cold in November, like the other prefab houses near the sea.

From the back of the house, we hear the voices of men working the downstairs bakery. They chatter and play dominoes on a table splattered with pigeon shit and crumbs. The birds hang heavy on the electric wires as a metal shovel chimes against the stone oven.

We're sure they can hear everything going on, behind the curtained window, in the bedroom of Grandma's house, where from an enormous dresser, porcelain dolls dressed in chiffon, with blank eyes, overlook the bed.

Grandma's house freaks us out. We wonder if there are cameras in the dolls. We think Grandma herself is watching.

3.

The doorbell rings around 10 p.m. I go downstairs, berating myself for taking risks with strangers in exchange for a few moments of pleasure, as I eagerly unlock the door.

We size each other up, blink, adjust expectations, to see if they align. He smiles. His eyes meet mine. He has a trim build and hair I want to feel. I reach forward and touch him on the arm. Already everything is electric—just that touch. I lead him upstairs, turning back a few times. Sebastian, at the top of the stairs, says nothing for a tense moment. Then they hug.

Manos is a slow drinker and a slow smoker as we sit in Grandma's kitchen. He wouldn't have met us at a hotel with reception staff. During the summer, he's overworked at a resort in Kissamos. Now, like many Cretans, he is unemployed for the winter, staying at his parents', and bored at home. We are lucky to be here in the off-season. Otherwise, we would never have met him.

A glass of raki balanced on one palm, he tells us he is not out to his parents, although good friends know. Like so many Greek men I've met, he is clear-headed about his sexuality and strategies of secrecy. Many are married with an efficient double life or have a partner who is officially a roommate. Few are out. Wouldn't all this lying eat into the inner life, making the inside rotten? Or is life in balance as long as the surface meets societal obligations, as long as there is a clear division between private and public? I imagine life in a medium-sized cage.

"Will your parents wonder where you are tonight?" I ask.

"Who?" he hesitates. "Yes. Tomorrow is all family."

We drink more raki. Manos takes his time: with his cigarette, with conversation. We are the ones who scrape our wooden chairs across the stone floor ever-closer to the man in the middle, touching him on the leg, on the shoulder, until we are kissing, and he asks quite nonchalantly if we have a chair fetish, and suggests moving to the bed. On the cross-stitched coverlet, Manos takes off his shirt and I see on his shoulder a tattoo.

4.

In the morning, the sky is grey powder, the harbour brushed lead. The masts rock with the insistent chime of rigging. At the port's entrance, by the lighthouse, a furious white swells beyond the breakers.

Sebastian and I escape the wind into the Venetian quarter, Splantzia. Facing a square is an Orthodox church that was once a mosque that was once a Catholic church. It has both a bell tower and minaret. Sebastian wants to go inside but we're wearing shorts. A pictogram indicates we aren't dressed properly. But the church is empty, who will see us? Not god.

The church is dominated by a grandiloquent iconostasis. Abstract visages are painted on metallic disks. Darkness falls from candles. Gold leaf is smeared with charcoal. Behind the biblical scenes must be the dismantled Catholic altar.

Before the painted images—angels with swords, dragon mouths impaled—I grow quiet. A griffin's shadow falls about my shoulders from the ornate chandelier. But I feel brave enough to step right up to the iconostasis. I can't resist drawing back the curtain to peek behind.

Sebastian calls from the aisle. Wait! What if someone walks in? The other side of the screen is holy, after all. No one is allowed back there. It's where the miracle happens.

I call back. We're not religious people. We're xenoi. We won't be struck down. Anyhow, there's a sex party back there, only men allowed! That's where the true worship is happening!

I turn from Sebastian to take in the scene behind the curtain: plastic bottles full of oil, folded chairs, candles, and a card table. The sanctuary looks like a storage room.

I turn with a shrug to Sebastian. But immediately I feel a new electricity in the room; we are not alone anymore. An old woman with her head

covered has limped into the church. She crosses herself repeatedly—right to left as they do in the East, a mirror image to the Catholics, a mirror to me at the curtain. A hush falls. She carries seriousness and penance. I quickly drop the cloth, but it's too late. I have been seen.

I pass her swiftly on the way out, my head dropped, shamefaced, and listen to her tut-tut with her tongue. I pick up the pace, the church blurring past, until, relieved, we find ourselves at the water's edge.

"Did you see?" asks Sebastian.

"What?"

"Her arm, it was all bound up, and she limped—"

"It was…"

"Grandma!"

We both laugh, but a little nervously.

5.

Manos shows up after the dark. Sebastian and I, waiting for him, have been playing chess on Grandma's embroidered tablecloth. "Raki?" Sebastian asks, and Manos balances the glass on his hand. I take a shot and reach for a beer when Manos places his other hand delectably on my shoulder.

"Don't mix."

"Raki is evil!"

It distills bad dreams.

"*Only* drink raki, and the next day it's like you've drunk nothing."

"Liar!—I'll make tea then."

"So, you are someone who plays chess *and* drinks tea?"

He takes out a cigarette and shoots us a smile that draws us to the balcony. It's us three and the sea and moon. We get cold, returning directly to the bedroom, where the air-con is on heat function. Manos tells us he's got a budget flight to London in December. He has never been outside of Greece and only once to Athens.

"I would like to go somewhere chic," he says, but these are times of austerity. I have already been editing the recommendations we save to his phone. I'd feel guilty except he told us he makes 800 EUR a month and only in the summer. Our city tips only last a few minutes. Soon,

his phone trails from his fingers as I climb on top of him and his hand gravitates to my ass and Sebastian sticks his cock into his mouth.

We meet every night but I keep bringing my hands to my face all day. The images are like that tattoo, not pixels but indelible beads of ink. The nights run into one another; I can't keep them apart, we are twisted in each other. Manos is considerate, pays attention to us both, and when he kisses his eyes are open. I bury my face into his chest, in the crook of his neck, too close to read the words on his shoulder. I smell smoke in his hair. Manos turns me over to push farther inside. His lips purse, his eyes wince then close. As he shudders, he pulls out and I see an arch; he has it all over his hands.

Manos washes his cock in the bathroom sink with the door open. Tall and trim, he has a sinewy body. I turn to Sebastian who chuckles in complicity. I know he is thinking: you never expect to have such good sex again, then suddenly it happens.

Manos turns off the taps. I see him in the mirror. What does he think of us, now cuddling on the bed? Does he feel like the third wheel? Or is he happier standing well apart, admired? I think he is going to put his clothes back on and leave. Instead, he comes to us. But he is illuminated by his phone and swiping through messages and maps.

We have spent a week's evenings together. How have I been able to communicate so well with him in bed but also know almost nothing else about him? An intense experience makes more conspicuous what we don't know. There's an abyss in that glance, distracted, somewhere else, on the phone.

Manos puts on his shirt. As he is busy in it, I look at his long body, try to read it, to list what I know. Relaxed, tender, and considerate: all information I learned from sex. Without that decency, it wouldn't have worked—it was my precondition to relax. But what of the articulated intimacies that need words, not body? Could I ever know him in daylight? That tattoo on one shoulder: what does it say? I read it and immediately forgot. Now it's under a shirt. I know nothing.

Manos turns to me, wistfully, his phone in one hand, and asks, "When are you guys leaving?" before smoking another cigarette that burns to the end, before descending Grandma's stairwell. A kiss before opening the door, and he looks out, nervously, not wanting to be seen.

6.

In the morning, Sebastian opens the windows to dispel the fug of men. We laugh about the sheets, wondering whether Grandma will wash them. "They look pretty clean," I say, but Sebastian replies, "Grandma will know."

In the archaeological museum, Sebastian patiently translates inscriptions, while I sit on the floor, fascinated by hundreds of clay bulls in a glass box. They resemble children's toys but are, in fact, Minoan effigies used as animal sacrifices. I am intrigued that each small animal has a hole in the ass, under the tail, to prevent it from exploding under pressure when kilned.

We wander far from the port. Perhaps as far as Manos says he lives from the centre. We walk and walk, then grow hungry. We find a canteen for meze. The walls inside are mottled yellow, except for faded advertisements for Amstel beer to match the Amstel cooler in the corner—some old sponsorship. Inside, where we sit, there is not a single woman or child, just old men drinking raki. On the terrace, visible through a large picture window, the large families are seated.

We order beef stifado and horta. Tall glasses of wine and raki are poured from enormous plastic containers.

"Reminds me of that gay bar in Athens," laughs Sebastian.

Men, fed on olive oil and fries. Men, gesticulating their ownership, who sit on the wooden chairs at fold-up tables. Salads, ashtrays, skewered meat, and flasks of raki mix under the shadows of their grandstanding. The atmosphere feels thick, uncompromising, and vaporously masculine.

What if we pulled a curtain over the picture window? I imagine an orgy. I'd take the trim waiter, clothes half-open against the cooler. An incautious pleasure, while the proper families sup unaware outside.

There's no curtain. The men sadly seem more interested in the raki than each other. I've been reading too much Cavafy.

As I entertain this fantasy, I am surprised to see through the window Manos sitting at one of the outside tables. Next to him is a woman with her back to us. She has long dark hair and a white blouse. Across is an old lady wearing an embroidered cloth. Between them are two small children. The little girl sits quietly with her hands over her lap. The younger boy, perhaps four years old, stands next to his chair, his arms akimbo, making some kind of fuss that is voiceless through the glass. I reach over to Sebastian, but I know, without looking at him, he too has seen.

Manos stands up, frustrated with the now-screaming child. He throws his napkin down forthrightly, a cigarette burning in his other hand, and he makes his way to the door, toward us sitting—I imagine illuminated—inside the window.

Manos raises his eyes to meet ours. Can he see through the glass? He does not even blink. The door opens and closes behind him. His raised voice joins the laddish banter of the raki-soaked men. He joins their back-slapping dance—Ja Vassili!—ordering the bill—ton logariasmó!—before purposefully butting his cigarette in an ashtray between empty plates—a flourish in the performance—turning back outside the door, without a word, without another gesture, without a sigh, to those people.

7.

An unusual silence hangs about us, and also about my smartphone. We messaged Manos the night before. We wrote in the morning to say goodbye but still no reply. I am left with a ridiculous feeling of having written too many times. I feel his silence, as if a light has gone off. I also know I can't spend another hour in Chania. Sebastian and I hurry to the station late that afternoon, dreading that the bus might not leave on time. But we board and watch a woman cross herself repeatedly as we drive past a church.

After two weeks on this island—this continent—we step from shore to ferry. At the aft, we watch the crew draw up the ropes shedding water. The ferry pushes into a turbulent night alongside a British destroyer, draped with men. They seem to move instead of us. Our cabin is a four-bedded chamber below deck with no windows. The ventilator makes a sucking sound. Sebastian claims an upper bunk, I choose the bottom, and he winks, "I hope our roommates are cute."

We close the door, keenly awaiting the moment it opens to a stranger. Already the boat is rocking. I shower in the cabin bathroom and when I come out in my towel, I run into a bearded, stocky Greek.

He smiles, "You are travelling. That's good. It means you are full of feelings."

We both nod. I like the idea.

When will the door open again?

Now!

The young man is maybe nineteen, in gym clothing like packaging on his muscular calves. He's an engineering student in the capital and returning from a wedding.

"You like Athens more than Chania?" And he gives a silly grin like he's discovered sex on the mainland. He jokes with the older man, with some of the bravura we saw in Chania.

I feel awkward dressing in my long underwear in the cramped space for what might be a cold night. I say goodnight to Sebastian but all I hear is the sound of breath. The bunk lights click off. The cabin sinks into darkness. We are in a capsule adrift to the mainland, a little closer to our habits. I feel confined. I tell myself: here there is nowhere to go because we are going. But I cannot relax. It's a watery coffin. We joked we'd enjoy an all-male cabin. But, in this silence, and separate spaces, nothing is possible. Our fantasies are all wrong; we are confused people.

The boat rocks forcefully. I cannot sleep. Lying there in bed, my mind drifts to Manos. He is stretching on top of me. I can actually feel his pressure. Will I wake up in the night, years from now—god, in some hospital bed!—and feel Manos above me again, even for a moment, and recall? Will that return be painful or a blessing? Perhaps, when I am very old, all my loves will come back to me, a consolation.

I throw back the scratchy sheet that smells too much of bleach and feel short on oxygen. I throw on my coat over my long underwear and slip on my shoes from under the bed. Sebastian is in deep sleep. I stagger across the rocking floor to the door.

8.

Empty cans of beer and glasses litter tables that are bolted to the ship. Open sleeves of chip bags reflect. The trash, directed by the boat's rock, scatters onto the floor. Families with children sleep on blankets, stretched on the industrial carpeting, fixed under fluorescent lights that haunt their sleep. I feel guilty to have complained about our little coffin as I notice an old lady huddled on the floor, a shawl half-covering her. I stare at her, thinking it's Grandma! She seems reduced here; I wonder why we were afraid of her.

I put my weight against the door to the deck, and the wind pushes back at me. Stepping out, I am alone, cold in the face. Portside, I almost

slip on the rain-splattered deck, illuminated only by the vessel's square windows. Smoke wafts from the ship's funnel. I reach the stern, an exposed platform under a turbulent night.

I lean out, suspended over the black sea. The motor eats the surf—white into dark. To one side is an island, darkened mountains speckled with lights. It retreats, leaving a sky without stars or moonlight. I imagine the ship—seen from far away—stuck as if on a black canvas, the blurred horizon. The sway—leaving me white-knuckled—is from a distance but a quiver. I take a sharp breath as my eyes dart again to the oblivion suggested by the white water churned into the Aegean.

The roiling sea renders everything else senseless. I can almost touch it. There is no partition here, only freedom and the hint of death. I want to laugh at the macabre tableau. It calls us to take our pleasures while we can, not to care what people think. But the immediate sensations of the weekend—the feeling of Manos against me—are retreating. The two weeks with Sebastian are also being buried, light into dark. I think of all the many times we woke in rental apartments, whose doors we shut behind us, never to come back, the keys left on a table for the host.

That night, I feel exposed and terrified on the deck. How did Manos feel when he saw us through the picture window? Why had he not pulled back a curtain to see what was there?

Dana Jaye Cadman

CHAMBERS

Won't say deep
Or say inside my heart
Won't the dragging thing in my meaning let up
Won't let the weather get me down
Or drown
Or turn the heeled boots into something magic
Won't forget the feeling of you on the phone screen
The dreams I had where we swung from amusement rides
I'll drive around the back roads of neighbourhoods upstate
The trees turning to flames
The game we played where I was a flying creature
And you weren't alive
Our subconscious won't let us forget
We fell out of love and that made us love deeper
Won't say deeper say mature
Say forever that feels good
It's in my nature I'm a mortal
Don't say ghost when I know you're thinking of me
It's autumn in here too
Don't you feel us losing water and turning
To something rustling
Something in piles we jump in and
Get lost

Moni Brar

WHAT YOU WANT DOESN'T MATTER

When you ask me
  where are you from?
do you want me to say
I'm from
            a crushed clove
  the husk of a coconut
            coriander dust
  the swell of the water buffalo's belly
             the ocean's lust for the moon?

When you ask me again
  I won't answer
instead, I'll say
I have
            a peacock in my pocket
  tucked among old stories
            nesting in lint
  feeding on crumbs and little lies
            I gently push down its throat.

Paulette Jonguitud

RUNNING TO STAND STILL

Mamá says we need to practise sitting. Just sitting down, doing nothing. Being. We sit in her study and look at the books, but we don't take them out. We look at the watercolours but we don't paint any pictures. We sit. I'll be going to a new school now. I need to learn how to be still. It's not that I don't know how to, everyone does. This is so boring, Mamá! I need to learn to be bored, she says. It's working. The thing is, I'm almost always bored. Except when I'm moving. I like to jump from my bed to Leo's. He wants to follow me and the whole game ends up in tears. He's too young to move. He's such a nuisance. I've been trying to use that word all week. I heard Mother say it. She's my source of new words. She curses like a sailor, Father says. She knows all kinds of words. We've been reading together, at night, like we used to. She bought this boring book called *Rad Women of All Times*. It's about women who've done something cool. Feminists, she says. Are there any men in the book? I ask, but I know the answer. My books are full of women doing all sorts of things. She thinks I don't notice her intention. She always thinks this. I let her believe she

gets away with fooling me. She's such a nuisance. We sit in her study and she asks questions. I complain, this is so boring, Mamá. But I love it. It's just the two of us, like it used to be when we lived in the Blue House. Just her and I. Father worked all day back then, he was on TV. He left early and Mother and I walked to school. We had to walk across two parks, one had a small pond and ducks, the other had a fountain and a wooden bridge. I liked that school. I felt free. We could choose what to play with, in that school. There was no schedule. No teacher speaking at us. I felt calm. I felt loved. When school was out, Mother and I ate hamburgers at a restaurant or had a picnic on a park bench, we bought red popsicles and used them as lipstick, played in the jungle gym, or just strolled around the neighbourhood all afternoon. Mamá didn't like the house we lived in, the tiny Blue House, she felt trapped. It wasn't the house, but still. We spent all afternoon roaming around. By seven o'clock we went back home and we read and she sang all the songs she could think of. We painted with watercolours. I had a bedroom all to myself, but she let me sleep in her bed until Dad came home. Then I was vanished to my room until I got up, still asleep, and walked up and down the tiny hallway until someone noticed and dragged me back to my bed. That must have been when I started sleepwalking. I loved it back then when it was just Mamá and me. Like now, looking at the ceiling, lying on her rainbow rug. She insists on teaching me how to pronounce the letter C. I can't, I admit that. It comes out like a T. I tan't get it right. She wants me to have perfect pronunciation. She's a nuisance. She sets exercises I'm sure she made up herself. This is so boring, Mamá. You need to learn to sit still. Mamá, this is the worst afternoon of my life.

I love it. We moved out of the Blue House when Mamá got pregnant with Leo. We moved here. A white house. All the walls are white. The front is white. The back is white. No colour. And a brother. Mamá got as big as a rhinoceros. And angry. All she was missing was the horn. She couldn't move so much. She was frightened she'd lose Leo, I heard she had lost two other babies and I wondered how in the name of the universe do you lose a baby when it's trapped inside of you. Then Leo was born, not lost, and they pulled him out of her stomach. They must have done it wrong because they left an oozing scar there. She had to stay in bed for weeks. She cried when she had to go to the bathroom. Who cries when they pee? They must have done something horribly wrong. She cried when she coughed. She even cried when Father made her laugh, and when he gave her an injection to ease the pain. Milk came out of

her breasts but Leo never seemed to like it much. So, she cried for that also. I would have drunk it. I would have loved to have her hold me like that. She never offered. She wanted to play with me. I could tell. But her stomach was all bruised and purple and wrapped in bandages. She took long showers. She couldn't play for almost a month. Poor Mamá. Father had to give her an injection twice a day and for that she had to lie on her torn stomach. I ninja-spied on them. She said she could hardly feel the needle in her buttocks for the pain in her belly. I don't know how that's possible. Her buttocks were as bruised as her front, black and brownish bruises from all those injections. I'm never having children if that's how it is. She says it wasn't like that when I was born. I don't know if she's lying. I can't always tell. When she came back from the hospital her legs had turned into elephant's limbs. They were huge! She had to wear long white stockings to keep her legs from exploding. I pictured torn flesh all over the white walls. My father had to put the stockings on her because she couldn't even bend to touch her own knees, forget about her toes. I thought it was those deformed legs that kept her from moving. But I walked in on her once while she was in the shower. I wanted to see her. I slid open the shower door and saw that black line under her bellybutton. I saw the bruises that went all the way down to her legs, as if someone had spilled paint all over her. I'd never seen yellow bruises before. Green bruises. Purple bruises. They looked like a galaxy. A scary one. Better yet: a nebula. I've been reading about space. I know all the planets in our solar system and some in the next one, too.

"What happened to you?"

"Close the door."

"Why are you all beaten up?"

"Close the door."

"I'll close it if you tell me, did Dad do this? Did he lose his temper?"

"I'll tell you if you close the door."

"There, closed. Now speak, Mother."

"This is normal when they do an operation to get your child out of your belly."

"What's an operation?"

"They open your body to get the baby out."

"How do they open it?"

"They cut into you."

"With what?"

"With a scalpel."

"What is that?"
"It's like a knife."
"Are you serious?"
"It's not that bad."
"Does everyone turn purple?"
"Yes."
"Does it hurt?"
"It hurts a lot. But after. Once you're home."
"Good, I wouldn't have believed you if you'd said it didn't hurt."
"I know."
"Does it hurt when you move?"
"It hurts when I exist."
"I don't think you can stop existing, can you?"
"Not right now. The baby is crying. I can hear him."
"I'll help you out of there."
"Call Dad."
"I can help you!"
"Call your father and get out."

After her shower, she had to be bandaged all over again. Father would dry her wrapped in a towel like a baby while she tried to feed my brother Leo, who kept rejecting her nipple. Father dried her and then he put some ointment on the scar. At first, they kept me out but then they just forgot I was around and I got to watch all that I wanted, not even in ninja-mode. The ointment was brown. Mamá twitched when Dad touched her and told him not to look at her.

"I can't do it if I don't look."

Then he covered the thing in bandages and wrapped my mother in two large strips of fabric, like a tamal. That seemed to make her feel better. She could at least sit up and continue trying to feed Leo.

"This boy won't eat. You ate all day long and made the funniest noise when reaching for the nipple, like a pig snort. You were so fat and beautiful, with a round white face. You looked like the moon."

We like to colour mandalas. We hate making necklaces. We used to like playing board games, but I get frustrated when I lose and my mother shouts at me. Frustrated is a big word, a word I hate. My teachers use it. The principal at my old school used it. My father shouts it at me all the time. Mamá whispers: you need to control your frustration. My schoolmates don't even know what it means. It might be a family thing. I'll ask Grandma. Or maybe not. She'll say my mother shouldn't

be teaching me such big words, she should let me be a child, she'll blame my father, she always blames my father. She's such a nuisance. I'll ask Grandpa tomorrow, he'll know, and he'll give me a straight answer. He keeps talking to Leo. I wish he talked to me. I go by his chair and ask all kinds of questions to get him to look at me with those blue eyes he hides under his red hat, but he gives me a straight answer and sends me on my way. I eavesdrop when he's not looking. He talks to Leo, he tells Leo a long story about priests and car accidents. I sometimes hide under the table to listen, but my body needs to move and before I know it, I'm kicking a ball up against the wall. Grandpa prefers Leo. They sit together and eat peanuts. Who prefers me? I prefer me. Mother says that's enough. I'm not so sure. She's much better now. She's working again. She teaches a class twice a week. I hate to see her leave so early. So happy. She's never this happy at home. She puts on makeup and makes her eyes look huge with black eyeliner. She's much better now. She no longer showers for an hour. She sometimes cries but not as much as she used to. We like to tell stories, I like the scary ones, my mother is so good at telling those. But we no longer tell stories of the earthquake, those give us nightmares. Mamá and I hate the seismic alert. It's terrifying! It goes off without warning and everyone stops what they're doing and goes outside. No matter if you're in your pyjamas, not even if you're naked. Our next-door neighbour came out naked once and I saw his penis but Mother said, don't point at his penis. It was pink and wobbly. The alert just goes off: waw-waw-waw, alerta sísmica, waw-waw-waw and my mother grabs us in her arms and, shaking, takes us out to the street. The alert lets us know an earthquake is hitting the city in less than a minute. Everyone says the alert is a good thing. But everyone runs scared shitless when they hear it. I'm not supposed to use that word but it sounds so important. Mamá and I hate the alert. No one can blame us. But they do. Everyone tells her she'll traumatize me. Not the earthquakes, but she.

Mamá's friend died in the earthquake. The big one. The scary one. She died. Mamá spent two days glued to her phone, posting pictures of her lost friend. She tried to go and look through the rubble that had been her friend's apartment building, but the police wouldn't let anyone in, and she had us to look after, everyone told her to think of us as if she could think of anything else. Her friend went missing for two days and all my mother knew was that her building lay in rubble, she watched a video of the building collapsing. The video is silent, taken from a security camera. I watched over her shoulder, she was so distressed she didn't even notice I

was there, she kept saying: I shouldn't watch this, I shouldn't watch this. In the video, you can see a patrol car waiting at a red light and then the trees dance, they stretch out to touch each other, they lift their roots as if they were toes. A woman with a stroller runs out of the frame, three strangers hug each other while the pavement develops a high tide. Then the building collapses into a pile of dust. Her friend was there, at the top of that building. Her friend died. She had a daughter my age. I know her. She was at school. We all were at school when that earthquake hit. The big one. I was in the playground and the concrete floor turned into an ocean, it felt like water and we were surfing the waves. The teachers shouted, they pulled children out of their classrooms, they pulled them by the hair, by the clothes. All the earthquake drills we had done, no grito, no corro, no empujo, were forgotten because that day the seismic alert did not go off until the earthquake hit and then no one heard it with all the howling. There was no early notice. The earth growled and seemed to want to swallow everyone in one gulp. The windows shattered in every classroom. Me and a group of friends hugged each other by a statue and we watched as all the students were brought out into the yard. The walls cracked and pieces of brick fell off my classroom wall. The door to the laboratory jammed and the music teacher kicked it in to let the kids out. It was the longest earthquake. I thought the school would fall. I thought I knew what fear meant, but that day the meaning of many words changed. Drill. School. Safety. City. Distance. Smoke.

My brother Leo was in the nursery; I don't know how they got all the babies out but I saw him being carried by a teacher. When the madretierra finally stopped moving, they took us to the football field and gave us cookies and milk. There was a strange smell in the air. My mother says it was gas. I think it was terror. Mamá came to pick us up two hours later. She ran and hugged us. All the mothers were crying. She took us to the car and bought two ice creams but we weren't hungry. The traffic was impossible. My mother was silent. She kept calling Father but got no answer. We were in the car for two hours. Dad finally called. Mamá cried in silence and said: "We're fine, I've been trying to call you, I heard some buildings collapsed, I heard a school is down, is everyone okay? I haven't turned on the radio, the kids are awake, we're safe, don't cry, I know, but the lines were down, don't cry, I'll try to drive as close to home as I can and then we'll walk from there."

We parked the car in a cobbled street and walked for an hour and a half. Leo had fallen asleep and Mamá had to carry him the whole way. I

wish she'd carried me. I was so tired. I got a leg cramp and she couldn't even help me stretch out my leg because she had Leo in her arms. I'd never seen so many people walking. They walked in packs on the Metrobus confined lane. People were crying in silence. They were covered in dust, they looked up at the buildings, they pointed at distant clouds of smoke, cars were bumper to bumper, but everyone was silent, ears glued to their radios. My voice rang. Mamá smiled. Mamá talked. When we reached a panadería that was open she bought me a doughnut and just when I bit into it I heard Father shout her name. He ran across Insurgentes and held me so tight I almost puked. He was sobbing. He really frightened me.

"Many buildings have collapsed," he said. "When I couldn't reach you for hours I thought, I thought."

"We're fine," said Mamá. "Let's go home."

She was made of stone, that afternoon. A little later she crumbled, but not just yet. The traffic didn't move and we walked in the middle of Insurgentes trying to get home.

"Why is the street so quiet?" All I could hear were sirens calling out to those under the rubble.

"We're fine."

But we weren't fine. Mamá's friend was missing. Her friend left her daughter at school that morning and never came to pick her up. That's my biggest fear, now. I didn't know that could happen. Now I know, and it is all I think about when the time to go home is coming near. What if Mamá died while I was in school? What if no one comes to get us? What if our house was destroyed by an earthquake I didn't feel? Mamá's friend died that day, hit by the rubble. I saw my mother break when she finally confirmed the news, two days after the earthquake. We were about to eat, she was standing by me with a plate of chicken nuggets when her phone rang. She answered. And she deflated like a balloon. It looked as if all her bones had dissolved. She fell on the floor and howled like an angry cat. The plate shattered and our dog, Balam, ate the nuggets. Father told her to get up, to get a grip, not to cry in front of us. She melted like a candle. I hugged her. Father was a nuisance.

em fowler

SHOW UP

at the house on Barclay Street, the
one with the roof that dips low and
leaks like a body face down in the
intersection—and where a few days
earlier Vi shot an AK-47 into the air
and the cops never showed up, because
the cops never show up: the house

where all the hallways lean in too much
and touch me when I'm only trying to
get to the bathroom, where the sink has
either more or less dried or fresh blood on it
than yesterday so I can sniff cocaine, the kind
that's still wet and flakes apart and breaks
my fucking heart because I'm just so happy

that Dee is finally back from Palestine and
didn't die in Hebron in all that street warfare—
they want you to show up too; and remember
last year when the skinheads showed up at
the house show and told Charly to turn down the
Wu-Tang album, how the switchblade came out,
and the way he left the house and then Baltimore

for good after he twisted up that nazi's guts and the
cops never showed up, but more skins did, days
later at Charly's sister's house in the country with
the barn and the fields of corn so yellow and tall
that they pull against the earth in an attempt to reach
the satellites, the mechanized orbit, orbital
trash filling outer space; and how did they know where

to look? No one knew where Charly was then
or is now, but in the summer flocks of geese

travel northward to brittle nests in Quebec; over
the telephone wires and boarded-up row homes and dope
deaths and dead friends, and what type of survival
is that? How do I know if I'm capturing it accurately? I
could pray for a comet to hit the earth hard enough

that nothing else can grow or be taken from it, and I could
nest in the crater like a magnetic field, even dig
a little further with my hands, caked with powder-drugs,
until my fingertips are only blood, and the cops
never show up, and yeah if you can Mom—
if you can find the time, at some point, meet me there—

José Emilio Pacheco
translated from Spanish by Cynthia Steele

RIVERSIDE DRIVE

He plays with his little friend
on Riverside Drive.
(The bombs have fallen
and the war is over.)
Finally one afternoon
they invite him over.
They are both five or six
and know nothing
about history or world politics.

His friend's mother makes him the best sandwich
he has tasted in his life.
His father tries to be hospitable too.

"I'm familiar with your country.
I once spent the night in Tijuana.
Here are the words I can say in your language:
puta, ladrón, auxilio, me robaron."

Dominik Parisien

OPEN LETTER TO AN UNKNOWN SIBLING

Dear Unknown Sibling,

You don't know me, but I am your older brother, or I was at one time. Maybe I still am. I don't know precisely how these things work. That's a poor way to begin but it seems the only true way. My sister and I learned of you in a similarly sudden fashion. Yes, we have a sister called Sophie. Maybe you have more than one, I don't know.

Is it even right to call you unknown?

I know you exist. Your date of birth and the name you were originally given. The place where you first drew breath and who was present. The names of your biological parents and grandparents and great-grandparents.

But those are simply facts, words, numbers. They don't amount to a human being, or even the shadow of one. I know less of you than

a stranger whose information I could randomly search on the internet. Online, I might discover where someone studied, their political affiliation, religious belief, marital status, their favourite drink or book or movie, the names of their closest friends, their pronouns.

But you, to me you are more a concept than you are a person.

I keep thinking I should structure this differently. But there is no clear narrative. I could start from the beginning, but exactly when would that be?

Before you read on, some things I agonized over:

- the use of *our* versus *my*
- the hurt this might cause you
- the hurt this might cause my family
- the hurt this might cause your family
- if I have a right to tell this story
- who this letter is really for

Maybe your parents told you early on you were adopted.

It took decades for my sister and I to learn about you, and we might never have known if not for a stranger.

Some of your biological father's defining characteristics include:

- brown eyes with bags underneath that remain regardless of the amount of sleep he gets
- a full lower lip responsible for many of the compliments he's received over the years
- canines so pronounced they would have caused him issues in the Middle Ages

Your biological mother:

- blue eyes like an overcast winter sky
- a bird's nest of hair that always settles on the right
- webbed toes like a creature from a Hammer Horror film

Your biological parents were high school sweethearts, both from a small town in Eastern Ontario, both from working-class families. They met in thirteenth grade after my shy mother asked my father to accompany her to a family wedding. Despite his good looks and charm, my father

was nervous. He would come into his confidence in later years, to a sometimes-insufferable degree.

My parents were married at twenty. My father attended university and my mother college. By twenty-five they desperately wanted a family and were actively working toward that goal. If you're wondering, yes, that's a sex joke. They're a staple in this family.

But complications arose. My mother has endometriosis, a painful disorder that affects the uterus, and which can make pregnancy difficult. As a condition it affects an estimated ten percent of women globally. My sister is equally affected.

Fortunately—and evidently since we're here—my mother was able to bear children. But it took years, five to be precise, for my parents to have their first child. And those were difficult years. Test followed test followed test. A regulated schedule for sex, along with prescribed positions for optimal chance of pregnancy, all but destroyed any sense of intimacy.

And then I came along, premature and with an oversized head. Not quite as large as yours, I'm told, but still large enough to occasion questions. After some scans they determined I had a benign arachnoid cyst, but otherwise I was deemed a healthy child aside from some jaundice.

A year later, you arrived.

As a family unit we have never been five, only three or four. My mother, my father, me, and you. Or my mother, my father, me, and my sister. You were adopted at birth and had already been gone two years by the time Sophie was born. By then you had another family. And, from what I understand, loving parents and siblings.

But the memory of you remained, behind closed doors. My parents took your picture out on your birthday, at other times too. Discussed you at night, imagined what you looked like, if you were well, if you were loved.

Do you like poetry? William Wordsworth wrote a poem called "We Are Seven," where an unnamed narrator—let's call him Wordsworth since he always writes as himself—interrogates a little girl about her family. Wordsworth asks the girl, "Sisters and brothers, little Maid, / How many may you be?" She explains they are seven: two live in Conway, two are out at sea, and two, a boy and girl, are dead and buried near her cottage. Here Wordsworth demands to know "how this may be," and the pair have some sing-song back-and-forth where he explains over and

over again that she is mistaken, that they can only be five. The girl, this "simple Child" with her "rustic, woodland air," rejects his reasoning until Wordsworth finally declares:

> 'Twas throwing words away; for still
> The little Maid would have her will,
> And said, "Nay, we are seven!"

I think of this often when asked how many siblings I have. I answer, "I have a sister," and wonder, should I feel that we are three?

I don't even know if you're alive as I write this. I hope you are, and that you're thriving.

Were you raised to speak English, or French? Would you recognize the voices of your biological parents if you heard them?

There's a year that no longer exists, not the way I knew it. I would have been one when you were born. I would have known you existed, in the way toddlers do, maybe babbled to you through my mother's—then our mother's—belly. You were there when I learned to walk. You overheard so many moments. Covertly participated in countless firsts. I thought I understood how life had been back then. Through the pictures in the photo albums, through the stories my family tells. You don't exist in any of them. Or you do, you did, in your secret way. You were hidden in plain sight.

My mother kept a picture of you at birth in the little box on her dresser. She still does. I looked through that box often as a child, searching for candy, or the many secrets you just know parents are hiding away somewhere, if you're clever enough to find them. I probably saw the picture. Assumed it was of me, as children do. Or maybe Sophie. Later, my mother admitted she'd hoped one of us would find it and ask. It would have been easy, then.

No, not easy. Easier.

Sophie was the first to learn.

She was substitute teaching at an English grade school at the time, which was unusual as she normally only worked for the French school board.

When she introduced herself to one of the teachers in the hall the woman said, "Oh, I know your family. You have two siblings."

There are quite a few Parisiens in Eastern Ontario, most of them unrelated, and Sophie politely explained that the woman was mistaken, that she only had a brother, me. We were two, not three.

"I know your father, André. He's a teacher. André and Ginette have three kids."

That night Sophie sat down to dinner with our parents at their little round table. She was still living with them while she saved money to buy a house with her fiancé.

"This weird thing happened at work today," Sophie said. She explained how she and the woman went back and forth in the hall, until they both left confused and somehow certain the other was mistaken.

I received a phone call the next day. I was in my basement apartment in Toronto. There was little light there, and I always lingered by the windowsill when I spoke on the phone, usually propping myself up against the wall.

My mother explained what had happened to Sophie. What had happened to you.

I slid down the wall and listened.

Unlike Sophie, I had it easy.

No, not easy. Easier.

Our house had three bedrooms when you were born. I kept fixating on that in the weeks that followed. We moved when I was six, when Sophie was three. You would have been five. The move was to another house with three bedrooms. So much of my understanding of my childhood was framed by the houses we lived in, the space we occupied as a family.

We're all constantly creating ideas of people, of ourselves.

We were the stereotypical nuclear family. Mother, father, boy, girl. Small town middle class. The father a teacher, the mother a daycare provider. No picket fence, but an immaculate lawn.

We were closer than any family I knew. Sophie and I lamented the fact that some siblings of the world didn't get along. Our parents were romantic and caring with each other. With us, they were gentle and kind, they kissed us goodnight and didn't raise their voices. They cheered our

sports teams and drove us to practice. When we were sick, they cleaned the vomit from our lips, then sat in bed and read us stories. They made us volunteer, and ensured we were grateful for all we had in life. They could be demanding, especially with school, but they pushed us to be better. There were disagreements, but we resolved them with love and understanding.

They were model parents.

Sophie kept demanding an explanation when our parents couldn't stop crying at the dinner table. People can imagine a scenario in their heads for years, decades, plan for it, and still have no words when it arrives, only tears and panicked looks.

At this point you may be wondering why, why they chose to give you away.

This is the part I dread most. As your unknown sibling, as a son, as a member of my family. How can I capture what it meant to them, and recognize the complexity of both their humanity and yours?

A close writer friend once told me I loved my family too much to write about them as truthfully as I should. I think love is precisely why I try. Because I want to understand them, and others like them. In all their beauty and their complexity and their flaws.

Some things Sophie and I were told long before we learned about you:

- Our parents consulted a marriage counsellor when we were young, after they went through an exceptionally difficult time. It had always been framed as communication issues.
- A close relative, who has an intellectual disability, suffered violent convulsive episodes as a teenager. More than once the family had been called to the hospital and told she probably wouldn't survive the day. These episodes had a profound impact on our father.
- Growing up, there were two boys Sophie and I frequently played with whose parents had given up two other children with Down syndrome for adoption. The children with Down Syndrome would have been the middle children. I sometimes asked my parents about the children and we talked about how difficult a decision it had been for the parents. How the children had found a home better suited to their needs.

If you're wondering, neither one of our parents share Down syndrome with you.

Sometimes I wonder if you experience any of the same health issues I do.

Once, I asked my mother if she and my father ever regretted keeping me. She was outraged and hurt at the thought, it felt inconceivable, until I explained my reasoning. They had given up one disabled child only to raise another.

I should tell you, I don't think less of my parents for giving you up. I think that's the expectation with these things, that I should.

Of course, I'm in a privileged position.

I wasn't born disabled as far as most people understand it—my illness was a sleeper agent, it first manifested in my teenage years as convulsions, severe insomnia, blackouts, and chronic daily pain. My parents did all they could to improve the quality of my life. They travelled across the province to get me proper care and invested countless hours. When it became apparent we could mitigate but not resolve my health crisis, they showed every patience and understanding. When I began writing on disability, they validated the complexity of my experience, recognized ways their good intentions had failed me. They celebrate my life and that of my disabled colleagues and friends.

Sophie also experienced serious health issues for years, although hers resolved over time.

Our parents were supportive in every way.

How, then, to reconcile these actions with how they acted when you were born?

Why did they give you up? In a way, it comes down to ableism.

That must seem like a harsh judgement, especially when my parents have been so fiercely supportive of me in my life and my disability.

But a large part of ableism isn't prejudice, it's ignorance. And fear.

Back then, my parents had a narrower idea of who they were, what they were capable of. They didn't think of themselves as people who could raise a disabled child, even though later they did, successfully.

They feared difference, they feared the unknown. And disability is a terrifying concept to most.

Like me you were born premature. My mother was rushed to the hospital when it became clear you were coming, and there the doctors explained that something was wrong with the baby. My parents hadn't even heard you cry and already you were being framed in their minds as wrong. When you were born the doctors listed all the health concerns, the challenges they would pose. Adoption was suggested as a good option for the family.

People with Down syndrome are predisposed toward certain medical conditions. For new parents, the list can be long and terrifying:

- Alzheimer's disease
- autism
- celiac disease
- childhood leukemia
- congenital heart defects
- sleep apnea
- seizures

For the next week my father drove to and from the hospital in a daze, going over everything the doctors warned about. Later he couldn't remember driving, parking the car, feeding himself, feeding me. He would sit in rooms and stare at walls. My mother did the same in the hospital bed.

Because I've seen the many ways my parents have grown to better comprehend and navigate disability, I do try to understand who they were at the time, the factors that influenced their choice. But like others before them, my parents behaved in a way that is all too common for those with disabled children: they gave up their child for adoption.

Contemporary statistics are difficult to come by, but in 2011 there were as many as 30,000 children in foster care in Canada, with an estimate of eighty percent of those children having been diagnosed with what the Adoption Council of Ontario identifies as "special needs." Disabled children are considered "hard to place," and they often remain adrift in that system, sometimes into adulthood.

My parents met your parents. They learned about where you would grow up, the siblings you would have, how your family better understood Down syndrome. Your future environment made their decision easier, knowing you wouldn't be a victim of the system.

Maybe that makes it better in some ways. Maybe not.

Regardless of their reasons, I can't begin to guess your feelings about your biological parents, now or ever, knowing they gave you up. Whatever you feel is fair and is yours to feel.

What will happen now, when people who knew about you all along learn my sister and I know too? Will they sigh in relief? Assume we had always known? Be angry with me for putting this letter out in the world? How does a family, a community, maintain a secret like this for years?

I assume it can be easy to forget a thing you don't want to acknowledge.

Except that's an oversimplification. Ignore a thing, maybe. Not forget.

Some folks at the time understood why my parents did it, for one reason or another. Others were furious. Days after you were adopted a great-aunt charged into our home and excoriated my parents for their choice. Screams and tears and angry arguments ensued.

But people move on, and it's easy not to discuss something that is absent, or that you know might cause hurt.

You were the greatest lie our parents never told us. The more time passed, the more insurmountable the fact of your adoption became, until it seemed impossible for them to ever address the reality of you.

If not for that stranger, they might have endured in silence, always dreading the day we might learn, somehow.

I don't want to be Wordsworth's rustic child, proclaiming "We are three." We might have been, but we aren't. We are each other's unknown siblings. We have our respective families. If there comes a day when that changes, I will welcome it. But for now, this letter will have to do.

Some expansion of that sentiment could be a good note on which to sign off, on the knowledge that we each exist, on possibility.

Except, ending this letter here would be too easy, too much like the silence that surrounded you. Because there are children like you everywhere, and people with too narrow an idea of who they are, what they're capable of.

This family I have, this person I am, they might never have been. In some alternate timeline I too could have been identified in the womb as disabled, and perhaps my loving parents would have chosen to do with me as they did with you. As so many parents do. They would never have known they could raise a disabled child, and do it well.

We are all far more adaptable than we give ourselves credit for.

Knowing you may never read this, I think this letter might be as much for those families, for the people my parents were, as for you, and for me. I think I wrote it not for what might have been, since that can never change, but for what can be if families learn not to fear raising people like us.

I think I wrote this letter because of love.

Your unknown sibling,
Dominik

Tara Borin

FATHER'S DAY

A flight of fathers
tend to their ghosts,
buy beers
with pocket change pooled
between them.
One by one
they pull folded photos
from duct-taped wallets,
conjure kids on cracked
phone screens.
Spent shoulders drawn back,
rough chins jutted out
over concave chests—
she's on the honour roll
he gets into a lot of trouble
if anyone hurts her
that's my boy.

Hung over the bar,
a framed black and white
studio portrait of a baby.
Her dad counts cash
in the office upstairs—
pencils, cocaine, calculator
lined up on the desk.
Our Little Lady of Lost
Opportunity, a father's
reminder to go home,
her chubby hand reaching
for what she cannot touch.

Leah Sandals

RE:ACCOUNTING

curling lurkers and a hot stone message
you're never gonna find that little black dress

age is coming for you and all you've got is
stamp o stale trauma drama, topo map

of no mama, blueprint for supergay death
star, the comment that dearth becomes her

when giving your all means shitting and
puking at the same time, it's hard to make

those phonemes chime, but she was always
st mary's stampede mascara, lindsay park

playups and anti bedsore night terrors,
a big blue ring and hallway medicine

zero on the errors till cerebellum stung
like an overvaped lung, rv rust resprung

ol' strunk and white say keep it basic:
if your mandala stinks, erase it, this

diagnosis by crayola's broken unjungian
the oud's revenge, an iud stonehenge

so recrease the origami of your mind,
let the paper come unhinged

nothing is invincible, everything's defaceable:
time to rip up her grid and begin again

Laura Clarke

POTHOS

I never sought them out. Yet month after month, the greenery crept and expanded, blossomed and sprouted, until I became a stranger in my own home. Purples and yellows, pinks and oranges. Everywhere. Grotesquely beautiful petals fell to the beige carpet as if they knew it was the perfect backdrop against which to display themselves. An asparagus fern grew red berries whose pulp was reminiscent of menstrual blood, and no matter how far I moved it from the window, its fronds grew until they tapped against glass. Did anyone really know me? I suppose everyone wonders that. I tried to pinpoint what false signals I had given my friends, family, and co-workers; what had I ever said or done to suggest I desired the company of plants?

It's true I acted as a caregiver to my mother for several years at the end of her life, but wouldn't that mean I'd enjoy shedding my sense of responsibility, going on vacation somewhere tropical rather than living in an apartment that itself resembled a jungle? Wouldn't I appreciate having several one-night stands in a row and not coming home for days, rather than abiding by the watering, misting, dusting, and fertilizing directions

of a printed PDF schedule? If only I had made an effort to shed the caretaker persona as soon as my mother died, gotten a dramatic haircut, disappeared to Europe for a few weeks, or even impulse-bought a few eccentric pets.

In the days following my mother's death, people sent sympathy flowers to the apartment, bouquets with cut stems destined to die in the near future, a gesture I appreciated. Several alleged well-wishers gifted me succulents and potted plants instead. A woman who had worked with my mother at the restaurant boldly "dropped by" with an orchid, which she claimed only bloomed once a year. But I swear to god, it was practically a weekly occurrence, and it was never subtle.

All the plants were annoying in their own unique ways: some for their size, such as the asparagus fern, others for the amount of upkeep required, still others for the psychic energy they seemed to take up. All were equally irritating in one universal way: their insistent desire to live.

"Do you think it's getting a bit weird in here?" Ryan asked. "Like a bit too…fecund?" She narrowed her eyes at the rows of cacti on makeshift shelves I had recently erected. Ryan had never bought me a plant in her life. Ryan had never bought *a* plant in her life.

I sniffed the air. It was heavy with something. Was the air so clean from the filtration of the plants that it felt leaden and strange in my lungs? Or was it laden with information, with expectation?

Ryan wasn't the first person to see my place in its current state—I didn't hide what was happening like my hoarder friend, who always wanted to meet for coffee a block away from her apartment. Everyone seemed to find my plant-filled home delightful. What about the fact that I slept on a roll-up futon under the table, every corner and closet filled with monstrous veined leaves and blossoms so bright they stung my eyes?

"I mean I definitely think it's weird," I said, sweeping up some dirt on the kitchen counter with my hand. The plants were well cared for, but the apartment itself was messy—nutrient-dense soil spilling everywhere, stray showboating petals trod into the carpet, cans of dead leaves sitting on the counter. "I didn't buy any of these dumb plants. People keep giving them to me." Ultimately, I didn't feel I had the right to stop the botanical encroachment from occurring. Who was I to oppose the plant kingdom taking up space and carving out an indoor life for itself in the Anthropocene?

Ryan tilted her fox-like chin at a particularly large orange moon cactus. "Creepy," she said. Ryan was the only person who reacted with suspicion rather than wonder to the human-scale terrarium infiltrating my consciousness and physical space. She had only recently moved back to the city—she had been living in Tokyo for the past few years, absent during my mother's sickness and death.

"Did you get rid of the bar?" she asked. She was also an alcoholic.

"Yeah, it was taking up too much space." I had curbed it two days prior. Bad timing for Ryan's return. "I don't like to drink alone anyway," I added—my attempt to signal that I had been drinking less than she was accustomed to, that the dynamics between us would be different this time. I averted my eyes from her body sprawled across the sofa, one of the few plant-free surfaces in the apartment. She was average height but gave the impression of being tall (everyone thought so, not just me), a trait that seemed to have intensified during her time abroad.

"That doesn't make you less of an alcoholic than me. You don't like to be alone, period." She pulled out her flask from the pocket of her overalls and joined me in the kitchen. We sipped whiskey, sitting on the counter, watching the third-quarter moon rise above the church across the street that I had never stepped foot inside. "Anyway, just make sure you're taking care of yourself first." She had a penchant for speaking confidently in clichés, and rather than being annoying it was hypnotic, due to the rich musicality of her voice, and the way she had trained herself to elide all "likes" and "ums" from her speech.

"Pretty," she said, begrudgingly acknowledging a bird of paradise, a gift from my boss at the boutique. The bird of paradise exhausted and repulsed me more than the others—each day it grew more huge and gorgeous.

Ryan asked if she could smoke if she sat by the open window, and I shook my head no, saying it was bad for the plants. The spring air was just warm enough for their quality of life. She pointed out that I hated them so why did I care, and I explained that it was still my moral obligation to care for them.

"Jesus Christ, you're so moralistic, it's almost like a weird fetish. Just throw them all out the window if you don't like them. Let's go out then. As long as you can still breathe outside of the greenhouse." She looked around again at the apartment, her tiny nose crinkled, then turned the flask upside down to empty the last few drops into her open mouth. At least she didn't open the fridge and see what was in there.

Ryan's presence was dominating, and I noted a small shift in the energy of the room—I felt myself gain territory for the first time in months. We went out to the bar and when I came home in the morning, one of the orchids was dead. It was a good, clean death. I knew I had done everything possible to care for it—it had simply failed to thrive.

My victory was short-lived. Overnight a slight, luminescent yellow mushroom burst from the soil of the rubber plant, whose leaves I dusted with an eco-cloth weekly. Other living entities had sprouted at the base before—an insistent spider plant, a wispy fern that only lived two days. But this was different. Even one fairy tale toadstool indicated a complex web of mycelia had formed. As above, so below. The mushroom was simply the flower; the real structure was a vast network beneath the soil, able to reproduce in thousands of creative and terrifying ways. I knew the plants used their electrical currents to communicate with one another about me. To tell time, to make jokes, to shoot the shit. To plan for their future. For *our* future.

Killing them never crossed my mind. I thought about simply leaving in the night. One morning, shortly after completing every step in my plant care PDF, I sat on the toilet drafting an ad on Craigslist to sublet my apartment. I was determined to start a new life, but first I would perform my due diligence to secure an appropriate caretaker.

The succulents on the bathroom windowsill watched the downpour pummelling the neighbourhood foliage beyond the glass. I rolled my eyes. It seemed so staged, like they expected me to take a moody black and white portrait of their fleshy silhouettes. Then I caught a reflection of myself in the bathroom mirror: the crow's feet around my eyes had disappeared, and my hair seemed to have grown several inches overnight. Sudden horniness overwhelmed me; I felt an urge to formulate an ad for anonymous sex rather than the one I had set out to write. As a compromise, I downloaded some dating apps on my phone and began swiping, completely abandoning my sublet post.

I hadn't had sex since Ryan and I ended up back at her place the week before. That had been the first time I'd stayed a night away from my plants in six months. Ryan's apartment had two shrivelled cacti in the bedroom window surrounded by various cat-themed knickknacks.

"I'm surprised you haven't started reproducing asexually like your plants." Ryan lay on her stomach diagonally across the bed. I lay staring up at the ceiling—from which no English ivy or Boston ferns dangled—

using her butt as a pillow, the same constellation we had formed post-sex since we were teenagers.

"Maybe I would if I actually wanted kids. And not all plants reproduce asexually. Ever heard of pollen? Or spores?" My gaze drifted to her two pathetic cacti. I knew just what they needed. But it wasn't my place.

"Some do though," she insisted. She flexed her glutes under my head. The smell of Ryan's ass, when my face was buried deep enough in it, was one of the four cardinal smells. Along with fresh rain, cinnamon, and my childhood dog's fur when it hadn't been washed in a while.

"Yeah some do."

"Is this a cage?" my brother asked. It was the second anniversary of our mother's death and he had brought me an aloe, which made me furious. Not a single person brought my brother a plant when my mother died.

"Maybe more like a nest. Or a cocoon." I had hung cardboard to create a plant-free space for myself beneath the table, but who knew how long it would last. "I told you not to give me this shit anymore." I gestured to the aloe, which seemed to have grown larger and more luscious in the five minutes it had been in the apartment. I was getting ready for my hookup for the night. Ryan was out of town on business, and my desire for sex had not dissipated.

"Your skin is glowing. What skin care stuff are you doing? What's your secret, living in a cage? You pregnant?" He thought I only had sex with women because I told him very little about my life. The thought of me being accidently pregnant was hilarious to him.

"Nothing." I glanced at my beautiful reflection in the mirror, my skin tone even and dewy, my hair thick and glossy. My dandruff had evaporated and my adult acne had cleared up once the plant population surpassed a hundred.

"Take a spider plant baby home," I said to my brother, who was five years younger but now looked older than me.

"No thanks, I don't like plants." He brushed his hands across the spiky tips of a bromeliad, which seemed to shrink away from his touch. "I like being here though. It's peaceful."

"You're becoming a narcissist," Ryan said, stretching in bed next to me. It was part of her daily practice to accuse at least one person of being a narcissist. But it was true I was lying on my side staring at my reflection in the mirrored doors of her closet. By the end of summer, the plants

were healing me where I didn't need to be healed, erasing wrinkles from my elbows, repairing split ends. My toenails grew too quickly and the stretch marks I'd had since the onset of puberty had disappeared. I wasn't grateful, I was annoyed. I was being pulled into an endlessly symbiotic relationship that would be impossible to escape.

"Don't be jealous I'm getting so much ass," I said. "And don't be jealous that I'm getting hotter every day."

She rolled her eyes and said, "You look the same to me." She never complimented me on my appearance though she was clearly attracted to me. She wasn't competitive about who was better-looking; she was simply a withholding person or had not been raised to give compliments freely or was sending me a message that she did not love me, or some combination of the three. She liked to talk dirty and would go on about how hot "the sex" was, as though "the sex" was an event that happened independent of the two of us.

I had been drinking again and getting sloppy in my execution of the plant schedule—half the time I came home wasted from one of my hookups, threw some plant fertilizer around the room and crawled into my nest to sleep. My assumption that my REM cycle would be overgrown with lush greenery and majestic blooms if I stopped taking my sleeping pills proved correct. Usually I dreamt of sex in tropical places. My subconscious wasn't hiding much, it seemed. Sometimes the backdrop was an arid desert full of stubborn shrubs and rust-coloured lichen, or what seemed like another planet thriving with bioluminescent fungi the size of skyscrapers. Luckily, the plants erased my hangover overnight. When I slept at Ryan's, I sacrificed my hangover repair for her company—and she knew it.

The spider plants kept growing babies, and I diligently potted each new one as they propagated at a seemingly exponential rate. It was the spider plants who seemed most hostile towards Ryan when she visited. Most others radiated a soft indifference—in my opinion at least. Ryan herself refused to acknowledge energy emanating from the plants.

"So I guess this spider plant doesn't need pollen or whatever to procreate. Sister is doing it for herself," Ryan said when she dropped by with a bottle of vodka.

"I guess you're right," I agreed cautiously, sensing she was trying to rile me up. She knew I never fucked in my apartment. I was afraid of what might happen. I was afraid it might feel too good.

"Maybe you should get one of those indoor composts going in here?"

"With the live worms?"

I stared at Ryan until she scrunched up her nose and said, "Never mind, you're right, they're grotesque." Why was Ryan suggesting new ways to care for my plants? Was she also starting to look younger and more beautiful as each month passed, or did it only seem that way because I loved her?

When she left, I removed my glasses and saw it was exactly as I feared: I did not need them anymore.

The snow-laden trees outside my windows now had the appearance of peering inside, hoping for an invitation to my sanctuary. It was my mother who once told me certain plants require moonlight, so it didn't feel right to draw the blinds even after sunset.

I had urges. To pick avocado pits out of green bins and bring them home to sprout, to break into apartments and steal neglected philodendrons displayed in windows. I was able to resist for the time being. I knew it wouldn't always be this way.

"Do all the plants have, like, individual personalities?" Ryan asked me as we drank Caesars in her bed on a Sunday morning. "Does this spicy green bean have a personality?" She pulled the garnish from her glass and dangled it in my face. The word "like" slipping into her speech was a sign she was letting her guard down. I couldn't explain to her that it was even worse than that; they were both connected and individual in a way no ordinary human mind could comprehend, so I just said no, no they didn't.

When Ryan was over next, she asked me why there was a star next to Christmas on my calendar. I said no reason, just for Christmas. It was four weeks away. But in actuality, asleep in my cocoon under the kitchen table, sheltered from the moonlight streaming in to feed the plants and the gentle but insistent tapping of branches at my windowpanes, I had dreamt I was walking home from celebrating at my brother's house, and his in-laws had given me a large, complicated-looking fern, with which I trudged down the snowy sidewalk. Ryan was waiting for me on my doorstep, smoking a cigar, which she never did in real life, and drinking from a flask, which she always did in real life, and with her was a bulging garbage bag. *I have everything you need here*, she said. *Let's leave and never come back*. It was then that I noticed the apartment was on fire. A window blew out and a few cacti tumbled to the ground below, saving themselves.

Plants emit a screaming sound when they're thirsty or in distress that is undetectable to the human ear—except mine, of course. I was therefore surprised to hear only silence as the leaves and twigs, the flowers and thistles and branches and berries burned. It was strange to have such a dream in my cocoon when I was accustomed to jungle sexscapes and mushroom alien worlds, and I wondered if the plants transmitted it to my brain to render me complacent—so I could dream of a false future of freedom for eternity in my cardboard nest. Still, I hoped it would come to pass. That's why I drew the star.

Laura Zacharin

THE SHLOSHIM

◐

After 7 days I uncover mirrors, trace a line around my eye, read mail,
put on shoes, take the subway. Everyone asks me, not
with voices, but with something I can't pin down
to get on with it so I get on with it. I fill out forms
with space for one-word answers, scan copies, sign them,
send them. Leave the spirit work to others but
it's all spirit work, the dead say into one ear
in a dream or an apparition covered in white or molecules,
humming at the foot of my bed
or beneath my skin.

◓

I don't mean to break things. Things come apart so easily—
breakfast cereal, a bookmark, a pencil sharpener, a cup of tea,
chair lamp desk bookshelf.
I'm under water, I think, fingering shards of glass
where the window was.

◑

I succumb to the Incredible Sleeping Sickness the doctor says
she invented for me.
Looks like it finally caught up with you, the chorus
chants in the distant blue. I sleep at breakfast, at work.
I can sleep standing up in a pencil skirt.
I keep my eyes open and answer questions, sometimes answering
with other questions. All the articles, and there aren't many, just
the most esoteric recently published in peer reviewed journals, say
to focus on the breathing so I do.
It helps me stay awake at night but not in daylight.

◒

I watch for a mouth but I don't understand the words. *Can you repeat that?*
I put food on the table. I put things away,
sweep up, pile to-dos in a file folder.
I scramble the letters
and they become kettle spoon table mother.

◐

T. Dallas Saylor

CAN'T FIND IT

It's right here, she calls from deep
in the cabinet. *You have to lift things*.

And he reckons that in the beginning
there was only static on God's TV,

maybe PBS when the weather was clear,
so God said, *Let there be*

sitcoms, and He made light:
a sign that flashes "Laughter"

and big strobe lamps for
the set, which He made next—

a sofa and two recliners
around a TV, and offscreen, an oven,

a bed, and a backstory of big expectations
that no one will talk of.

Now the characters: first a dumb one,
and then one fatigued by the dumb one.

In the script it says they love each other.
It's funny because neither gets what they want.

Domenica Martinello

PEDESTRIAN

I capitulate to cliché doesn't everybody
have that one memory of lying
sprawled on the dark suburban pavement
as a teenager, stargazing in collusion
with the future soon to be
a young woman tied to the tracks

Susie Taylor

VIGIL

All that is left of the impromptu memorial at the Ultramar is one rosary tied around the cage for the propane tanks. Gary Coombs felt a stab of regret the day he went in early, earlier than ever before, to clear away the wind-tattered ribbons, the bows, the plastic flowers, the water-soaked and mildewed teddy bears, and the sodden and faded packs of cigarettes (Canadian Classics, Stevie's preferred brand). Other offerings he'd had to discreetly remove almost as soon as they were left. Someone had stuck a whole untouched Happy Meal on the growing pile of tributes, with a note, a heart-shaped Post-it with "Stevie" scrawled on it in a kid's handwriting, and the gulls swarmed the thing. And the booze. A couple of young guys came by and left big showy bottles of Lamb's. Kev Babcock had left a bottle of Crown Royal in a purple bag. Gary couldn't have that stuff out for the taking in front of the store. He gave the bottles to Stevie's mom, Arlene. He told Brenda that's what he was doing; her son Carter had left one of the 26ers. Gary knew she'd pass the information on to Carter, and he'd let the others know.

The day Gary cleared it all up, he worked fast, bagging everything and putting it in the dumpster. High winds were expected and, already, bits of ribbon from the black and purple wreaths people had hung on their doors to honour Stevie were blowing through the streets of the town. Gary kept the tiny toy ATV someone had left and stuck it on top of the collection tin they kept at the cash register. It was a fund for Stevie's headstone. A metal coffee can with a coin slot cut into its plastic lid. It wasn't filling fast. No one used cash these days, but Brenda had come into work excitedly a few days ago to tell Gary someone had made a big anonymous donation on GoFundMe. "Enough for something real nice," she'd nodded, "Who was it, I wonder?" Brenda reeled off some ideas: a local who'd won gold in the Olympics, the town's one NHL star, or the musician from that band in St. John's. The one who'd quit drinking and was always "paying it forward," picking up people's bills at Tim Hortons and the Dollar Store.

Stevie's not the first to go missing around here. The woods, the ocean, can take a person and never give them back. At first, people speculated that Stevie stowed away on a ship and was living in Norway. Maybe he'd been kidnapped and held as a sex slave in some cabin in the woods, or maybe he'd gone feral, living off berries and trapping rabbits.

The day Stevie's disappearance made the news, the town organized a vigil. His mom, Arlene, hadn't contacted the cops until he was gone for three days, figuring he was on a bender. The police, well, they knew Stevie and it took them a while to start looking. Arlene hadn't seen Stevie for a week by the time the search got serious.

The vigil was candlelit but with no open flames (too dangerous). Attendees were encouraged to either bring a battery-lit candle or download the Mourning Flame app on their phones: a perpetual flickering image of a candle that never shrank down or blew out. The vigil was well attended. Brenda went with her daughter Evie who sobbed through the whole thing, which surprised Brenda. Brenda guessed Evie's period was coming.

Fourteen-year-old Britany Dawe, one of Stevie's cousins, sang "Ode to Newfoundland" and Reverend Higgins, who has a church in his basement called Redemption Faith Centre, prayed loudly and evangelically for Stevie's return. Arlene got up to speak. Rev. Higgins put his arm around her shoulders and led her to the front of the crowd, but she was sobbing too hard for words to come out. The Rev helped her back to one of the wooden garden chairs that had been set up for dignitaries and the old. The mayor was seen with his arm around her, being a bit too comforting,

Brenda would report later to Gary. A radio DJ from the local station got up and played the acoustic guitar and a song he had written that very day for Stevie called "Buddy, We Luvs You, Come Home."

Gary hadn't gone to the vigil. Business was booming. The Ultramar picnic table, the dark alley behind the building, these were places Stevie conducted his social and business interactions. He was part of the place. The Esso on the other end of town was probably wishing they hadn't given Stevie such a hard time for smoking near the pumps and sent him on his way. Gary had heard people were boycotting the Esso for their treatment of Stevie, but he'd only heard it from Brenda, and he knew the Esso had a bunch of Missing posters up in the store. When he drove past earlier, he saw the sign out front that usually advertised the price of gas and bananas now acknowledged Stevie's absence: "STevIE CoME HOME! ViEnna SauSAGE 2 4 1!" Either way, people were coming in to pick up a six-pack or carton of milk when they came to drop off a message for Stevie, or a drawing one of their children had made, encased in a Ziploc bag. And Gary's gas sales were up, a sign his perceived kindness towards Stevie was being rewarded.

Truth was, Gary couldn't stand the kid. He'd once caught his daughter walking down the street with him when she was only fourteen. Stevie was out of school by then, way too old for Becks. It was just after he'd come back from his trip to the Penn. He was wheeling along his bicycle and Becky was wearing one of those shirts that showed off her still childishly round belly, and pants that showed one of the thongs Gary's ex-wife inexplicably let Becky buy with her babysitting and birthday money. Becky was laughing at something Stevie'd said. Gary made her get in the car and she refused to talk to him for three weeks. He bought her a new cellphone, a bribe to resume communication, but he didn't tell her he'd put a tracker on it. The only reason he didn't chase Stevie off his property was that if Stevie was sitting on the table outside the store, he knew he wasn't lurking around his daughter. The last place Becky would be caught was at her dad's gas station. Once Stevie was so high, he spent two hours walking around the Ultramar parking lot retracing the same figure-eight pattern. When Gary finally went out to talk to him, Stevie didn't hear him. Just kept walking like he was in a trance. Gary threatened to call the cops on Stevie more times than he could remember, but he never did. He knew by the time the cops actually showed up Stevie would be long gone.

Stevie was a symptom of all that diseased this place, but he wasn't the cause, and the cops didn't have the time to chase him around unless he was

actively engaging in armed robbery. The cops did come by when Stevie disappeared. Gary didn't tell them that they weren't the first to come looking for him, that days before, Carter was in making inquiries, seeing if Stevie'd been around that morning. Gary overheard this conversation from the back room, but he didn't tell the cops about it, and Brenda didn't mention it either. Just acted all surprised, "Well, now you mention it, I haven't seen Stevie for a few days. Funny, I didn't notice." Gary saw one of the cops glance quickly toward her partner, and he just shrugged. They didn't push their questions.

During the vigil, Gary set up the store's CCTV so it took in the growing memorial outside. Rumours that someone had stolen a pink teddy bear had caused tension among his part-time staff, so he had trained one of his cameras away from pump number two and onto the offerings that were piling up on the picnic table and the chain-link fence behind it.

Lucy had gone to the vigil. She stood at the back, and one or two people gave her a nod of recognition, but mostly she was ignored. She felt uncomfortable, out of place, even though the event was at the little park she could see from her house. People gave her strange glances. Everyone else was with their people, and Lucy didn't have people, not in the sense they meant it here. She half-hoped one of the other Come-From-Aways might show up, and they could huddle on the edge of the crowd together.

Eight days earlier, about forty-five minutes into a run and Beyoncé ringing in her ears, Lucy loped along the trails and, in a kind of glee, leapt over puddles in the mud and breathed deep the forest smells. She was in the perfect loose-limbed, loose-minded state of moving forward with animal compulsion; of being a body running a brain, and not a brain running a body. She ran into the clearing, a place where kids partied. Both creepy and strangely beautiful as decades' worth of broken glass littered the ground and caught the sun. It was a teenage sex and drugs kind of place. Her brain touched a memory of losing her virginity in a similar place in Ontario, less rock and more reeds, but just outside of town. She was considering this with the emotional detachment that running afforded her, when her eyes saw it, red, attached to a leg. It took her endorphin-soaked animal brain a minute to catch up.

It was a shoe, a red, expensive-looking running shoe sticking out into the path ahead of her. She knew this shoe. It belonged to that kid, Stevie. The one she crossed the road to avoid. The one she was sure masturbated in the bushes. The chemical mix in her body was suddenly all wrong,

adrenaline was pumping and she felt numb. She stopped running and her hearing went for a minute. Lucy took out her earphones, but there was nothing, no wind or birdsong or distant highway sound. It happened before she fainted, this silence, but she couldn't faint, she needed to keep her shit together. Lucy gasped for breath, her heart thumping from the sudden stop, her legs confused that they weren't still moving. The foot was still, and the leg was too. She could see an ATV pulled up just beside the trail.

She wanted him to be asleep. Lucy was scared of this kid, despite his scrawny arms and underdog appearance, he always reminded her of a hungry and unpredictable animal. She pitied him, but she didn't trust him. Something in the way he nodded his head at her made her feel naked. But his head wasn't nodding now. She let her eyes travel up to his face and for a moment she thought it was a trap, and he was going to grab her.

His eyes were wide open. There were ants crawling all over his face, on his cheeks, a line travelling over his lips. It was the ants that tipped her from cautious concern to fear and she bolted, getting away as fast as she could. She ran right past the police station and kept going far out towards the lake until her legs were like jelly and she turned slowly and took a plodding jog back towards her house.

She had to call the police, but she imagined the conversation, them asking, "Why didn't you call straight away?" To be honest, she wasn't sure. She pressed the nine then the one, then she stopped. The telephone always made her hyperventilate. She'd heard that therapist on the radio say you should make notes if you have phone anxiety. She did it when she had to call the vet's, or the doctor's, or order pizza: appointment for Hugo, pap smear, anchovies. Her head was pounding. She went upstairs and found some pills, swallowed three, got in the shower.

This is not me, she thought. In the shower she questioned herself. *Is it possible I have imagined this? Maybe he was asleep? Maybe it was a prank? Is the perimenopause making me hallucinate? Is it a false memory? Some kind of waking nightmare brought on by dehydration and depression? Am I schizophrenic? Do some people sleep with open eyes? Didn't I read about Russian prisoners doing that during the war?*

She realized she had to go back. Go back and calmly reassess the situation. She would take Hugo this time. She would touch the boy, maybe prod him with a stick to make sure, before she called the cops.

She drank a whiskey to calm her nerves, and then another. Day drinking was an exception, not the rule, but she was drinking like a possessed woman. Bad drinking. Not the sip, sip kind but the drowning kind, the kind to make everything go away. She pretended to herself the drinking was working until she was seasick crawling to the toilet then puking, puking, puking. It was early evening when she woke up on the bathroom floor, Hugo licking her hair. Shakes, self-recriminations. She fed the dog and went to bed. She would go back tomorrow. She would call the police from the body. She would apologize to the kid. She would confess to the police, lie just a little. Say she hadn't gotten close, had found him scary, figured he was sleeping, but then she started to worry and went back to check the next day.

It was early, 6 a.m., the following morning. She'd already showered off the sweat and tears and booze of the day before. Her stomach held her guilt like a nest of snakes. She put Hugo on his lead, and they headed up to the clearing. Lucy took the direct route, no fucking around. They never went out this early. Lucy was not one of those morning people, the soft light, the emptiness, the air seeming new, it just irritated her. She would have to touch. Feel with her hand the cold flesh. She hoped things hadn't eaten him. She had a horrible vision of maggots writhing in his eyes.

They got there fast, the dog excited to be out so early. As they got closer, Hugo was not tugging on the leash, he was just moseying ahead of her, like nothing was up. She didn't see the shoes, the kid must be further along than she remembered, but she walked the length of the trail where it cut through the clearing, and nothing. No dead boy. No ATV. Nothing.

The feel of it, the relief, when it lifted from her shoulders. She was high with redemption. She had nothing to confess. She was guilty and not guilty. Guilty of not checking, but there was nothing wrong after all. But then she thought of the ants. The ants crawling on his face, and the white pallor of his skin. She contemplated calling the cops still, but saying what? "There is nothing here, and for reasons I can hardly explain I got drunk instead of reporting what I'd found to you yesterday. I don't deal well with life, with human contact," sounds pretty trite in an I-found-a-body situation.

But he was gone, and maybe it was some kind of hoax? A trick? Or maybe she'd just imagined the whole thing; the trees, the physical exertion, the quantity of time she spent alone since her partner had left for what

was initially a work sabbatical, but turned out to be a relationship one too, finally tipping her into psychosis? An unease followed her for the next week, and then she heard the news report, "Stevie Loder, of Grace Harbour, is missing."

Kev'd gone to the vigil with his mom. People were pretending to have hope for Stevie's safe return then. "Sin," she'd said when they got there, and again when Hugh Dooley showed up drunk, and again when Arlene got up then couldn't stop crying enough to speak. He'd seen Evie there with Brenda, tried to catch her eye, but she was staring at the ground most of the time.

Kev was relieved when they found Stevie's ATV at the bottom of the cliff. He didn't think anyone would find Stevie, but you never knew. The woods held a lot of secrets, and you never knew when it was going to give one of them up. A hunter found a grenade once. He went for a piss and saw something in the undergrowth. Him and his buddies carried it around for two days and when he got home his wife made him take it to the cop shop. They said it could have gone off at any moment. Had experts come in and explode the thing in an empty field. It was from the Second World War, and they figured a soldier had brought it home, thought better of it, and dumped it out there. The woods were fickle. Kev's uncle had dropped a Swiss Army knife once and it had just disappeared, he'd made Kev crawl around for an hour and he never found it. Three weeks later they were back in the same spot and there it was, easy to see, almost lying on top of a rock, red plastic case so obvious among the muted browns and greens. Surely, they'd have spotted it if had been there when they first lost it.

Once they found the ATV, at the bottom of a cliff and half submerged in the ocean, the ground searches for Stevie stopped. They sent down divers, but the conditions were poor and they didn't find anything. There was talk of trying to raise enough money to bring in that couple with the underwater drone, but the currents were so strong, and the seas so rough, that no one really expected Stevie's body to be found. Arlene said she knew, she'd felt it for days, that her child was dead. And although no one said it, Stevie was the kind of guy you expected to die young and tragic.

Kev'd thought about joining one of the searches but decided that was too much. On the cop shows on TV the murderer always showed up to look for the body, and he wasn't going to make that mistake. And then, after the ATV was found, when someone started a campaign to buy a headstone for Stevie, somewhere for Arlene to go and make her peace

with this world and Stevie's death, Kev had seen an opportunity for a kind of atonement.

Stevie disappeared in the fall, and in the spring the tombstone was erected. An oval picture of Stevie taken a few years ago, wearing his IceCaps jacket and the D&G ball cap he was so proud of but lost at a party a week after he got it, was stuck on a slab of rose granite. Stevie was smiling in the picture, giving the camera a two-fingered salute. Above the photograph were the words In Loving Memory, and below it his name, Steven Aloysius Loder. Under Stevie's name was an etching of an ATV, but it must have been a generic one because the machine pictured on the tombstone was a way better one than Stevie had ever owned. "Maybe he's got a real sweet ride in heaven," Carter'd said that night when they ended up at the cemetery, drunk and pouring whiskey on the place where Stevie's body should be.

Lucy waited a few weeks before she went to pay her respects to Stevie. She wanted to bring flowers but everything they had at the Food Basics in Carbonear was marked fifty percent off. Limp carnations, electric blue and pink dyed Gerber daisies with some brown-leafed fern thrown in. The stems of the daisies encased in plastic tubes. She didn't buy them.

She was relieved to be alone, not to run into Arlene or the groupie mourners, as she had come to think of them. A group of junior high girls had taken to hanging around Stevie's old haunt of the Ultramar, playing sad songs from their phones, eating candy, vaping, and occasionally sticking a fake flower or strange stuffed animal on a keychain into the chain-link fence behind the store. It was unclear if any of them actually knew Stevie. They were a generation younger than him. Lucy had seen them up at the cemetery from a distance when she was out with Hugo; they were dancing around Stevie's grave in a combination of worship and degradation. Lucy remembered her own teenage obsession with James Dean; there was something very seductive about a heartbreaking but safe crush on a dead boy. She stood by the marble slab; the dog lifted his leg against the corner of the stone before Lucy could stop him. "Sorry," she said. "I'm so sorry."

The first time it happened, she was running the trail, and she swore Stevie was standing in the woods just to her left, his hands down his pants. "Can ghosts masturbate?" the pragmatic part of her wondered. It was a hallucination, she decided, brought on by stress. But Stevie popped up in other places. A quick flash on his bicycle on her way to the post office. Once, peering in through the kitchen window, which made her scream.

Sitting on the curb smoking a cigarette. Sprawled on her sofa, looking up at her. It was always just a flash. A few seconds. He was stroking Hugo, crouched down in the backyard, the dog sitting looking up at him. She bought a sage stick online and tried to smudge the house, but it just made her eyes water and Hugo insisted on going into the backyard and wouldn't come in for a long time. The thing smelled vaguely chemical.

Lucy was waiting in line at the Ultramar. Gary noticed her come in, he hadn't seen her much all winter or spring, but a warm June day was bringing everyone out. Lucy was looking older, she'd lost weight, but not in a good way and her hair was dull. He'd heard her "friend" was living on the mainland. Gary was always slower than the women that worked for him, and customers fidgeted in line anxious to make their purchases. Lucy was trying not to stare at the guy in front of her, everyone was giving him a wide birth, the tattoos on his face like magical markings parting the crowds in his way. But he nodded and smiled at everyone coming in the door and they nodded back cautiously. One of them even said, "How's you doing, Kev?"

"Grand, b'y. Just grand."

It was just after that when Lucy saw Stevie. Pale, like in real life, but shoeless. He was always shoeless when she saw him, wearing white tube socks that dripped with mud. He was leaning up against the slushy machines, sipping from a supersized cup. Blue slush and red layered in the cup. She stared, wanting to catch the moment he disappeared. But something pulled her attention away. The guy in front of her was motionless, not stepping forward to take his place in front of the till; he was looking over to where she'd seen Stevie, his face completely still, until his eyebrow twitched. He must have felt her looking at him because he turned and their eyes locked, then they both glanced back towards the slushy machines, but Stevie was gone. A melting cup of slush sat next to the machine, and neither of them could be sure if it was there before.

E. Kristin Anderson

HOW YOU MADE ME WANT

after The Donnas

I'm trying to accept that underneath the salt of it all your breath
has always been a steady cold. And in this I wish I could remember you

as just a quarter to feed into a payphone. There's no wrong apocalypse when
every small town is its own circus and in this claustrophobia I will

always be ready with my coat. I hide things because memory can be disease,
fading Polaroids to linger undisturbed. Now there's a stillness in me

that only the man in the moon can move. I dream again of blood
spilling warm from my shoulders, a vivid frame, and in the misty afternoon

you pave the road with whatever magic you couldn't pull from me. I call you
by your first name—an empty-handed ending with a closed gate and

a party gone sour. In any town I watch for the raven—she, too,
covets gilded dawn, every moment golder than the last, a victory to stow

away for the days without a shiny thing to hold. Every day now
I ask favours of inanimate objects, my shoulders knitted in the kind of pain

that only collision can cure. And I contact myself via séance, visit
my old high school, take my heart from my old locker and swallow it. I can

close that blue aluminum now, even as it rattles inside me like a difficult
breath. I know a song with a perfect ending and, no, it doesn't

look like me. But you can peel it back and find the seams underneath,
such perfect wreckage, just like the dresses I made when I was

nineteen hunched over on the floor—all those sequins, edges rough and
beautiful, my body just a vessel to be labelled *daughter*. I take note.

What you wanted wasn't a bird, tongue wrapped around metal and sky to
serve as ballast. I just need something shiny to hold, something real

to put in an envelope and send in the mail when I find last year's revenge
in the pocket of my winter coat and know I have to take it with me.

Carol Krause

LOSING THE WORLD

I sit on my little red seat and my eyes go whirr whirr and the people clap as they scurry on by up the little elevator and out into the big bright world and the subway moves between stations like a giant spaceship and the signs on the wall are talking in a language i try not to understand and the lights go bang bang and the man with the bag is looking down at his feet and everyone's silent in their electronic hypnosis and i wonder if i have stepped into a dream and on and on we are carried on into the next encounter the next very important opportunity to find something of value to hold onto and i know i am a person in a body but to tell you the truth this still feels like a dream and i sense something closely resembling peace and while i am here i am somewhere else and i don't mind that we all die and everything moves out of our hands which tremble in the face of what we cannot control and

i close my eyes and hear the sounds of the world gather down my spine and i smile because i am not at home here i am part of something else and it's not quite liberation but it's the next best thing this other world that never shuts me out and i fold myself into a belonging that cannot be broken by time and somehow losing just feels like opening another door and in this moment i am happy knowing there are things i want but i want this more.

Alice Turski

LOOKING FOR JADE RABBIT

I reach inside your skull
and stroke a special spot
push my finger in so the farthest
curve of my nail
sinks just slightly
until you forget God
just
I will
hold
God
for a little while

yes this is violent
what you are smelling is bone opened up to its sapwood

the myrrh is dribbling out nicely

do you want me to stop
I can tell you things: the moon inside
your head
looks like a moon
the priest is calling the children up
wait
tell me what is he holding
what did I miss

Ziploc bags of Goldfish have you ever
crawled beneath pews
sipped the Gulf
what should I do with your God
tell me
God
is the breeze bothering you
I can turn the AC off we like to sweat

is my nail bothering you
that is intimacy I'll let go
in a little
while

Alisha Dukelow

THE JELLYFISH

A small jellyfish just floated to the surface of my bathwater. At first, I mistook it for the remaining skin of a Sea Lily essential oil bead, which I bulk order from HD & Co. I wonder if it originated from an unseen corner of my body, or if its appearance is a psychosomatic clot of lorazepam, sertraline, rosé: three milligrams, two hundred milligrams, nine hundred millilitres, and counting. But when I pluck it from the water and hold it in my palm, the pink incandescence of my antique lava lamp illumines the fragile umbrella of its bell, a wisp of algae-like arm.

I meet the venomous thread of tentacle when The Jellyfish stings my thumb. The sting is so quickly delicate, though, that I feel a sobering needle of shame for being this large. I put The Jellyfish back in the water. It undulates by my toes in tandem with the lava lamp's boluses.

A few moments later, The Doctor enters my bathroom. They wear white suede platform sneakers with their oversized white coat. I admire their accessories: turquoise tinted safety glasses, a teardrop lapis lazuli pendant, nitrile gloves in Heavy Duty Blue. Their fingers are exceptionally long, and their short dark hair sprouts in clusters of elastic moulded

waves. I count them: one, two, three, four, five, six. The hairstyle seems to tug their face toward the ceiling and sky, rippling their forehead with wrinkles and widening their already capacious dark eyes.

How did you feel when you first noticed it? The Doctor always wants to know how I'm feeling. They kneel at the edge of the bathtub and click on the LEDs attached to the temple hinges of their glasses. The Jellyfish gleams clearer in the cool light: coral in gelatinous transparency, a red splotch in its bell centre like a drop of Rorschach ink. Fine ruddy lines venously trace to the frilled circumference. It's hard to believe that The Jellyfish, guided by ocelli only, is without blood, brain, or heart.

I've been depressed again. I can be honest with The Doctor. *What should I do?*

Relax. You don't want to disrupt the habitat. Even though they haven't touched anything, The Doctor stands and firmly wipes their blue hands on their coat. They undo the top two buttons and retrieve a thin silver stick from an inner pocket, which they shake and unfold to extend—like a wand—and immerse in the bathwater. The stick lights faintly, a diluted blue.

What's that for? I ask.

Measuring repression, The Doctor says. After refolding and returning the flimsy-looking device to their coat, they pull out an amber vial from another inner pocket and squeeze its dropper lid full of an azure liquid. When they squirt the dosage into their mouth, their forehead lines briefly disappear. They refill and re-release.

What are you drinking?

My new brine. The Doctor half-closes their eyes as they answer.

Can I try? I realize I'm very thirsty.

No, The Doctor says, as they pull a circular screen from their pocket and take a seat on the toilet. They proceed to tap and scroll. *It's a type of Hydrozoa!* they announce after a while. *The smallest jellyfish are of this taxonomy, and there are genera that can survive beyond saltwater.* But then they shake their head. The Jellyfish, a mobile medusa, is not sessile like freshwater polyps, nor a pink-hearted hydroid, nor *Tubularia*. It looks nothing like the Portuguese man o' war, actually a colonial siphonophore, which grows up to thirty centimetres with a gas bladder of carbon monoxide. They continue to tap and scroll. *It's not a moon jelly*. A long time ago, a bloom of these *Aurelia aurita* clogged the world's largest nuclear power reactor in Oskarshamn, Sweden; but this jellyfish

lacks the distinctively glowing tetrad of horseshoe shaped gonads. *It must be a Pacific sea nettle!*

I no longer live in that region, I say.

Hmm. The Doctor frowns again, taps and scrolls. It can't be the box jellyfish, either; it doesn't have eyeballs, and its poison doesn't seem potent enough. It's definitely not a cubozoa. Is it stalked? A staurozoa? They sigh. There are over 10,000 species of cnidarians!

I'm overwhelmed. There are too many things that could be. *Should we call the Humane Society*? It has become hard to breathe.

That wouldn't be very helpful, The Doctor says. *Please just try to relax*. They pass me another three milligrams of lorazepam, which they keep in a special inner pocket. *You look sweaty. Maybe you should wash your face*?

I speed up the tab of medicine's dissolution with more rosé. I typically exfoliate my T-zone with black charcoal in the shower after I brush and floss my teeth, but I can't disturb The Jellyfish, so I must improvise. Through thorough experimentation, I have finally formulated a skin care regime comprised of natural and medicated products to combat my hormonal acne and overproduction of cortisol: an even layer of 2.5% benzoyl peroxide and 1% adapalene cream every night; three layers of moisture every morning to quench the subsequent dryness. Cold-pressed rosehip seed oil; plant-derived squalene; 2% hyaluronic acid. Above my sink, next to my shelf of serums, I have pinned a line from *Mrs. Dalloway*: "Rigid, the skeleton of habit alone upholds the human frame." I typed the quote in EB Garamond typeface. Virginia Woolf is my favourite modernist novelist.

The Doctor hands me the products one at a time.

Are you hungry, they ask when I have finished the face treatment process.

I nod, hungry.

The Doctor pulls their cigarettes from their hand pocket and lights one. The smoke elevates my nausea, and I'm not sure if it's healthy for The Jellyfish, but I need The Doctor around, so I don't comment. They tap their screen with their pinky, and the number for shrimp dumplings is speed dialled.

Soon after, The Delivery Person enters the bathroom with the order. They wear an indigo track suit, an amethyst choker, and violet circle shades. The Doctor says thank you and sets the Styrofoam takeout box and chopsticks on the edge of the tub. I take another gulp of rosé, open

the chopsticks, and pierce the first dumpling as a heat test. It seems cold, is gummed with oil.

What's the matter? Without breaking their own pair of chopsticks, The Doctor stabs a dumpling and sucks it into their mouth. They chew rigorously, and the erect waves of their hair oscillate with the jaw movement. They swallow hard. *You need to eat. These are your favourite.*

It's true, or has been: I have been eating only shrimp dumplings for the past two weeks of dinner. *I don't know*, I say, with my eyes glued on the hole I have punctured in the dough. A shrimp chunk is visible, and I extract it with my fingers, pruney. There is a little black filament curled at its underside: the digestive tract, now fragmented. I glance at The Jellyfish. It pulsates energetically, and I decide that it has definitely grown. The dumpling wrapper and its ruffled seal suddenly feels weighted—rigamortised—beneath the chopsticks. My stomach clamps and rumbles. The back of my throat spasms.

In one smooth gesture, The Doctor extends the garbage can to me as I start to gag. I hang my head over its plastic rim until the roughly one thousand millilitres of wine has been ejected. The liquid froths a diluted pink. The Doctor places the garbage on the floor and pats my back with their long rubbery blue fingers. *It's good to let it out*, they say.

When the immediate need to purge encloses an accumulated desire to binge, it feels like loss on the level of self-concept. The Doctor assures me, though, that all of this was already scheduled: that my personality, in each of its phases of psychosocial crisis, has been fixed since my birth. That soon, I will master the current crisis, and I will feel better. The Doctor tells me to envisage myself like a statue, continually calcifying. They carry the garbage can across the approximately two metres of floor space and push it outside of the bathroom. After closing the door, The Doctor wipes their hands vigorously on their coat. The rubber to cotton sounds uncomfortably dry; I still feel ill.

Would you like me to read to you? The Doctor asks.

Please. I always want The Doctor to read to me while I bathe.

The Doctor retrieves their amber bottle to squeeze, drink, and repeat again before choosing *Selected Poems* by Christina Rossetti on their screen. Of late, The Doctor has been drawing on a pre-1900 literary collection that they assure me is more mentally hygienic than Modern and Contemporary. I'm not totally sure what they mean, but Rossetti is my favourite Victorian poet. They clear their throat and start with "A Birthday":

My heart is like a singing bird
Whose nest is in a water'd shoot;
My heart is like an apple-tree
Whose boughs are bent with thickset fruit;
My heart is like a rainbow shell
That paddles in a halcyon sea;
My heart is gladder than all these
Because my love is come to me—

Look. The Doctor stops reading to point at The Jellyfish, which has swelled at least three inches in its umbrella's diameter. Its coral colouration has thickened. I gasp. Enlarged, The Jellyfish's movement is enunciated: a phosphorescent vortex that furrows the bathwater. I temporarily lose track of my measurements as The Jellyfish jet propels over my body, moving from one end of the tub to the other. Its swollen bell contracts, squirts to vibrate through tentacles, pauses before it propels. Its beauty is overwhelming, and my breath catches in my throat.

You need to relax, now, The Doctor says. The Doctor always wants me to relax, to be still, to wait. With another tap of their screen, ocean waves sound softly. They hand me my gel sleep mask, which I keep cool on the toilet tank lid. *It's time to sink insiiide and breaaathe.* They dramatically lower and elongate their voice, as I imagine a poet at a poetry reading would:

Here you will find the catharsis that you have been dreaming of. Here, our psychic experts will gently guide you towards your truly ideal symbolic hue. Surf through easy-to-order swatches like ROYAL, NAVY, CORNFLOWER, SKY, YALE, SAPPHIRE, INDEPENDENCE, AIR FORCE, OLYMPIC, PIGEON…

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Are those wall paint shades? I ask, slightly confused. I've been meaning to repaint my bathroom, something The Doctor previously suggested as a form of self care.

Shhhh, The Doctor says. *…and PROFESSIONALISM. Our heavy-duty gloves feature diamond texturing for efficient wet and dry grip. With our primary colour an optimal 450 nanometers long, we can multi-reference with expertise… We 100% guarantee that you will benefit from this interior wavelength therapy.*

My listening becomes spotty, and eventually the sound waves melt in the direction of whole-body vibration. Finally, I unclench: my shoulders and spine rounding, and my gurgling stomach neutralizing. Each inhale becomes less volitional, towards automatic, with my thorax expanded, ribs elevated, calm incited in globular shapes via the xiphoid process, intercostal muscles. With each expiration, I envision a bluish and pinkish series of pulsations that swell to a collection of spheres. I try to count them as they arise, but they quickly morph, splitting and narrowing into a tributary of strands, tentacularly knotted like stems, like trunks, like roots. My skin tingles.

As I begin to feel a fluid pleasure heating and growing under my thighs, rising by way of autonomic nervous system towards my pelvic region, I lose all points of reference. With the familiar rhythm of muscular contractions, there is fast electricity in my brain: a sweet chemical tide with a thin blade that tangs with the pressured release. But such an acute and slippery sense of gratification has often evoked grief for me. And in my heart, there is the subsequent sting before the strain. I well with tears.

When I feel The Doctor's rubbery knuckles slide by my feet, I'm sobbing. Crying makes me feel smaller, closer to ground, with a neurobiological need that is perhaps subconscious, but neither wasteful nor theoretical. The rush of water sounds harder in my ears. I remove my sleep mask.

To my shock and utter confusion, water is shooting from the drain, spilling over the tub's edge, and quickly flooding the bathroom. And The Jellyfish, now as wide as my torso, has suctioned to my belly button, where it continues to undulate. Its tentacles cling to my waist and lower back. I open my mouth to say something, but can make no noise.

The Doctor's eyes are unusually liquid in their bulbousness. Their pupils have dilated to eclipse the irises. I've never seen them like this before. *Don't panic! I've called for help,* they say, holding the unattached drain stopper against the stream of water. The flow shoots more aggressively against their effort to resist it. When the spray hits their face, knocking their safety glasses off, they stumble backwards, dog paddling.

I cry out for The Doctor but my mouth only fills with water, mildly salinated and lukewarm.

The water level rapidly climbs halfway up the wall.

I'm rising above the tub with The Jellyfish still stuck to my stomach when The Electrician opens the bathroom door. They wear copper bib coveralls over a cantaloupe-coloured T-shirt. The waterline is now three-

quarters of the way up the wall, and once the exit is cleared, the four of us surge straight through the hallway. Alongside bob an unnumbered collection of things, including, but not limited to: my lava lamp and scattered array of toiletries; the empty bottles of rosé; pieces of the leftover dumplings; the Styrofoam, chopsticks, and puffed plastic bag; The Doctor's glasses; The Doctor's amber vial of brine; The Doctor's repression stick. I reach for the tube of benzoyl peroxide and adapalene, even though I know it's futile. The Doctor and The Electrician are flailing their arms and legs wildly in attempts to keep their heads above water. I realize, though, that The Jellyfish, like a mucilaginous life jacket, is keeping me buoyant.

At the end of the hallway, in the foyer, The Paramedic, dressed in green, stands waving before the water knocks them down. And when The Police Officer, clothed in highlighter-yellow rain gear, opens the front door, the waves—having become progressive, with crests and troughs that travel speedily at right angles to themselves—carry everyone outside. The apartment block, too, has flooded; the sky is at storm. It rains monsoonally. Fire trucks float in futile zigzags across the street.

No one has arrived in time. The Doctor clings to their screen, but it is quickly sucked into the undertow, glinting as it sinks, a blurred fragment of mirror glass reflecting the prism of the professionals' uniform colours: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, violet.

I swim with The Jellyfish, its radial symmetry a mysterious form that feels accumulatory, out of order. I try to breathe slowly as my life indoors grows small and distant in my wake. In my mind's eye, I see a distant oceanscape that rotates 180 degrees to become a spangled sky. Zooming in, the sky blooms with jellyfish, glowing in primordial multiplicity, having existed much longer, and much larger, than me. The future is unclear, but soon, I think, we will leave the city. Soon, we will reach the sea.

CONTRIBUTORS

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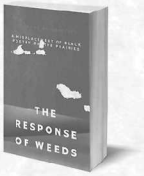

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"I had urges. To pick avocado pits out of green bins and bring them home to sprout, to break into apartments and steal neglected philodendrons displayed in windows."

— *Laura Clarke, "Pothos"*

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