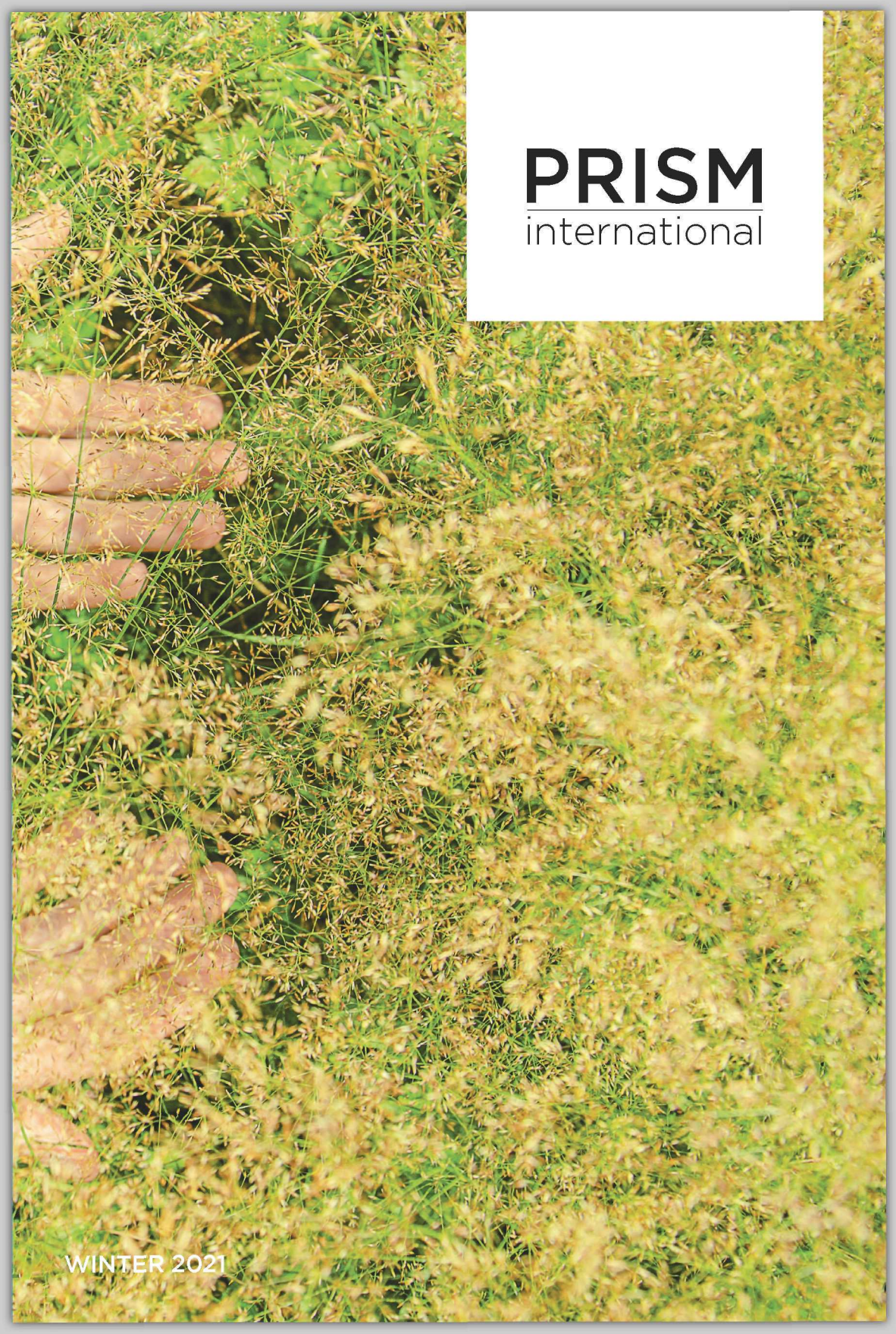

PRISM
international

WINTER 2021

PRISM international

CREATIVE NON-FICTION CONTEST

GRAND PRIZE

"Ghost Bread" by Angelique Stevens

FIRST RUNNER-UP

"Meditations on My Face" by Jaminnia States

SECOND RUNNER-UP

"Me, the Joshua Tree" by Joshua Whitehead

JUDGE

Alexander Chee

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a place of mind
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Alexander Chee

ACTS OF MAGIC

The process of judging a contest like this—where you read the submissions alone, no names attached—is like a fascinating magic act in reverse. You begin with the magic tricks and only at the end do you see the magicians.

I found these essays then to be good company in a desolate year. A year full of death and cancelled dreams, during which it seemed as if anywhere I looked in the world police were beating and gassing protestors. Sitting down again and again to a hopelessness that seemed always to renew itself, I wanted writing that instilled in me the will to stand up again, to smile, to renew my pact with this life.

What does it mean to call an essay essential? To say of something that it gives you life? "Ghost Bread," the winning essay, is about what it is like to run into your biological father at a Trailways station. "Meditations on My Face," the first runner up, describes what it means when you have a face that, as the writer's mother says, "carries that old song." A face everyone is always trying to explain to you, a face that soon starts to feel as if it doesn't belong to you. "Me, the Joshua Tree," is the impossible story you tell a lover after they have gone, a letter flung over the wall. All seem to be about a longing to belong, and what we learn about ourselves from that longing—longing as a teacher. Belonging as an aspiration. All of these writers were, by the time I was done, my new favorite writers. I did not turn to them for escape but for wisdom, and found a way to make sense of myself that I didn't know I was looking for. I couldn't have said that was what I wanted, but that was what I found.

So please, sit down for the magic show in these pages, read these essays, and remember the magicians' names: Angelique Stevens. Jaminnia States. Joshua Whitehead. I'm so grateful to have found them. I think you will feel the same.

Angelique Stevens

GHOST BREAD

1

I was almost sixteen when I ran into my biological father, Reggie, at a Trailways station. My friend and I wanted to see some boys an hour away in Geneva, so we concocted a scheme to tell our parents we were each spending the night at the other's house. We were in line to buy our bus tickets when Reggie walked in. He was broad shouldered and dark skinned; even from across the room, I could see that he was over six feet. His cheeks fell heavily into frown lines just underneath tinted glasses. In my young mind, I had imagined him with long black hair like the Indians on TV that I grew up with, but this man's hair was short and neat.

My sister Gina and I had been maybe eight or nine the last time we'd seen Reggie. He had been sober long enough that my mom and dad (my stepfather) were letting us visit him on weekends. He and his second wife, Pat, and their three-year-old son, Sean (my half-brother), picked us up at our little apartment in the city and drove us the two hours to an

old farmhouse nestled in a valley. A pond rippled just beyond a clearing. A horse pasture and barn marked the yard's boundaries. They had a big mutt of a dog that bounded up the gravel drive when we pulled in.

Reggie let us ride Vail, their horse, around the pond while he walked along the side holding the reins. At night, Pat helped the three of us kids get into our pyjamas. After dinner, we ate chocolate-chip-mint ice cream on beanbag chairs in front of the TV. Some days we'd all pile into the car and go hiking to a local waterfall swimming hole. Other days, we would go out for a pizza dinner. It felt more like a normal family than anything I'd ever experienced, but their family life could not have been as ideal as I imagined because Reggie went off the wagon and got arrested again after only a few months of those visits.

This man who walked into the Trailways station was older, resigned somehow. I said to my friend, "That looks like it could be…." She stopped me before I could say it. It was our turn at the counter. After we got our tickets, I looked for him, but he was gone. I was thinking maybe I had just dreamed him up when I felt the tap on my shoulder. I sensed him before I turned around—an embryonic line connecting our tissue, his skin just a shade darker than mine, his hair black but spotting grey, and the parentheses around his mouth deeper.

"What's your name?" It was a question otherwise unforgivable from a father.

I started to say "I'm Ang," but he hugged me before I could finish. I couldn't remember the last time I hugged him. I wanted to bury my head in his chest and tell him I loved him, that I missed him, that I didn't care about all those lost years. I wanted to hear his voice say all the things that fathers say, "It's going to be all right," "We'll make it through somehow."

"I'm heading over to Clifton Springs to do some rehab. I'm trying to get better," he said, like we were long-time friends.

"I'm glad to hear it," I told him. My mom and stepdad ran in the same circles as he did, so even though I hadn't seen him in years, we had heard about his life regularly. He would do well for a while, like the time he, Pat, and Sean moved to California so he could attend Berkeley for his Master's degree in alcohol counseling. They had stayed in California long enough for him to get his degree. When they moved back to Rochester, they had another son and we had another half-brother, named Tim. But that didn't last long, because soon he was drunk again and passed out in a local diner.

I grew up hearing stories about him and his grandfather, Henan, who was a dropout of the Carlisle Indian Boarding School in Pennsylvania. Carlisle, the first of its kind, was built on General Richard Henry Pratt's philosophy, "Kill the Indian, save the man." It gained its reputation for taking Native children from their homes and assimilating them by cutting their hair and forcing them to speak English. The children who were sent there were often beaten for speaking their languages. Sometimes their skin was scrubbed raw in order to make them white. Many, including my great-grandfather, were sent out to work on local farms. But Henan didn't lose his Indian identity. He became a Seneca Chief, one of the last ones, in fact, who could "read" the Haudenosaunee wampum, the messages that were woven into belts through a series of purple and white shells.

Reggie and his brother came home on the reservation one day to find their parents, Henan's daughter Rosella and her husband Ulysses, dying in a convulsive fit from wood-grain alcohol. Years later, Reggie ran away from the Indian boarding school that he and his brothers were forced into. In his twenties, because of his alcoholism, he was admitted to the R-Wing, the same psych centre where he met my mom. She had been living there over ten years. They fell in love and left the ward and got married.

"I'll be in rehab for ninety days if I'm lucky, then maybe we can get together?"

I nodded.

"Where are you living now?" he asked.

"In a foster home in Hamlin, but I'm on a home visit for the weekend." I pulled out a piece of paper from my purse and wrote my foster family's information on it. He asked me if Gina was at the same foster home.

"No, but we're trying to get her moved in with me."

"Maybe when I get out of rehab we can all get together?" He smiled when he said this.

"I would like that." I moved in to hug him again, and for a moment I remembered the weekend, years earlier, at his old house in the valley when I had a broken leg. I was stuck inside with my casted leg and asked to go outside and watch Gina ride Vail around the pond. He scooped me up in his arms and carried me out the door. He was so close that I smelled mint Barbasol shaving cream intermingled with Old Spice. I put my arm around his neck and he kissed me on the cheek, like fathers do with their daughters.

2

Four months after that day in the bus station, he called. I had turned sixteen in the meantime and he had moved into a halfway house. He was going to volunteer at a soup kitchen for Thanksgiving and asked if Gina and I would meet him. Over the holiday weekend, when Gina and I were both on home visits, we took the bus to the soup kitchen, the same one our stepdad had often volunteered at. We didn't eat because mom had a turkey in the oven, but we worked side by side with Reggie and it felt good just to be near him.

Shortly after Thanksgiving, he called again wanting to get together, maybe to go to dinner or a movie. I said no, giving him an excuse about a friend needing help. What would we talk about? I hadn't seen him in years. He didn't know anything about me. When he called again, I turned him down a second time. I didn't want to see him without Gina, who was still in the detention home. Then I feared he would stop calling altogether, so I wrote him a letter and told him that I was anxious. In his letter back to me, he said that he was proud to be my father and maybe someday I would allow him to be just that. Then he said,

> *I don't have much to give right now, but I'd like to be a part of you. Without each other there is an important part of us missing. We need to be whole. Let's salvage all we can…I know I have a lot of strong feelings for you both…I could feel it when I seen you…I'm glad to hear you're working on yourself, changing for the good, "I'm growing up," you said…you have to…life is not always easy…I know how it is to be away from your parents. I was in a boarding school for eight years.*
>
> *Your mother is a good woman; she stuck by you against a lot of odds. She says John is a good man. He works hard—if it has been good for you, then I thank him too…I have no immediate plans except to get myself together….*
>
> *I have a Master's degree. So I can get a job when I get ready. I'm not rushing it…I can't afford to…I didn't mean to rush you. I must be like a stranger to you and it must be tough for you… take your time…write again….*

We wrote back and forth two more times before Gina and I started visiting him. One Saturday afternoon, we were all drinking coffee in his kitchen apartment when he took two big bowls down from the cupboard and put one in front of each of us.

"Today is a good day for you to learn how to make fry bread."

"I already know how to make bread," I said.

"Not that kind of bread. This is ghost bread, the bread of our ancestors."

"If it's ghost bread, then shouldn't it be invisible?" Gina asked, and we both giggled.

He ignored us.

"The government gave Indians commodity foods, like white flour, cheese, meats, and lard so that they could live after being forced onto reservations." He took the flour and Crisco out of the cupboard.

"Is commodity cheese like government cheese? Because that cheese is the shit!" Gina said.

"This is not funny, Regina. This is your history," he said, taking two spoons out from the drawer.

Gina and I snuck glances across the table at each other. He made us prepare our own batches as he scooped flour into each of our bowls. I was about to pour the water into my bowl when he snapped at me.

"You're doing it wrong! You have to hollow out the center first to make room for the water!"

"What difference does it make?" I asked. "It's all going to the same place. This ain't my first rodeo you know."

"You need to let the flour fall from the sides a little at a time." He slammed the Crisco down on the counter. "This is the matter of life! All of it. This is how we remember our ancestors, the ones who died before us. Those who are still connected to us."

"I thought it was just bread," Gina said. But she had gone too far because Reggie didn't say much after that. He began ladling the Crisco into the pan and then showed us each how to make the little saucers with our dough before placing them into the oil.

Later, when we were eating the warm rounds of fried bread, Gina made a joke about how she couldn't taste the ghosts in the dough. "Maybe we should put some of that government cheese on it," she said.

Without words, Reggie left us in the kitchen to go watch TV.

Over the next few years, as Gina and I were moving out of our foster homes and into our own apartments, the three of us saw each other

often. Sometimes, we'd drive out to the reservation to visit his uncle. Other times we'd all go out to eat and see a movie. The first week in my new apartment, he came over with Pictionary. I made a casserole and fry bread, and we all sat at the table and played games.

3

The summer I was eighteen, the three of us drove two hours to Salamanca for a pow wow. It was at the veteran's memorial park, big enough to handle thousands of people who came from all over the country. At the heart of the pow wow was the large dance arena, where several categories of competitions in all age levels, for both male and female dancers, took place. Hundreds of craft and food tents circled the arena. Native vendors sold silver jewellery, paintings, woodwork, and handmade regalia like embroidered shawls, jingle skirts, and headdresses, each signifying a particular tribe and clan. There were buffalo burgers and Indian tacos and fry bread stands. Campers and tents for the vendors and dancers were spread in an outer circle around the food.

When the grand entry started, Reggie explained the intertribal dance that opens the day's competitions. "This is the dance that everyone shares," he said. "It doesn't matter if you don't know how. It's simple." He made us go into the ring with him. At first, we were embarrassed, but as he pointed to the circle of people around the drum, he said, "Just listen to the drum and follow me." We watched him move—toe heel, toe heel, in the same clockwise direction as the rest of the crowd, some who were in full regalia, but many, just like us, in everyday clothes. Gina and I picked up our feet and moved them to the beat of the drum on either side of him, and then the crowd fell away and it was just the three of us and that drumbeat guiding our bodies.

We stayed all day watching the competitions, eating fry bread tacos, and meandering around the craft booths. At the end of that first day, there were fireworks just as the moon came up. It wasn't until very late at night that we all got back into the car to drive the two hours home, exhausted and full.

Over the next few years, we went to several more pow wows: Niagara Falls, Canada's Grand River, Toronto. Gina and I learned new dances each time we went. When the competitions were going, I'd stand on the sidelines feeling the beat of the drums, sometimes moving my

feet, sometimes lifting my arms high, sometimes twirling, sometimes pretending I could fly.

Reggie must have seen how much I wanted to dance, because one day he took us to a craft store together to pick out the calico fabric and ribbon that we could use to sew our own pow wow regalia—a long dress shirt, a skirt, and leggings. Then he connected me with a women's singing group. He gave me tapes of social songs to memorize. It was mostly a series of chants like yo ha ya wayo, and I couldn't understand it. Still, I listened to them every day, rewinding and playing and rewinding again, trying to get the intonations down right. But Reggie's drinking continued, and though I memorized the songs, I never showed up to the group, and we never made our dresses either. That calico cotton sat in the JoAnn Fabrics bags for years before I finally threw it out.

By the time we were twenty, Gina had already been arrested for prostitution a number of times, spending three or six months in jail, after which she'd be sober for a while before going off the wagon again. When she got out, she moved into a tiny little studio over on Spencer Street. It was a sober time for both Gina and Reggie. At a garage sale, he found an oversized wooden rocking chair, an Aztec blanket, and some kitchen goods for her place. He'd stop by her apartment now and again to check on her. She was so much like him. I told myself that I understood why he did those things for her and not for me when I got my first apartment. Months later, when Gina went into the R-Wing and Reggie went on a bender, I cleaned her apartment alone and took that chair and Aztec blanket for myself.

The last time I saw him was at a Seven Clans picnic in the Finger Lakes. Someone he knew owned a big cabin on a mountain. We drove separately, Gina and I in one car and he and his brother, Les, in another. The cabin was on the top of a mountain. The trees in front had just been cleared so that from the porch we could see for miles and miles.

"This is all Haudenosaunee territory," my father said as he made a sweeping gesture in front of him. Then he walked inside and left us rocking on the porch.

In the afternoon, somebody pulled out a game of Pictionary and Gina and I played with Reggie and two of his friends, a man named Bill and a medicine man named Ted. In the evening, after we were all stuffed on a big dinner of fry bread, corn stew, and sweet apple crisp, a bunch of us gathered in the living room and someone pulled out a water drum. Some of the men began to sing. I watched Reggie look down at the floor

at first. Then, as the music poured out of him, I saw his head lift and his eyes close and I heard that voice, his voice above the others. It was a voice I had never heard before.

4

Shortly after I turned twenty-two, Reggie called me from Syracuse, where he was living. He was plastered. I asked him what he was doing. He said, "A little wine, a little women, a little song." He had married another woman named Pat, one who kept him swimming in alcohol.

"You know I love you," he said. But the word "love" sounded more like luff. "You wouldn't know it to look at me, but I luff my kids. All of them." He laughed a little. "You never met your brother Tim, did you?"

"Not yet." I remembered the letters Reggie had written me when I was in foster care and thought I always knew, even when I was very little, how much that disease had a hold on him, had a hold on his parents, how much it now had on Gina too. I wondered then if my brothers would follow in the same footsteps.

"You will someday. Your brother, Tim, is maybe eleven now." His words came out slurred like he said, eesh mabeh. He talked like this for a long time and I didn't say much but yes and okay and unhuh. It wasn't the first time he had called me drunk. I wondered how many times he had called my mother drunk over the years. Mom told us that when she was leaving him, when we were just babies, he'd come to her apartment and pound on her doors calling for her. Once, she said, when she didn't answer the door, he stood outside her window and sang.

Then the phone went silent and I couldn't tell if he was asleep or if he just needed a break.

"Reg," I said.

"I'm sorry." He paused. I heard a whisper or a gurgle, a sound like maybe he was talking to his new wife Pat or maybe he had laughed. "I'm sorry, I'm not the one you called Dad."

I realized then that he was crying.

"I love you, Dad." I said. That title felt funny coming out of my mouth. Though he was always my father, he had never been my dad. My mother had been with my stepdad, John, since Gina and I were babies. John had been with us all of our lives taking care of us. Drunk as he was, John still went to work every day. He took us to our doctor's

appointments. He stood up for me at school when I was bullied in the fourth grade. He took me to emergency when I fell on the playground and got a concussion. He taught Gina and I how to ride a bicycle. When I went into foster care, John was the one to write me twice a week to check in and let me know what was going on at home. He was the one to give me money to get new shoes or school clothes. Because he ran in the same circles, he was often the one who told us news about Reggie throughout the years.

John had earned the title of Dad. But when Reggie was around, I felt it in my bones. Every time I looked in the mirror, I saw Reggie's face, those lines around my mouth, the heavy cheeks, the black eyes, my skin the color of earth. My body, I knew it was an Indian body, broad-shouldered and strong on top. It didn't matter to me, the stories about him being drunk and violent, about him coming home incoherent. It didn't matter to me that he called me wasted and never remembered afterward. It only mattered that he was my father, beautiful and proud and Indian.

In October, I had just come home from shopping, bags still in my hand as I entered my apartment, when the phone rang. It was my mother calling to say that Reggie had died. It was Columbus Day weekend. He had been in an aneurism-induced coma for a week and no one called to tell us. It was almost seven years after I had run into him in that Trailways station.

Mom, Gina, and I drove to the reservation together for the funeral. Not much had changed on the Rez since the time that my grandparents had died. Even in the early nineties, there were still many houses without potable water. Reggie's wake was held in a small shack owned by my great-uncle. There was a three-seater outhouse just outside the back door. When we arrived, there were people all around the house outside in jeans and T-shirts, drinking coffee from Styrofoam cups. Inside, women were elbow to elbow, making corn soup and ghost bread and baking roasts in the cramped kitchen. Resting near the sink in an awkward spot was a full-size garbage pail full of water for cooking and cleaning.

When the three of us walked in, one of the women pointed to the living room. "He's in there." Mom stayed in the kitchen to offer help and Gina and I walked into the living room.

His casket was wedged in between a wood stove and the wall. Aluminum chairs were lined in rows facing the casket. There were a few

people sitting. Gina and I walked up to his casket and felt the warmth of the wood stove on that early October morning. He wore a bolo tie and a grey suit. His hair fell in black strands over his shoulders. I remembered him saying, "I'm sorry I'm not the one you called Dad." Gina grabbed my hand and I put my head on her shoulder. From the chairs behind us, I heard a voice, "Oh my god, is that...? Sean, Timmy, come meet your sisters."

After the wake and the funeral in the long house, I gave Sean my address and phone number. Months later, I still hadn't heard from him. But he was sixteen, I told myself. I wrote a long letter to their mother, Pat. But I never heard from any of them.

Years later, Gina called me up to tell me she ran into some lady in the laundromat who had known Reggie. The lady gave Gina an old picture from 1976. I was six years old when the picture had been taken. In the picture, our father was with a group of Indians signing some proclamation with our city's mayor. That afternoon, Gina and I cancelled our plans and took the bus downtown to meet at the library and scroll through old microfiche. From a Thanksgiving-week newspaper article, we learned that Reggie had been part of an activist group advocating for Native American Awareness Week in Rochester.

I had been going to the local community college then, and it was around the same time that my anthropology professor asked me if I was related to Reggie. He told me that in the seventies Reggie had been a consultant on a number of projects related to Native American issues. Even later, after I got my own Master's degree and started teaching Native American Literature at the same community college, I learned that Reggie had worked at the local museum developing materials for the Haudenosaunee exhibits.

After Reggie died, Gina and I still went to pow wows. Even when we were dead broke. We'd scrape up the gas money to drive to Salamanca for the day. On Friday night, we'd make a gallon jug of iced tea in my apartment and the two of us would each pull bowls out of the cupboard. I grabbed the Crisco. Gina took out the flour and other dry ingredients. Each in our separate bowls, we made a well with the dry ingredients so that the water could be poured into the middle. Then, stirring, we let the soft powder fall from the sides deliberately into the liquid. Little by little, it formed the pliable dough we would use to make the ghost bread.

I still have that photo and newspaper article, maybe four or five pictures given to me from people who knew him. I have the three handwritten letters from 1986 and 1987. Sometimes I wish I still had that old rocking chair that I dragged around from apartment to apartment for years, repainting and reupholstering, until finally I left it on the curb, or that Aztec blanket that I kept right into grad school only to lose it in a park somewhere, or that calico fabric left in a plastic bag, long gone. Sometimes, he himself feels like an artifact to me, a man who exists in a photograph, who signed a proclamation somewhere with someone long ago, who tried, who really tried to pay tribute to those ancestors long gone. But then, I look in the mirror and I see my skin, just a shade lighter than his, the lines around my mouth deepening with age and my hair spotting grey.

Ariel Gordon

PANDEMIC DIARY, DAY 32

A few months ago, you stood
in the middle of the kitchen & announced:
This is my spoon.

Since then, I have had so many strong
thoughts about your spoon, I'm surprised
it hasn't bent.

I want to kidnap your spoon
just for the way you rub its handle.
It just feels right, you say.

Where is my spoon?

Your spoon is dim & chewed
but I can just make it out:
Community Stainless by Oneida.

The other spoons in our drawer, spurned,
have similar tattoos: Stainless China.
Beacon Stainless Korea.

Stainless Steel Japan. J.A. Henckels 18/10.
IKEA Stainless Steel China. Stainless
Steel IKEA 22422. Korea Imperial Stainless.

Have you seen my spoon?

Today, the cat spent most of the afternoon
dragging a bacon costume
up & down the stairs.

I was supposed to be WFH, but I spent
that time researching derelict
flatware patterns on Pinterest.

I'm not sure who's smarter.
But I learned it isn't Trinity or Satin Gloria.
Not Cimarron or Shelton or even Paul Revere.

I'm certain it's Ridgecrest. ON37. Glossy.

Your spoon had its debut in 1986, the year
the Space Shuttle Challenger exploded.
It was discontinued in 1991.

(That was the year
my parents separated.
My mom kept all the spoons.)

I asked you not to use my spoon.

So many kinds of spoons:
Absinthe. Bouillon. Caviar.
Marrow. Parfait.

Demitasse. Tea.
Soup. Dessert. Table.

Love. Cocaine.
Ear. Maidenhead.

Did you use my spoon?

So many spoon shapes: Featheredge.
Downturned oval. Hexagonal.
But Ridgecrest has a fiddle-ended handle.

It looks like the base of a fiddle.
Or an oar with fins. The base of the handle
is decorated; it's a minimalist bouquet

or a bundle of matches. Cutlery experts concur:
fiddle-handles were first found
in France around 1675.

Did you hide my spoon?

In 1848, a group of Christian Perfectionists
formed a commune near the Oneida Creek in NY.
They believed that every woman

was the wife of every man & every man
was the husband of every woman.
They believed in mutual criticism.

(I like to say that what's mine is mine
& what's yours is mine but
you are faithful to your spoon.)

I want to say the Oneida Community
financed themselves with forks,
but that's too easy.

They ran a silk mill. They had carriage,
horse & cow barns, a fruit canning
house, a foundry

& a printing office, but their first success
was steel traps. By 1880, the founder
had fled to Canada

& Oneida abandoned utopia
for publicly-traded flatware.
Silverware. Cutlery.

I just want my spoon.

So many spoon materials:
Wood. Cattle horn. Ivory tusk.
Bronze. Brass.

Pewter. Sheet tin. Gold.
Solid silver. Silver plate.

Stainless steel. Plastic.
Bamboo. Edible.

WHERE is my spoon?

In WWI, Oneida retooled, producing
ammunition clips, lead-plated gas shells,
combat knives & forceps.

In WWII, army trucks, aircraft survival kits
& jet engine parts. In peacetime, they
abandoned silver-plated cutlery for stainless

because of dishwashers
& convenience. Now, Oneida has not made
a social-distancing spoon.

But local brewers are canning hand sanitizer
& last month, President Trump lied,
bragging that GM & Ford

had already started making ventilators
instead of cars. And then he ordered
them to. I lied too.

I knocked your spoon
off the counter & left it where it fell,
wedged between the dishwasher & the fridge.

Christina Shah

INTERIOR BAR, 1986

imagine boom, echo. your
underground father emerges
into a lean-to town
Ansel Adams' anticlines
bungalows and gasfoodlodging;
concrete cats crawling at their ankles

twin falls, one tavern. that men's den.
gold dust woman on dirty checkerboard
feathers, slipped fins flap
stiff on tanned hips
Eagles' epode warns sailors.

like you can move within a trap.

crew splices near misses with not a chance,
table populated with empties
butts with the wind knocked out of 'em.
he's dreaming she's Pegasus

she's mining time in grams

kari teicher

THIS IS HOW YOU PREPARE A FISH

crush four cloves of garlic with the meat of your palm slip some
under your tongue to see if it is fresh to see
if you can take it
slap the pickerel down, slice through the velour that velvet
flesh with a sewing scissor
drag the bones out with your fingernail, gorge the eye with a knife
    (pop)
it will leak & the juice will cluster around your ankles get into the meat
    of your house
this is normal this is how you prepare a fish

sublime supine serpentine this creature will leave you ensorcelled
your husband will leave you for a gastroentomologist gastroenterologist
    gastroentobogganist
you can't remember but you saw them in the garage against the
toboggan, said ok (got a new toboggan)

rip thyme with your fingers stuff it into the meat of your palm slip some
into the fish into the gills the lips somewhere gnathic
weave the scales into your hair swallow the fish bones then kiss it on the
    mouth
use your tongue

turn the taps fill your house with riverwater make it a swamp
an aquarium cut gills behind your ears carve gills you will need them
how's the garlic how does it taste

Zachery Cooper

HEREDITARY

21

Steel cuffs bite my wrists. The blacktop under me liquifies
to cold. Streetlights shimmer like far quasars.
I'm afraid of my reflection.

I think of my father in this moment. 171 kilometres away,
he's having a drug-induced stroke in Sequim, WA.
Both of us fighting something hereditary.

19

Dry is an odd term for sober. Something alien in me
pulses. I'm waiting for it to burst ribs, show crow's feet.
I haven't made any friends since moving to Canada.
I'm afraid to hurt people.

My father phones me, tells me things haven't changed
much in Sequim. I wonder what he means. That shadow
people still lurk around the property edges? That the toilet
still flushes with algae tinted pond water?
Lord, I hope things have changed.

17

Sharp winds whip the Salish Sea. The ferry finds rhythm
in the waves like an old PlayStation cheat code, down, up,
side-to-side. "Maybe things will be different?" I say
to my sister. Victoria, Canada, skirts indigo waters as the
horizon blushes pomegranate. City lights atop black stone
smears burn through wool fog.

I hold his last words *good luck* & *I love you* closer than
muscle over bone. He must be sitting where I left him: in

that run-down home, drywall loose, carpet patches missing
like checkerboard, wires hanging like Garter snakes, cold
woodstove, the home's last warmth in flux on the Salish Sea.

16

We call him "Doctor." He's a grade higher than me. He
wraps a Nike shoelace round my bicep till the skin turns
red, tells me to clench a fist, pump. Veins shatter in my
forearm like cracked glass. I watch the cream cheese-
whipped clouds out the window, wait for steel's sharp
poke to chisel skin back, enter euphoria.
I don't hang with Jesse much anymore.

Dad works a lot. I think he still does his nursing job, but
to be honest, I'm not sure what he does all day. He checks
in at night, regardless of who I have over. I've noticed
we're more like roommates sharing space than father
& son.

14

I told Vice Principal, Ms. Hudson, I didn't make it to
detention because it just wasn't a good day for me.
What I meant was, my friends & I may get in trouble,
defile desks, no-show to class, or talk in class,
but we share a language that's untranslatable to adult ears. Not
encrypted verse, nor counted knuckle knocks—
they don't ask, I don't ask. We just get it.

Dad has a small single-wide trailer in Port Angeles. He
bought me a drum set despite my lack of pace and rhythm.
Some time ago, he caught my language's words like rogue
bat pings off cave walls. He doesn't cringe when I bash
symbols, splinter sticks, stomp bass pedals till windows
rattle. He doesn't offer therapy, just nods. He gets it.

12

My dad lives on his sailboat in Port Angeles. He lets
my best friend, Jesse, & me stay over, ride our bikes till
PA's streetlights jolt awake, then we return to the marina.
We lay blankets on the boat's deck, watch meteors skip
off the sky's raven pond. Ask each other what we want to
be when we grow up. We do everything together.

The divorce has been hard on Dad. R&R Whiskey bottles
clink when the boat sways with tide. Mom and Dad meet
in a Safeway parking lot in Sequim to exchange me. Dad
& I sling passes while we wait. He knows a bullet pass
means I don't want to talk, lobbed passes that float down
to his calloused palms means he can pry.

10

We lay on his and Mom's bed, my arms round his ribs,
face into his belly. Hold him because he's sad. Don't dry
his tears or repeat, *it's okay, Dad*. Dad never cries. As his
chest shakes from stinted breaths, I think Superman has
fallen. My dad lost his dad.

You're such a good son, he says. The low sun's orange
bleed warms us—Grandpa's balmy hands, one last time.
This pain will scar him. Me too.

7

Daddy tells me to wave goodbye to the house. It's small in
the truck's window—between my fingers. He says we're
leaving misery. Oops, mi-zoor-ee—Missouri. That one.

AC/DC at full blast, my dad navigates the winding
interstate highways to Washington. He doesn't seem sad
about leaving his home—his family, his dad.
My dad's a mountain an earthquake
couldn't crumble.

6

Daddy says he forgot something inside. He leaves me
inside the rumbling truck as it warms. The gear stick
wiggles as the engine rumbles. I'm not supposed to, but I
touch it. I trace the R and countdown 5-4-3-2-1
with my finger. Daddy says the numbers are gears.
He dressed up for Halloween & went to school with me.
I was a skeleton. I don't know what he was.
I think a soldier with a gas mask.
My teacher asked me to draw
my hero: I drew my dad.

Daddy sees the truck roll backwards. He sees me
wave from the passenger seat, as the truck plows
into the neighbour's fence. He slides over the frost-
covered hood like Luke from Dukes of Hazard.
When the truck stops, he flings open the door
with tornado force and asks:
"Are you okay, buddy?"

5
4
3
2
1

When my mother cradled her round belly, feeling my faint pulse, I
wonder if she hoped I'd be just like my father.

Stacey May Fowles

LIKE A BRANCH FROM A TREE IN A STORM

On an unseasonably warm day in February, my body once again refused to do what it was supposed to.

There had been comprehensive plans and desired outcomes. There had been so many books read and procedures studied. There had been supplies acquired, bags diligently packed, and questions asked in stuffy hospital classrooms on weekend afternoons. Methodologies were thoughtfully debated, and doctrines refused. But like so many times before this one, my body resisted. And like so many times before this one, it was threatened with force.

It wasn't my baby's fault. Yes, it was true that when we arrived at the hospital the risks and complications were immediately established. It was true that she was what they called "posterior," and that she had to be turned, and turned, and turned again. It was true that she couldn't make the journey by herself, and that she had to be helped along.

"She's drifting to the left," the smiling nurses and doctors told me, as if she was a small boat out on the sea, a little too far from shore, and pulling slightly off course.

(A boat pulling off course is certainly not to blame for being off course.)

During every one of those twenty-seven hours I was in labour, I knew it was my body's fault. It had always needed to be altered, or fixed, or sacrificed. It had always needed to be better, or more obedient, or something other than what it was. There was no reason to expect that unseasonably warm day in February to be any different.

What do we mean when we say a birth is "difficult"?

Is it difficult if the mother is pried open, or cut open, or torn open? Is it difficult if someone has to intervene, if there is risk, or if there is the possibility of failure? Is it difficult if the mother catches a fleeting, poorly concealed look of concern—or worse, *fear*—on the faces of the nurses and doctors that hover above her heaving body?

Is her body—and the fact that it simply won't do what it's supposed to—the thing that makes the birth difficult? Is the birth difficult because she herself is difficult—a difficult body? Ultimately, is she the one who is to blame?

(This may not actually matter, given she will always blame herself anyway.)

I've come to learn that this word "difficult" is nothing more than a euphemism, a dismissal, a way of not actually talking about the wrongdoings that can transpire in the delivery room. It is a convenient way of not looking directly at each of the things that contribute to what eventually becomes traumatic, the fingers and hands inside you without consent, the injection in your thigh you were not told about, the drugs denied or administered without discussion.

The first time the doctor or nurse doesn't ask permission—and then the second, and then the third, until all those tiny transgressions come to mean there are no boundaries left. How many hours pass before you are just a body on a table, nothing but a line between them and a baby? A line that eventually needs to be crossed?

There is power in the knowledge that sometimes it is easier to submit than protest. That the body will say yes to anything if it is afraid enough.

One afternoon when I was in my mid-twenties, while working administration at a program for people with long-term mental health issues, I locked myself in the office bathroom, suddenly consumed by the very real fear that I was dying.

Weeping and sweating on the bathroom floor, I called a cab and somehow managed to pull myself into it, getting myself home and into bed until the feeling subsided.

That was the first panic attack of what would become many in subsequent months. The initial moment of genuine terror on an office bathroom floor would lead to a suffocating cascade of severe and seemingly insurmountable anxiety symptoms—worries about the future; fear of the outside world; difficulties sleeping, eating, and making even minor connections with other people. Eventually I could no longer go to the theatre or the movies or a concert, couldn't ride in elevators or on subways, and declined invitations to events and parties. I was fatigued, and generally fuzzy-headed, and inexplicably incapable of going beyond the lawn outside my apartment building.

Again my body had betrayed me. It was refusing to do what it was supposed to do. It was to blame.

That period of severe anxiety was a pit I eventually climbed out of, but I was never the same after that. I was now, officially and enduringly, an anxious person. I was genuinely afraid of enclosed spaces, the dentist, Pap tests, failure, and the idea that maybe everyone hated me. Despite therapy, and drugs, and conscious efforts at general wellness, I could never really completely relax, or enjoy the moment, or sleep without the light and television on. People knew to treat me with kid gloves, to ask me if I was okay, to accommodate me—even pity me.

And then, more than a decade later, something changed.

My difficult, anxious, pitied body became a pregnant one.

Postpartum, people love to casually ask how your birth experience was. It took me a long time to say out loud that mine was "you know, *difficult*." It took even longer to say it was traumatic, and even longer still to truly believe that it was. There are so many horror stories to compare your own against, so many ways you're made to feel lucky instead of hurt, or harmed, or in need of help, that maybe for a long time I felt like my experience—and my need—didn't measure up. I often wondered exactly how many things needed to go wrong before I would qualify for concern, before those curious people would also ask me if I was doing okay.

When I told those people what happened during my daughter's birth, when I told them how long it took, the dramatic plot points, the risks and the fears, I would scan their faces for any look that would validate what I was feeling.

The doctors and nurses did such a good job, she's healthy, that's all that matters, I'm so grateful.

What counts as a difficult birth? I would be really asking them as I rattled off the details.

It took a long time to say the thing I needed to say. It took the reassuring words of subsequent care providers. It took more books, conversations, and rejected doctrines. It took a period of healing, talking, and thinking about what it truly means to be invaded, violated, and traumatized.

How bad was it?

That question is a shadow that has followed me most of my life—this terrible, nagging, pervasive query of how bad a thing needs to be for someone to actually care. Is there a number assigned? A scale of severity? Was trauma in the facts or in the reaction to the facts?

How bad was it, really? Bad enough to cry about? To talk about? To write about?

Prove it, the world would always seem to say—show us all your available evidence, your darkest fears and most troubled days. Show us your messy feelings, your visible and invisible scars, and then we will decide. Write them down and put them out there for prying eyes and dirty hands to rummage through, and we will tell you if what you've endured at the hands of others is really bad enough for us to care.

And like so many speaking of their personal traumatic experiences, I was always tempted to say it was "not that bad."

It was simply easier than calling it what it was.

When my baby was no more than a few seconds old, instead of giving her to me, they took her away to a tray on the other side of the delivery room. They needed to look at her lungs, needed to make sure she didn't need to go directly to the NICU, and there wasn't any time to discuss it.

(There had been hours and hours of time to discuss it.)

She was only about eight feet away for approximately six minutes but it felt like oceans of space and time. After four years of trying to conceive, and twenty-seven hours of labour, she was finally here and I hadn't even touched her yet. This beautiful child who for a long and difficult time I thought would never be, who when I was pregnant I could never become

comfortable with the fact she was real, who for months and years to come I would be afraid would simply disappear.

This otherworldly being who had suddenly proven to me that the traumatized body could also be beautiful and powerful—and something more than broken.

And they just took her away.

I remember I asked over and over again if she was okay, my voice hoarse, breathless, and pleading. Even though there were suddenly so many people in the room, it felt like no one would address me directly, as if I suddenly no longer existed. Those six excruciating minutes passed, during which they did more things to my body that I didn't even notice: stitching and prodding, assessing the damage. The only voice that was directed towards me was that of the doctor between my legs, explaining the degree of tearing I had endured.

(She told me it wasn't that bad, and I still long to find her and tell her she lied, that I didn't walk for a week, that I wore adult diapers for more weeks than I'd like to count. I'd like to find her and tell her that on day two I was crumpled on the floor weeping and writhing from pain, that I urinated more than once in the upstairs hallway of my home because I couldn't make it to the bathroom, that when I finally saw my doctor she looked at me in horror and prescribed better painkillers.)

That sudden influx of specialists who fussed over my daughter, who discerned whether or not she should be rushed even further away from me, they drifted in and out of our kindly lit hospital room like ghosts. Despite the intrusion of their bodies, once it was determined she was okay and finally returned to me, it was always just the two of us, so much so that I now barely remember that kind-faced doctor sewing up the tattered pieces of my shattered body.

Instead I remember quite clearly, in that calm moment on the sea of her birth, the realization that I didn't matter anymore—a fact that would play out on multiple levels in the days, weeks, months, and even years to follow.

I was a mother and I didn't matter anymore and to some degree, *I was glad.*

From that moment, I would come to embrace my own irrelevance. I would come to understand that embracing your own irrelevance is the only way to not only enjoy this life, but to survive it.

Something unexpected happened to me after I got pregnant—I started to feel powerful.

I think that power had less to do with the usual clichés of creating and carrying a life and more to do with something far more literal.

My body was getting bigger. I was taking up more space.

So often men—the men who had harmed me, the men who had violated me—told me they admired my frailty. That they enjoyed the way I fit into the spaces that they made with their bodies, with their big lives. That they enjoyed the knowledge they could overpower me.

"You're so small," one once said hungrily as he put his palm on my exposed hip, like he had suddenly and gleefully discovered that he had the ability to crush me beneath it like a tiny bird.

And yet when I was pregnant, while so many were treating me like something vulnerable—kindly surrendering their seats, opening doors and carrying my things—I felt paradoxically aggressive and hulking. Despite my delicate (and increasingly sore and weary) status, I knew I was gathering strength.

The world around me, in all its messiness, noisiness, and hatefulness, became fuzzy and faded from view. Within my own tiny protected sphere, there was a necessity to being present, and more focused than ever. And while pregnancy certainly comes with its own unique set of anxieties, my usual nagging ones were dulled, replaced with clarity of purpose I hadn't experienced before.

Intoxicated by this new feeling of heft and of purpose, there was suddenly a protective calm enveloping me that I hadn't felt in years. I realized that for so much of my life I had been something shrinking and small, pressed beneath the palm of a man's hand.

Now I was sure, and solid, and heavy footed, relishing in growth and momentum.

When my baby was only a few hours old, the nurses dropped me on the floor on the way to the bathroom. My legs were still loose and uncertain, and I landed face down on the floor—stunned, and sore, and apologetic. As I pulled myself up, I knew I just wanted to get back to the bed, to get back to her.

For a long time I wouldn't be able to stand on my own, to walk unaided, to lift my baby out of her bassinet. In the week that followed, when I did manage a few steps I moaned in pain, stitched up and swollen, flesh torn and screaming red. Muscles had been ripped and otherwise

obliterated, and simple body movements became impossible. I wasn't able to change her diaper or hold her while standing up. Breastfeeding was a struggle for the simple reason that I couldn't sit upright for long enough without pain. For a very long time I could only manage to lay in bed, next to my baby, demoralized by my own incapacity.

My body had stubbornly refused and now it was being punished. Instead of opening voluntarily like it was supposed to, it had to be torn and broken, like a branch violently separated from a tree during a storm.

I don't remember sleeping at all in those initial days after my daughter was born. There is a photo I found on my husband's phone over a year later—a misplaced treasure, where I am depicted in defeated, wide open, gaping-mouthed slumber in my hospital bed, but still I have no recollection of ever drifting off.

Instead I remember staring at my daughter's face for four straight hours in the deepest part of that first night, the nurses coming in intermittently to check her vitals and mine, to change the shoddy ziplocked ice pack between my legs, to give me an over-the-counter Tylenol for prescription-level wounds.

That was stasis. A pocket removed where it was only me and her. A bridge we stood on together for a time, in no real hurry to get to the other side. There was no pain despite the very real pain—just the sound of breath and quiet. I vaguely understood that something was terribly wrong with my body, something that would ultimately take years to heal, but confined to that bed with her, still in the stained hospital gown I had worn since the moment I arrived, the parts of me that had been sacrificed didn't matter.

I drank my room temperature beef broth, and took my useless Tylenol, and I watched her sleep, each tiny breath proof that we had, in some otherworldly miracle, both made it here to this dimly-lit place together.

After so much loss, and waiting, and prayer, we had made it.

Once we were finally home, a lactation consultant was called to help solve my breastfeeding issues. My daughter was losing weight, and though I initially protested, exhausted by the very idea of another person touching my body, I was desperate enough to let a stranger into our house during such a vulnerable time.

I remember the consultant had long strawberry blonde hair parted down the middle, and a warm, round, open face. I told her what had

happened during my daughter's birth, how long it took, the dramatic plot points, the risks and the fears, and I scanned her face for any look that would validate what I was feeling.

The doctors and nurses did such a good job, she's healthy, that's all that matters, I'm so grateful.

What counts as a difficult birth? I was asking as I rattled off details.

I couldn't tell you her name, but as she sat next to me in our bed I involuntarily wept in her arms. She held me there, knowing my already-clouded mind was filled up with the messy, unhelpful buzz of unsolicited advice and Googled expertise, of what I thought was supposed to happen and what actually happened.

And though I remember so little from that period, I do remember something that lactation consultant said to me while I was crying in her arms, something that applied to the entire experience of having a child.

"You have to let go of everything you know," she said.

I understood then, in my shattered state, that my body had surrendered in a new way. It didn't betray me. It had new power. It gave up everything just to get this baby into the world.

I had embraced my own irrelevance instead of having it dictated to me.

What happens to a violated body when it gives birth? Is it reminded or is it transformed? Is it both?

Despite the numerous professionals who assured me how normal everything was, there was nothing about the experience of my daughter's birth that felt that way. "Normal" is such a hideous word, and one I have come to hate. The "normal" I experienced was a long period of very difficult time when I was more than sure I would never feel okay again. When I was terrified that the damage was irrevocable, and even more terrified by the fact that I couldn't be the mother I wanted to be as a result.

Twenty-seven hours of labour and four hours of pushing an overdue posterior baby. A threatened C-section when there wasn't progress. (It was me that wasn't progressing—it was always me.) Talk of suction and talk of forceps. The searing pain of pitocin-stimulated delivery. The beeping monitors, the flashes of concern on their faces, and the sheer strength of my fear pushing her out of the peril of my body. (It was always the peril of my body.)

It was a traumatic birth. I know that now. But I did watch *Jurassic World* in the early hours of labour. I did request Creedence Clearwater Revival to play in the delivery room. ("Bad Moon Rising" is now referred to by my daughter as "Mommy's song.") There was laughter, and joy, and emotions beyond words. There was power.

Maybe, in the world we have created, all births are in part traumatic. The autonomy of the mother has been stolen by the convenience of the doctor. The robustness of care has been budgeted away, to the point where I had to order in my own meal and send my husband for antacids and adult diapers. The necessary recovery has been cut short by economy. The monumental transition has been disrupted by unrealistic expectations and painfully shoehorned into everyday life. No longer can we lavish in the splendour of what we have created—instead we must bounce back quickly, not only with our "before and after" bodies, but with our work, our relationships, and our lives. We cannot acknowledge this spectacular change, this spectacular transformation, but instead are forced to hide it from the world.

For years my body and life were defined solely by trauma. It was a story written by men and about what they did to me, a story I had to recite, in private and in public, over and over again in the hope of healing, in the hope of being heard, often feeling worse off after I did. It's a story I shared only to feel further invaded. It was a story that made me, a story I had to tell in tiny windowless offices to professionals who promised a cure for my worry, my misery, my suffering. It was a story I had to prove, the only one that ever felt worth anything even though it left me feeling worthless.

"I got hurt, and then I got really sick, and then I mostly got better," was the story I told. It was written in my skin, in my flesh, in my bone. It followed me everywhere I went, unrelenting, a script on repeat.

I don't have to tell it anymore.

My daughter changed my body's story. She taught me that my body was capable of doing something beyond what others wanted it to do, how it could exist in a place beyond suffering, and beyond the seemingly endless recovery from that suffering. She taught me that my body existed for purposes other than being used, or violated, or discarded. That it didn't need to simply be begrudgingly tolerated or mostly ignored.

My daughter taught me to live inside my body again, to be present and feel whole, even with all of the pain her entrance into the world brought. She taught me to lean into discomfort in the aid of discarding it.

She taught me my body was more than troubled days and messy feelings, more than scars and trauma, more than a bird beneath someone's palm. More than admired frailty, fitting into someone else's spaces, and fears gathered up while weeping on the bathroom floor.

Even through being broken like a branch off a tree in a storm, she taught me how capable I truly was of the regrowth that was to come.

Stephanie Jean

CONCH

because I wanted to shout it at the top of a century

i started sewing

bottles of dew in my breasts

because I believed there were untravelled smiles in your mouth

i bloomed

with carcinogenic certainty

because you believed in slow days and prudish roses

i wore whiskey

on my neck and knees

because I wanted to star in a furnace of curls

i caught moons of hurls

on a windy slide

Colin Morton

TINNITUS

I read John Cage and, in a silent room,
listened to the low thrum of blood in my veins,
the hiss of nerves in my head.
Proprioception I called it, after Olson.

For years I believed what I heard
was the microbiome of my inner ear –
cells living out their lives in there –
and I wondered about this thing called me.

How much of *me* is a population
of microbes doing I don't know what
to or for me, living and dying
as I say these words?

Now I accent the first syllable,
call it tinnitus, as if that's an explanation.
I told the doctor, I guess there's nothing I can do.
You can complain, he said.

Leanne Toshiko Simpson

(RE)VISITING HOURS ARE OVER

The first rule of psych ward is this—always bring snacks. I hustle through ER doors snapping shut with shark-jaw magnificence, clenching your paper bag stuffed with fast food freedom like it might be the last non-regulated meal we'll ever swallow. Want to see a party trick? I always lift my tongue when asked.

At the intake desk, my new friend Jason offers to escort me to your room. We link arms and stroll down sterile hallways, ignoring the nurses' hoots behind us. He narrates our walk like I've never scratched my name into the underside of the cafeteria table, never counted those white ceiling tiles to fall asleep.

I don't remember how to tell him I belong here—my tongue probes fissures in language as he asks me why I've come, when he can leave this place, if I have a sister. Here, I never have all the answers, but I've learned to live and breathe *yes, and*:

> *Yes, and* she tells the best stories you've ever heard. You always feel like you're right there, even when you're miles away. Sometimes, I still feel further than I am, but I think that's why I'm always so happy to come home.
>
> *Yes, and* I'm sorry your wife is Lucifer. I understand what it's like to love someone who has hurt you. Today, I am worried that my capacity to hurt outweighs anything else I could ever accomplish. Can you stay with me? Let's play Scrabble. I love to hold words in my hands.
>
> *Yes, and* I think our worlds can exist side by side for longer than this walk. I just wish I could tune into your radio like you can tune into mine—I bet your music is beautiful.

We count numbered doors together until there's nowhere else to go. Jason knocks abruptly, then turns around and doesn't look back. I can hear him humming all the way to the television room.

The first time I met you, they had taken all your clothes. This time is not different. I melt into your hospital gown when we hug. We only break apart to celebrate your single room, your moonlit window with a parking lot view. I haul lifelines out of my weathered tote—a nineties nostalgia novel, a card game to share, a notebook to shelter moments of joy. Seven years later, that's what I choose to remember.

There's no small talk here. No time for the weather when you're not allowed outside (just a few more days, you remind me). We fall into a shared language of metaphors—your burst of mania as lightning, so hard to look away. The comedown more sustained, a lethargic wallow into empty. Here, we hold hands and trust that we can outwait ourselves.

Your voice is molasses on Effexor. I fill in the gaps with tomorrows—warm coffee verging on parted lips, the familiar contours of the Bluffs, the next time my pendulum swings. But your gaze flickers towards the clock, predicts rupture before the speaker in your ceiling tile crackles awake.

The most important rule of psych ward is the return. I will come here again—to visit you, to teach writing, to seek refuge from this rhythm we share—and I will refuse to hold our bodies in contempt of living. Before I leave, you remind me how we are the lucky ones, and I agree.

How lucky we are to wade through this wreckage of ordinary, to hum louder than the wails of the siren.

Caragana Ennis

A BIRD-SHAPED HOLE IN HISTORY

I read every history book I can find. Most of them contradict each other and when they agree I still don't trust them. They all tell the same story again and again, a long angry line. I don't buy them or borrow them I just read them right there on the floor between the shelves and people can step over me if they want. Stories are the most interesting when they pretend to be new, when they put on a hat and make speeches. Gael lives in my building but I've never seen him inside, I always see him on the steps. Sometimes I think they're starting to take his shape. Really they'd be crumbling like that whether he was there or not. When I first saw him I wanted to kill him because I wanted to kill every man I ever saw especially if I had to get past them like that, walking where they could grab my ankles. Now I don't feel that way so much, now I know he has three little siblings and he takes care of them in his apartment upstairs and he needs breaks a lot. Sometimes he has the little one with him, the one that still fits in his lap. I came home one day and said let's paint the steps. He looked up at me with this fuzz behind his eyes. What? I could see anger just underneath all the time, I see it in almost every man. It's on every page of every history book I read. Sometimes I put my hand on the page and go shh shhhh shhhhhhhh. Men have no idea how good gentleness feels when it comes from you instead of from someone else. To lay down inside yourself and be gentle to the ground. But I wanted to paint the steps and Gael was on them so I invited him. I went upstairs and got paint while he was still deciding and when I got back he was standing up looking at the steps. What should we paint? I told him he could paint whatever he wanted but I was going to paint birds. He said he'd help me with the birds. I never find anything about birds in the history books and I think that's a mistake on the part of history. Birds mind their own business, they never start anything bad, they work together, they dive towards the earth and live, they feed their children from their own mouths, and they've been doing it the whole time we've been doing everything else. Their lives go in circles, not lines, not like history. It's a bird's world at the core, that's what I think. I think their absence from the history books says a lot, like it's a bird-shaped hole and the hole is all I

see. I wish I could be an absence like that but I'm stuck just like every human is. I told Gael this and he said he liked flamingos. I don't know if he really got the point. But he painted flamingos and I painted every other kind of bird. Sparrows, finches, robins, ravens, kingfishers, loons, hummingbirds, nightingales, magpies, all of them. People are going to feel like they're walking in the sky, Gael said. I didn't point out that his flamingos weren't flying. They were standing there on the ground, but only with one foot. Like they could only keep half of themselves anywhere. I thought maybe he related to that. I told him about the way birds regurgitate their food to feed their babies from their own mouths. He kind of laughed at his paintbrush and said yeah, I think we do that too. I didn't think we shared anything in common with birds so I asked him to explain. He said we chew what we give our children first, even if it's not food. We take every hurt meant for them and we eat it instead, then we give it back to them as something else. I told him that was incredibly wise, but it's not what birds do. Birds don't know about metaphor. I think he was kind of annoyed by that, maybe he hadn't been so honest with someone in a long time. I felt kind of bad, while we painted in silence. It made me look at myself. The way I was talking with this history-book voice like my words were just straight lines that never came back to me. So I told him about how some kinds of birds fly in flocks. He said he knew that and I said I wasn't finished. I said that some birds fly in flocks and sometimes those flocks make the shape of one giant bird in the air. So maybe birds do know about metaphor, maybe I was wrong. Maybe they use it to show themselves instead of to conceal themselves. Themselves bigger than themselves. Gael stayed silent still but it was a gentler silence that was all his own so I let him keep it. I see his little siblings on those stairs now sometimes. They point out Gael's flamingos when they go by. One foot on the step below and one lifting. Starting at the ground and then up, up, up. I sit on the stairs and watch them, they can step over me if they want.

Tolu Oloruntoba

ARIADNE SPEAKS

after Clint Smith

Poet, you look like you're familiar with the rudiments of gutting.
But remember the rumen, the honeycomb, the psalterium, the maw:

the procession of minotaur stomachs digesting heroes of the tribute.
Take this gyre of blood, then, in a spool encompassing the truncheon;

take this sword in the thigh-high float of a water compass; take this
mother beguiling a vader. You look like you've learned the doctrines

of beeswax, sealing each room's guile, wound into each wound.
You'll want to be indigestible, unnavigable, finding a way back here.

Fríða Ísberg
translated by Larissa Kyzer

PROFILE

Sesselía looked unusually good today. She bent over the sink, put a tiny bit of soap on her index finger, and sniffed. No, too strong a scent. A sweet apple scent. She rubbed her hands under the water for a minute more while she turned her head from side to side and alternated between smiling and not smiling. A few locks of hair fell out of her bun. Her white sweater brought out the contrast between her eyes and hair and skin. The bathroom had good light. The mirror was square and there was a little lamp in each corner, like a makeup room in a theatre. She shook her hands over the sink and stepped away from the mirror, reassuring herself that everything was okay. Marvelled again at how good she looked today. Hesitated with her hand on the doorknob. Pulled her phone out of her pocket and looked at herself. The light was perfect for selfies.

She hadn't meant to take so long. As she walked back to the table, she realized that they probably thought she'd been pooping. They were laid-back, their legs crossed at an angle, relaxed, elegant. Sesselía stood

up straight and held her head a bit higher. The table was covered with mimosas in champagne glasses and half-finished cups of coffee after a morning meeting that had been rescheduled for the weekend.

It was like a still life of success. When she'd been a waitress, she'd always lingered at tables like this. And now, she was sitting at one.

She sat in her chair and looked at her phone under the table. Saw that six people had liked her picture in two minutes. That was good. You could always tell in the first fifteen minutes whether a photo would do well or not. If there were more likes than minutes—that was the measure. It had also been good timing for a new profile. It wasn't even noon yet. The weekend. People had nothing better to do than check Facebook. The photo would hang there all day, like wet laundry collecting sunshine.

She put her phone in her pocket and decided not to look at it again for two hours. It was part of her therapy. To try and forget when she'd posted something and let time pass. Then she'd have something to look forward to.

The discussion at the table was no longer about work; the meeting was over. She tried to join the conversation. They were talking about some industry so-and-so she didn't know and before long, she'd started people-watching out the window. One by one, people strolled past with bags from this shop or that. The post-Christmas sales were starting.

She didn't want to leave, but she had to get keys to some friends of her parents before one. The friends, a couple, were going to her family's cabin for a vacation. It was twelve-thirty. Her new colleagues had ordered another round of mimosas and didn't look like they were going anywhere. It was a perfect opportunity to get to know them better. Break the ice. "Will you all be here for a while, do you think?" she asked the woman next to her, Margrét Mía, who went by Magga. She'd known who Magga was since she was a teenager. Admired her and her designs from afar.

"What do people think? We'll be here for a while longer, right?" Magga nodded encouragingly as she answered. "Yeah—just drop us a line when you're done."

Sesselía put on her new green coat. It was the most expensive piece of clothing she'd ever bought for herself. "I'll be in touch later," she said to no one in particular and walked toward the bar to pay, but then realized that the company would pick up the bill. She walked back past the table, feeling embarrassed.

"Thanks for coming on such short notice, Sesselía," called her boss.

"No problem," she answered, smiled again and waved before heading out. She had to admit that she hadn't anticipated how differently people would pronounce her name when she changed the way she spelled it: Sesselía, with an 'i,' instead of Sesselja, with a 'j.' She just thought it looked better on paper. But now people stressed the 'Sesse.' Sesse-lía. When she spelled it Sesselja, people pronounced it Sess-elja. It flowed better then. She was having a hard time getting used to it, although now at least she didn't have to share her name with .1 percent of the nation. Now, she was one of only thirteen people in Iceland with her name, instead of one of 310.

But, of course, her boss didn't know any of this. He met her as Sesselía.

She was coming up on Hallgrímskirkja. Her parents' friends lived in a small neighborhood just ten minutes or so from the church. It was rather overcast, but her steps were light. It had been a wonderful morning. She went back over the conversations in her head and smiled a little at the jokes. Gazes followed her as she walked up Skólavörðustígur and tourists watched her as she passed. Her coat was perfect, her scarf was perfect, her bun. She smiled affably at them. "I am a fashion designer in Reykjavík," she thought to herself. She'd gotten eggs benedict and shared pancakes with Magga. She still couldn't be funny around Magga—had gotten stuck on smiling. Just smiling as wide as she could and being careful to laugh in all the right places. Magga wasn't a threatening woman. She wasn't one of those people who only wanted peers for friends and kept you at a distance if it seemed like you looked up to them. Sesselía really felt like Magga wanted to give her a chance.

Sesselía stopped short and looked back. She'd forgotten to say thank you. She'd just walked out and said, "No problem." Oh no. Nonononono. She'd have to make a point of it when she saw them again later: *"I just swept out of here earlier and didn't even think to say thank you. So: thanks!"*

Out of habit, she pulled her phone out of her pocket and opened Facebook. Her picture had gotten forty-four likes in half an hour. Eight of them loves. Okay. Only so-so. She strolled up the street and scrolled slowly down the list of people who'd liked it. It was a decent blend of friends and relatives who always liked, acquaintances who sometimes liked, and a random mix of people who hardly ever liked. Those were the best likes. A couple of those were from guys she'd been crushing on. A few textile and fashion designers who Sesselía thought were cool and looked up to. Her BA advisor, who was a B-list celebrity at least, commented: *"Nice color palette."*

That made her feel a little better, although technically, she'd cheated on the whole two-hour plan. Her therapist didn't need to know that. She put her phone back into her pocket, promised herself not to look at it until another two hours had passed, and then kept thinking about how she could show her gratitude without seeming fawning or sycophantic.

It had been nice of them to invite her to the meeting. She hadn't needed to be there. They'd probably wanted to welcome her to the team.

And yet, it *had* been a work meeting. She'd definitely gone beyond the call. She probably didn't have to say thank you for anything. Industry people don't say thank you for a work meeting. They just say bye.

Her parents' friends lived in a bright apartment in the upscale neighborhood of Norðurmýri. There were two suitcases, a few full grocery bags, and a guitar case in the vestibule. Of all her parents' friends, they were her favorite—middle-aged artists who had their fingers on the pulse, good-looking and smart. Sesselía loved going to their place for coffee. They asked her about her new job and congratulated her on how well her graduation line had done since last spring. They talked about the Icelandic fashion world and she managed to get across how lucky (talented) she was to get this job without seeming too conceited.

Still, after a forty-five-minute chat, she was fidgety and wanted to get back into mimosa mode with her colleagues. She signalled that she needed to go by looking at her wristwatch twice in a short period of time. Then she sighed, "This was so lovely," gave them the keys, and explained how to open the electric gate at the turn-off to the cabin. She helped them carry all their stuff out to the car, so they'd only have to make one trip. They offered her a ride back to her parents' house in the suburbs, but she declined, saying she was meeting people downtown.

Her colleagues must still be in the same place. She waved to her parents' friends as they drove past. Regretted not getting a ride back up to Hallgrímskirkja. It was close to two.

The picture had only gotten sixty-one likes.

"What's going on?" she muttered. This wasn't what she was used to. Sixty-one likes in ninety minutes? Most of her profile pictures had over two hundred. On a good day, a selfie would get close to three hundred.

This one wasn't going to make it over 120.

She could change it right now—go back to her old profile picture, which had 270 likes—but she didn't want to look like a person who took likes too seriously. It was cold outside, and she didn't have gloves on. She

scrolled through the likes again to see who she had gotten new ones from. *Margrét Mía liked your picture.* She stepped onto the street and someone honked at her. Sesselía stopped and looked up from her phone. The car was a long way off. She would have easily made it across. Driving the car was an old woman who threw her hands up in frustration before turning onto a side street. Sesselía watched the car pass and decided not to let this get on her nerves. She jogged across the street and then looked back at her phone.

It was dead.

"No!" she said.

There had still been 25 percent left on the battery. She should have known. Maybe she could charge it when she got someplace warm.

Her colleagues had left the restaurant. Their tables had been pulled apart and there was a tourist couple sitting at one of them. She tried to warm her phone up by rubbing it between her palms. After plugging away for two minutes, it was lukewarm. She tried to turn it on. Nothing happened. She stood in the entrance and asked the waiter about a charger. He was friendly and scurried over to the bar to see if they had the right kind. He asked his coworker who pointed to a table out in the seating area.

"We have one, but it's in use, unfortunately," he said with an apologetic frown. "If you'd like to wait, you can be next, of course. But I can't promise when that will be."

"No, no problem. I'll figure something out," answered Sesselía, thanking him for his help. She tried to think of where they could have gone. It wouldn't surprise her if they were at Hótel Holt. She ambled over there and could feel by the moisture in the air that it would start raining soon.

They weren't at Holt. She checked the bar on Klapparstígur and all the bars and restaurants around there. Then she walked down Laugavegur and stuck her head in anywhere that looked cozy. No colleagues anywhere. She went to the two upstairs bars on Bankastræti and Smiðjustígur, to the bar across the street, and the one on Hverfisgata. Her feet were tired in her high heels. She decided to do one circuit around Austurstræti and then sit down somewhere if she didn't find them.

She didn't find them. They weren't in the bars on the squares at Austurvöllur or Ingólfstorg. It started to rain.

Sesselía decided to give up and wandered into the Eymundsson bookstore on Austurstræti. She no longer felt like she was a beautiful

fashion designer in Reykjavík, but rather a raggedy stuffed animal. She ordered a Sara Bernhardt cookie and a cup of coffee, and asked whether the café loaned out chargers, which they didn't. She chose a few fashion magazines to browse and flopped into a chair by the window on the fourth floor.

She was smarting. She'd been sure she'd find them. Laughing.

She imagined her next therapy session, what her therapist would have to say. She'd understand her circumstances and motivation, but she'd remind Sesselía that she didn't have to go to everything, to always be invited, loved by everyone. It was okay to take the bus home after having a good brunch.

"Sometimes, you can put a period at the end of the sentence," she once said. "Not just a comma, and a comma, and a comma."

Yes. She was right. Sesselía would take the next bus home.

Her therapist was a well-dressed woman around forty, unflappable and observant, had two girls around high school-age. Sesselía had gone to her every two weeks for three months now. During the first session, they talked about stress in the fashion world and Sesselía told her about her anxiety, about how she was anxious about everything—talking to strangers, going to events, openings, fashion shows. She wanted to curl up in bed and give up. Miserably watch garbage movies and fall asleep early, instead of running out the door. She didn't believe she could become a big name in the fashion industry because she wasn't good at networking and when she did try to mingle at such events, she always felt awful afterwards. Obsessed over the single stupid answer she'd given, the stupid way she laughed; she'd hit herself on the forehead afterwards and close her eyes, try not to think about it, but the fact was, she was in debt—she had to restore her image, show a better side of herself next time. Be more interesting, funnier, prettier.

Then the therapist had asked her about her social media usage, which Sesselía had found unnecessary. She wasn't a teenager. She was a grown woman. She was well aware of the gloss the internet put on everything. Nevertheless, her therapist wanted to know what social media she was on and how much time she spent on it every day. Did she make a point of posting things, of liking and commenting?

It surprised her that she had to force herself to tell the truth. Her first reaction was to lie. She started to say that she was definitely not the type who spent a lot of time on her phone.

Then the cost of these sessions flitted through her head. 14,000 krónur.

No, so actually, if she were being honest, then she checked her phone every twenty minutes. Yes. At the very least. It was the first thing she did when she woke up and the last thing she did before she fell asleep. Her therapist asked her to divide her internet usage into work and entertainment and asked her to try and ration her usage for one week. She could get on her phone once an hour for anything work-related, but only twice a day for anything that fell under entertainment.

A week later, her therapist asked Sesselía how it had gone.

"I feel like a marine mammal who lives deep in the ocean but still has to come up to the surface to breathe," said Sesselía. "The internet is like oxygen. I don't like feeling so unsettled. To not be able to check Facebook. It felt like I was drowning sometimes."

She'd also noticed that when she didn't post anything on the internet and wasn't getting any reactions, she felt like she didn't exist.

She'd been so surprised that she tried to think of a way for her to get rid of her smart phone, but she kept coming back to the conclusion that she couldn't do it because that's where her network was. Her graduation line had over seven thousand followers on Instagram. That was the whole reason she got her new job. She was terrible at networking, except online.

Her therapist nodded as she spoke and congratulated her for possessing such insight about herself. She said she'd heard this all before and that she found it to be especially common among intelligent young women (she emphasized *intelligent*).

"Self-awareness is closely related to social intelligence and empathy," said the therapist. "And I think that anxiety is closely related to this self-awareness. I see it in my girls, and it's hard for me to not connect it to the selfie epidemic. They post pictures of themselves on Instagram and get maybe four, five hundred likes for each picture, which slowly but surely teaches them that a girl's chief virtue is being beautiful, but they don't learn to value the rest. Their communication skills, humor, or opinions. And every year, they cultivate those qualities less, but the social media more.

"You are an extremely intelligent young woman," added the therapist then, smiling—almost as if she were proud of Sesselía. "Sometimes, you just have to say those kinds of things to yourself. When you feel insecure, remind yourself what you genuinely are. Without the likes and the social media. A smart, funny, interesting young woman."

Sesselía's parents were loaning her the money for the sessions. She still owed them from her graduation show, which is why she hadn't moved out yet. She looked at her watch and saw that the next bus would be leaving in four minutes. She stuck the last bite of cookie in her mouth and put her nice coat back on.

The bus came right away. When she stepped onto it, she realized she couldn't show her bus pass because it was on the app on her phone. She smiled as widely as she could.

"Um, I'm sorry. I have a monthly pass, but my phone died; it doesn't have any battery."

The bus driver shook his head and sent her back out into the rain.

She slunk back to the convenience store around the corner to buy a bus ticket. "You are a fashion designer in Reykjavík. Remember that, Sesselja. Sesselía," she said to herself as she trudged through the horizonal rain. Then she went back to the bus shelter, wet and disheveled. The shelter was full of middle-aged suburbanites who wouldn't normally take the bus. She squeezed in behind a couple who most definitely owned two cars and a jacuzzi. She watched them furtively, saw that they both had a few shopping bags from some of the nicer shops downtown. Next to her stood a woman in a long, shearling coat and fur hat. Everyone was silent, even though there were around ten people in the shelter. The minutes plodded by.

It had been a long time since she'd been entirely without entertainment. No music in her ears, no podcast, no phone.

The January sales had been so tempting this year. She'd seen a pair of Chie Mihara shoes in her size that had been marked down 60 percent. But she'd just bought herself this green coat and the less she spent, the sooner she'd be able to move out of her parents' house.

The middle-aged woman in front of her said something to her husband.

She heard raucous laughter and a small group of American tourists formed in front of the bus stop. "There—there's the map," said a woman with a southern accent. They plowed into the shelter towards the map that showed the bus routes.

"Now, wait a sec, where are we?" the man asked the woman. Sesselía counted the heads. There were six. Two middle-aged couples and two young women around twenty. Six ski jackets. Six beanies with *pom-poms* on them. The Americans looked at the woman in the shearling coat who was standing in front of the route map, said excuse me, and then pushed

further into the shelter. Shearling Coat Lady moved closer to Sesselía, who stepped forward a little, closer to the Icelandic couple.

"Here's number fourteen," said the man, tracing the route with his index finger out to Grandi, at the western end of the line. "Yep, we're on the right side of the street," he said then.

The woman: "Are you sure?"

They peered out at the street, then at the route map, then out at the street. Sesselía felt uneasy. If they wanted to go out to Grandi, they were on the wrong side of the street.

"Excuse me," she said in English. "Are you going up there?" She pointed to the top right corner of the map.

"Oh, no no no," said the woman. "We're going out to where the park and pool are."

Sesselía was conscious that the Icelandic couple had started listening to their conversation.

"I see. Then you are on the right side," she said, forcing a smile. She immediately regretted interfering. Shouldn't have interfered. Shouldn't have said anything at all.

"That is so nice of you," said one of the girls. A wave of agreement went through the group.

"How do you say this? It starts with an L," asked the woman and smiled. "I can't pronounce it."

"Yes. Laugardagslaug," said Sesselía.

"Oh," said the woman.

"Saturday Pool," she added.

"No, I think it's open every day," said the woman, looking at her husband inquiringly.

"That is what it's *called*," said Sesselía, having trouble concealing her impatience now. "Saturday Pool."

"That's the name, honey," said the man who'd stopped looking at the map and smiled at Sesselía.

"Oh, I understand," said the woman, laughing loudly.

The Icelandic woman in front of her started to smile. Her husband elbowed her. The Fourteen came flying around the corner.

"There is your bus," said Sesselía, nodding toward the street. They drenched her in thanks before edging out of the shelter. Shearling Coat Lady looked down and smiled to herself, too. Then she looked up and Sesselía shot her a look meant to say: *Tourists.*

Laugardagslaug. The word clung to her tongue like a bad taste. There was something off about it. Laugardagslaug. Saturday Pool? With a G? Where had she even gotten that? The Six arrived and she hid her face in her hands when she realized her mistake. Walked out of the shelter and straight into the bus, to the very back row, next to the window. It was Laugardalslaug. A word she'd probably said a thousand times. Laugardalslaug. With an L. The pool in Laugardalur Valley. She automatically pulled her phone out of her pocket and pressed the home button, but of course it was dead. Anxiety sent a current of pins and needles down her arms. The bus pulled away from the stop. She imagined that the Shearling Coat Lady was a famous theatre critic who would later realize who Sesselía was and repeat all over town what that little ninny once said in the bus shelter on Lækjargata.

Again, she imagined her coworkers in a fancy cocktail bar, laughing and having a good time, impeccably dressed.

She should have been with them. Someone would have finally seen her in their company. She imagined having a heart-to-heart with Magga and then the next weekend, Magga would invite her over for a drink at her place. And then she imagined Magga checking Facebook and seeing that Sesselía's new profile picture had only gotten a hundred likes. There was no way it had gotten over a hundred now, given the total before. She couldn't wait to get home and delete it.

Laugardagslaug.

She tried to shake the word out of her head. Saw herself reflected in the window.

"I am a fashion designer in Reykjavík," she said. "I'm beautiful and smart and fun. I am a fashion designer in Reykjavík. I am a fashion designer in Reykjavík."

Geoffrey Morrison

CONFINED SPACE RESCUE

When the air goes out, you will have
seconds. Avoid self-recrimination.

The blood bank said "Ten!" and covered me
in cold towels. The needle came out laughing.

The artillerists have that thing where
they cough and fart at the same time.

Radical parataxis as praxis. Bad praxis.
Bad praxis as good praxis. *Requiescat in pace*.

I'm remembering the time I fell through
my pelvic floor in a rhinestone wingsuit.

I won't talk like they want it, ossify my terrible
days for your joy. You thought this was *Donahue?*

At my utmost rococo I was counting changes
like a pseudo-lutenist, inducing ruination.

I was drawn to ancient
poems of tubercular death.

Appeals to the four humours:
gunk in the punctured quincunx.

I was flash historiography, lattice glass in the
Pan-American hand. I was wrong.

Many well-known people have that thing.
It's not *Donahue*.

Imagine my voice in a darkened room. It's drama
class. I'm doing everything to not tell what hurts.

Emma DePanise

OCTOPUS AS APPARENT MOTION

An octopus shivers a shadow to stir
its prey and biologists call the display *passing*
cloud. Octopus cyanea as in big blue

octopus as in big blue sky as in a cloud-shadow
coloring trees a darker green as in the octopus is
deepening, turning itself

off like a light. Oh shapeshifting
chromatophores, how your pigmented pixels

huddle close enough to speak motion.
Oh darling, all the colors

the octopus turns for you while dreaming. Oh darling,
what does an octopus know of clouds?

Brent Cassan

STARFIELD WEST

Eaters of cyborgs and mongrel soup would
write a calculus for topographies of snow, a sky-
spent raven, canyon-falling, its feathers to adorn
my glassy throat, pure ice cream and lemon
meringue in a freeze-frame for this nonchalant

afternoon.

*

One botched summer in this prime patch of
garden-bloom, marigolds wind-waving above
their rocky gestalt, bored with their Rhodian
selves, the universe unable to decide where they fit
best, flowers tied up in surly immobility,
impassible horrors—a cyborg's mechanical
fingers stabbing then adoring the pure beauty of
petal & deep root,

star-cold sky.

Maryam Gowralli

IBID, II: ANCESTRAL HOTLINE

>>Hello, you've reached the place that you've forgot to call in an epoch, a second, an eon, an hour, an era, a decade right now. What memories would you like to revisit?<<

Press one to connect with a humanoid womb, where an anus is formed first. Would you like to be an asshole?

Press two to feel a carriage go down a steep hill.

Press three if you are of separate nations and tribes, and have not yet known one another. Initiate the exact moment of meeting.

Press four to be bit by your first crab.

Press five to run to the Temple in the Sea, broken bottles beneath Trinidadian white sands.

Press six if Genghis Khan is your daddy.

Press seven to smell shoe shiner.

Press eight to help grandma. She left her dentures on her TV stand.

Press nine to go to the eleventh best food fair in all of Alberta.

Press ten to RSVP for Paleolithic "Big Mama" pottery classes.

Eliamani Ismail

OHIO

It is my third time racing to the living room with Tata Bintou's cup of tea. It's all I can do to balance the cup between three fingertips, and even so, the tea is so hot I partly fear my fingerprints will unravel. On my last attempt, Tata Bintou had pressed the back of her hand to the cup and declared, without breaking from my mother's conversation, that it was still too cold. Go back and make it hotter. My eyes had rolled, stopping at her daughter, Kadiatou, silent on the adjacent couch. On the dash back to the stove the tea had splashed out, singeing my bare feet. I fell, landing with the entire cup's contents inches from my face. "Eh Allah!" Tata Bintou called to my thud. "Que s'est-il passe?"

"Fuck you." I had breathed into bespattered wood panels, loud enough for no one to hear except the puddle, which howled back hot steam in agreement.

On this third attempt, the ache in my knee slows my stride. "Ada-o! Depeche-toi!" My mother calls in her melodic Malian French, and I wish she hadn't. Her voice is shrill and sweet. The kind reserved for kindergarten classrooms during Christmastide. I sometimes wonder how

she made it four decades in the States with a voice in which commands never sound sincere. It is always too soft, too delicate, too weak, and something about its attempt to sate Tata's impatience makes my jaw flex.

The wood floor of the corridor finally unfolds into the square living room at the start of our three-story row house. Pistachio paint with brown sofas and geometric wall mirrors. The product of our tireless thrifting throughout Southeast DC; our proudest room. We spent months planning the retro-style design. Some of our inspirations were old Kodak photos Mom had taken of the Congressmen's houses she cleaned when she first arrived. She left the choice of carpet to me and I decided on a multi-colored glitch shag rug. I'd spent hours in this room making sense of my mother's obsession with the seventies. I sometimes tease her on it. I sometimes cry, imagining the distress and desire she felt as a recent asylee cleaning identical living rooms for spoiled society.

We keep the room spotless. Me, because it seems to make her happy. Her, perhaps most of all, for this almost annual arrival of "relatives." Seeing it this way, cluttered with a dozen knockoff designer suitcases, never fails to disappoint me.

I am not past the first cluster of their luggage before Tata puts her hand out in anticipation. She is wearing a deep red bazin with yellow box designs and a matching headscarf. The dress has been dried in high gloss and starched so stiff, it crunches lightly as she breathes. I wonder how many Africans on the plane had wished her good fortune in America or exchanged emails to stay in touch.

"Is it hot enough?" I ask as the back of her fingers reach the cup. "Merci." She accepts, grabbing the tea with the meat of her fire-proof hands. Looking at her now, the skin on her hands and the skin on her face would tell two ages. She raises a withered palm to wave me off, and with it, a crescendo of crunching as my personal applause.

My mother and Bintou continue to talk as if they have years of catching up to do. In truth, they have only known each other for forty minutes. I turn to go sit at the opposite couch, remembering a duty to entertain my cousin-for-the-time being. Kadiatou has been sitting unnaturally straight and respectfully silent. She is young. Younger than any visitor before. Too young to be in grown folks business but much older than my seventeen years. She looks old enough to have babies, but she doesn't. This is something I'm sure no one is too happy about. She is in jeans and a white blouse and looks just like her mother. The same

raven-black skin and straight Fulani nose, but she smiles as I walk over and I notice the balls of her cheeks are higher.

"Are you excited to be in DC?" I ask.

"Yes. I'm very excited to be here," she says in a jarringly American voice. It is believable, yet still off. Too many regions blended; a valley girl who grew up in Texas.

"Is this your first time in the US?"

"No, I went to school in Ohio. College."

"Ohio?"

It is hard to imagine a Malian in Ohio. Malians don't tend to go places other Malians are not, nor do Malians go without invitations from a clan member, a friend, a friend's cousin's daughter (as was what brought Tata Bintou and Kadiatou to us). I can't imagine Ohio with Malian shops that sell acheke, or those bootlegged CDs of Oumou Sangaré behind the kiosk.

"That's cool," I eventually say.

We slip into silence, listening to the Bambara of our mothers that I cannot understand. Even so, I can tell the two old women are gossiping. My mother sits mouth agape, releasing small noises of disbelief. Tata nods at her shock, assuring Mom that whatever was just disclosed is true. Tata continues in the pauses after my mother gasps, tossing in more information. Like kindling in the flame of Mom's amused dismay.

My mother speaks back fast and firm, never stuttering or taking time to find a word. It occurs to me that I will never hear my mother like this. She speaks Bambara like a second skin. Though she has spent decades here, her English is still insecure and hesitant. That is the only way I have ever heard her. A familiar stillness floods me as I remember it is impossible to truly know a person filtered through their third tongue. That this woman of half an hour knows my mother better than I ever could.

"I wish I could speak Bambara," I offer Kadiatou. " It sounds so fun to speak."

"You can learn at any time. It's in your blood."

"Can you speak it?"

"Not well," she says slowly and then, "but I understand it."

Her smile is delayed and tight. Still, there is something about her valley girl accent that makes her more my peer than anyone in the room. I lean in.

"So. What are they saying?"

"Well, they were talking about a man from your mother's village who cheated on his wife and gave her AIDS. Now, they are talking about me."

Judging by Tata's face of exhaustion and Kadiatou's barren womb, I can guess what is being said.

Fanta, she would say to my mother, *who is a good man here? Who will marry her?* Then Mother would say, *Inshallah, Bintou.*

God-willing.

"Would you like me to show you your room? The third floor is all yours." But I stand as I say it, allowing no alternative.

"Sure."

I collect two large suitcases as Kadiatou follows with carry-ons. The cords of my arms pulse and burn as I pull their luggage to our guest room, but the prospect of seeing the carpet of my living room again excites me.

In the morning, my mother is in my room hours before I usually wake up for school. Ada, she says, come help me make them breakfast. Though there is little labor in a standard Malian breakfast of bread, powdered milk, and boiled eggs, my mother feels it is her duty to make our guests American pancakes. She can't make American pancakes, however, so it is now my duty to whisk the Bisquick and fry the dough before it burns. In the kitchen, Mom makes the tea as I interrogate her on our visitors. Does she know Kadiatou went to school in Ohio? How old is Tata Bintou? Why are these ones here again?

"The daughter lost her job. She is a US citizen. The mother is here to help," she tells me. When I ask if Tata can speak English she tells me she wants to learn, and maybe I should help. I doubt someone can learn a language that old.

"How long will they be here for?"

"Until the mother gets a green card. Until they can both work. Until they no longer need."

The floorboards start to creak as the family wakes up two floors above us. I hear the Bambara through the floorboards. I help my mother lay out the food and head to the bathroom to get ready for school. On my way up the stairs, I run into Tata Bintou, who is descending slowly, left foot first on each step. "Bonjour, Ada," she says. I respond "Good morning" in French. "Where is Kadia?"

"Up," she says, pointing to the second-floor ceiling.

As the weather gets cooler, Kadiatou and Bintou catch a cold from each other and quarantine themselves to their room. They cough throughout

the night. At points in my sleep, I dream I am hearing arguments between the two. Sometimes laughter. One night after school, my mother asks me to deliver them water bottles and food she has just made. I hold my breath as I start the third flight of stairs, trying to not catch whatever they have. But when I reach for their doorknob, I am lightheaded and have to take a sharp breath.

The air around their door is heavy with fragrance. Musky like cologne, but earth-like. I remember the smell in different episodes of my childhood. My mother will later tell me the scent is Wusulan, a Malian incense mothers teach their daughters to make for its legendary effects on men. She will use the word "seductive" without shame.

Bintou opens the door. "Wow!" she gasps. The way you would when a baby shoves their food at your mouth. She makes space for me to come in and lay the things on the floor, something I do not want to do. I walk in and the room is unnaturally warm and better lit than I remembered. The floor is now covered with gold and red prayer mats, traditional dresses, and jars upon jars of powders and things that look like black rock candy. The cologne smell is almost unbearable now. Kadiatou sits on the floor, wrapped in a thick blanket. There is nothing around her. No laptops or books. "Hey!" she says in a voice that should have said "howdy."

I smile back, "How are you?"

They are getting better, she tells me. Maybe just a day more of sweating it out.

"Awesome," I say. "Let me know if you need anything."

A couple of days later, I arrive home from school at the same time as my mother, who is holding takeout food and smiling in her dark suit. She has returned from her translator job in McLean. She hasn't told me much about it since I once not-so-jokingly-joked that she was "snitching on her mother country." Still, I am sure the recent populist uprising in Mali is giving her much to translate at work.

As we sit in the living room, she looks through the mail and asks me about my day. I tell her the semester is calming down, and as application season becomes December deadlines, my counselor has excused me from my classes to let me write essays in his office.

"Wallaye," Mom says, "that man allows you too much. Watch out for men like that, they all want something."

I tell my mother he is my college counselor. The only thing he wants is to get me into college. She mutters something in Bambara and chuckles to herself.

"You could at least chastise me in French," I say.

I watch as Mom begins to lay out the rice, poulet yassa, and fish she got from the restaurant on the living room table. She then yells to the third floor for the family to come eat. Suddenly haughty, she turns to tell me Tata has complimented the living room carpet, and was surprised I had picked it out. I enjoy seeing Mom arrogant. Moments later, the women join our dinner table for the first time, kissing our cheeks as my mom serves the plates. As we settle in to eat, I tell Tata I will take her to the thrift store soon. If she would like to go.

By 10 p.m. it is too late for the old women, who have retired to their rooms. Kadiatou and I, the last ones standing, watch a political thriller on TV. When a terrible impression of the DC Metro comes up, I ask if she has been on it yet. If she has left the house. She tells me she hasn't, but she is excited to get out after she is feeling well again.

Soon the film can no longer hold my attention and I turn to my phone. Tomorrow is the championship game, our final football game of high school. In my group chat, my friends send ideas for matching spirit outfits. I surveil the thread as I avoid confessing I won't be going with them. I fear another intervention about how much time I have spent with Kareem these last four months. I laugh quietly as he sends couples outfit ideas for the game: An Aaron Hernandez jersey and CTE scan. An X-rated version of Barbie and Ken. A flame and an American flag.

"Who are you texting?" Kadia asks.

"Oh. Just my boyfriend." I say, laughing where laughter is not due.

"Do you love him?" she asks, her Texan accent failing and the truth of a throat-thick French confessing itself.

My phone is suddenly heavy in my palms and I look up to meet an unblinking gaze. Um. Maybe.

"I don't know," I fumble. "I like him a lot."

"Like them only after they love you."

She turns back to the film which has now reached a climax with a car chase through what is supposed to be U Street. Despite the action bouncing off every corner of our flatscreen TV, Kadiatou's eyes follow nothing, frozen in the dead center. I return to my phone, but she starts up again.

"Where will you be tomorrow?"

"At school."

"Does your boyfriend go to your school?"

"Yes."

A moment passes. Awkward and pregnant.

"I was married. He was a Malian I met in school."

The American accent is all gone now, just a thick Mande-French voice reminding me of the oceans of age between us. I ask her, "In Ohio?"

In Ohio, she says, was a Malian boy she met at a student club and quickly came to love. Their wedding was in Bamako, at his home after graduation. He delivered his vows in Bambara and she in French. His parents were not pleased. They did not understand why, at a traditional wedding, the traditional language was not spoken. She tried to explain that going to boarding schools in Senegal had taught her more French than Bambara, but she does not think they ever believed her. After three years of marriage and life in Ohio, and his green card, he divorced her.

"Things have gotten hard, but they will get better," she offers herself.

"Inshallah," I say.

The next morning, my mother gives me a ride to school. Kareem and I have decided to go to the football game as baseball players. I am wearing a Nationals jersey and he will bring the caps. I ask my mother if she knows about this man who used Kadiatou for a green card and then divorced her. She does.

"She hasn't been well since. She lost her job because of it. Her mother says she has stopped taking her medication."

"Medication?"

"She is sad, Ada. No chemical can cure sadness. She will be fine in time."

I want to tell my mom about chemical imbalances and a fear of how far she might go without help, but I feel stupid before I begin.

"Do you know what we say in Bambara to women like her?" she continues.

I clearly do not.

"You let one man kill you and a hundred will bury you."

Though we lose the game, Kareem and I get good photos on the field that is quickly cleared out after our defeat. When he drops me home that night, I enter to hear Tata Bintou chatting in the kitchen, clanging pots

and pans to cook us all a late dinner. She speaks resolute, *Ce n'est pas ca, ce n'est pas ca!*

Tata doesn't hide the annoyance in her voice, sounding as if she has gone over it a hundred times. Kadiatou shrieks through the speaker, thicker with tears, *C'est ca!*

Crying fills the space through Bintou's phone. Though I want to grab water from the kitchen, I decide to save the mother any embarrassment. I resign to coughing in the living room. I let my brain wander throughout DC, wondering where Kadia has gone. What park bench or urban garden has reminded her of Ohio. But then a scream so loud and bloody, I swear the chandelier contemplates falling. A pot Bintou must have been holding clashes against the floor in the kitchen. I stand. Another scream comes, raining from the top floor and landing in my stomach. Then silence. For a second.

"Ada!" I hear my mother's old door swing open a floor above me. "What happened?"

She is answered by the sound of Tata Bintou's feet making haste on the stairs, more than I thought possible for her old body. When she reaches the third floor, their bedroom door opens and slams hard. Silence again. I think of responding to my mother, but I don't. I find myself starting down the corridor, deciding I might as well get that water from the kitchen now.

Later, me, Mom, and Tata eat peanut stew at the table alone. She apologizes to us for her daughter's behavior, and we refuse to accept it. I teach her how to say "peanut" in English, but when she continues to say *pee-hut* with confidence, I laugh so hard stew clogs my sinuses and she smiles at me, confused. "I want to work," she says in a labored English. My mom tells her she can find her a job at a local school that teaches French. Where the politicians send their kids. "Good," Bintou says.

I make good on my promise to take Tata thrifting. That Saturday morning, we wake early to get ahead of any early holiday shopping. She is once again wearing a gorgeous and nosey bazin, as if there is a wedding to attend in this moldy store on a corner. The car ride is long and I notice myself driving with a straight back. I'm uneasy about this new record of alone time with an elder besides my mother. We speak in French about pleasantries. School, college, career, school again and again until we arrive. She seems to like the shop. I take her to the wall of rugs and she walks down the aisle nodding in dignified approval, like

a statesman blessing the fleet of carpets. She trails over to the clothes, fingering through graphic T-shirts and slacks, impressed with the prices. In the end, we leave with some stained satin curtains and near twenty shirts she plans to send home to Mali.

When we return, everyone is still asleep. Tata asks me to sit with her and fold the shirts and we work in silence on opposite sofas over the table. I steal glances of her preoccupation as she counts, folds, and arranges piles by size and color.

She raises one blue Spiderman shirt up for inspection against the light. She throws a worn finger to a pile near me, saying something I don't understand. I look to the side of her head, blinking. After one second too many, she turns to me, irate.

"Oh," she says, remembering.

She repeats in French: "Hand me those." And I do.

"Do Malians think less of children who can't speak Bambara?" I ask after a moment only I feel goes by.

"No," she says. "We just wonder if they are lost."

I pause to see if she is being facetious. She picks up another shirt and folds.

"My mother didn't teach it to me," I say.

"She wasn't supposed to teach you," she replies. "You were supposed to learn." Chagrin.

"Did that work for Kadiatou?" I spit at the table.

Though I do not say it in French, Tata Bintou stops folding and attempts to hold my gaze. I look down and bite my tongue's tip hard. She stares on.

"And why should she teach you?" She entertains me in a slow voice shaking with age. "You are an American."

I look at her now.

"What else would you be?" she asks. "What would you use it for? English is the better language to know, *non*?"

I look down and watch my toes rake through the long fibers of the rug.

Suddenly, Tata smiles with all teeth, looking more like a grandmother than I've seen her. She laughs. She claps her hands in glee and I jolt.

"No," she says. "Your mother wouldn't teach you it. Her Bamabara is not that great either!"

Another roll of laughter, and I return to biting off a souvenir of my tongue.

"I'd imagine her English is better," she says.

And why shouldn't it be? Tata throws up her hands. She has been speaking English for forty years. The majority of her life. With whom does she speak Bambara all day?

"Anyways," Tata says, picking up a T-shirt again. "No Malians speaks true Bambara anymore." She laughs again. "There is too much French in it now. None of us are too great at it."

Another clap, another roll of laughter.

The next week, I am in bed when I hear my door creak open in the middle of the night. Kadiatou's figure stands backlit by the hall light and silent. I haven't seen or heard her since the scream. Bintou has been taking food and water up to her, telling us she seems to be getting sadder. I stay still for long seconds watching her stare at me. When I rustle underneath my duvet, she knows I've woken up.

"Ada. Where will you be tomorrow?" she says in her American voice.

School, I tell her. She asks if I will miss my classes. She would like to see the Metro tomorrow and the White House and the Mall. I'm not sure why I respond so quickly; I almost feel I sound desperate. I tell her to be up early before my mother is awake. She asks if I am sure it will be okay. I tell her there's barely anything left for me to do at school this week anyways. I call to her as she turns away.

"Bring a coat. It's gotten cold out now," I say. "You'll want a heavy coat."

The next morning I wake hours before I should, planning to prepare lunches for us in the kitchen. When I get downstairs, Kadiatou is fully dressed on the couch, asleep in her laced-up sneakers. I grab fruit and yogurt and throw chicken in a plastic bag. When I wake her, her eyes open before her body moves. We leave in the night of morning, heading to the Metro stop at the corner.

"They did the color wrong in that movie," she says as we wait for the train. And they did. The Metro has dark floor tiles that fade from rusty orange to red. The film gave it grey blocks. As we ride along the stops, the city starts to wake up. Kadia points out all the Africans as they come on the train. Nigerians, Ethiopians, South Africans. I ask how South Africans look. She looks at me, pondering. "They look a little bit like you."

When we get to the White House, the sun is high and Kadiatou is underwhelmed. "I thought it would be bigger," she says. The vendors

on the street sell scarves and sweaters that say "I Love DC" and centre obnoxiously large US flags on their bodies. She walks to the shop of a white man with a grey braid to the back of his knee. "How much for that shirt?" she asks, pointing to a pink T-shirt with the White House's front lawn on it.

We walk to the bus station and sit on the bench for the line that will take us uptown. Kadia reaches down and pulls a blade of grass from between the cracks in the sidewalk. She holds it to my face.

"Oo-goo-ma-ko-lo," she elongates.

"Oo-goo-ma-ko-lo?" I recite.

"It means earth." She turns the blade over in her hand. "My mom says you want to learn."

Though I am now even more ashamed of the disrespect I showed her mother, I feel a breach of confidence.

"When did she tell you?"

"She told me to make me feel better."

I smile as I realize her mother is right. As much as Kadiatou hates her Bambara, surely it is better than the non-existent.

"Ne-eh-et-tie-ye," she goes again, now pushing the earth towards me. Guiding my hand for me to take it.

She says it means "this is yours." When I recite, she is lukewarm about it. I ask her to say it again and she shrugs, saying she isn't even sure she is saying it right. But she knows when she hears it. On the bus ride she teaches me words for family members and weekdays. The ones that seem to stick are Tarata and Arraba. Tuesday and Wednesday.

As we walk on Georgia Avenue, I ask her if she would like to stay in DC long term. She says she likes the idea of it, though she doesn't like the cold. I ask what she would do here, and she says maybe teaching, or politics. She makes us stop at a Carribean food place. When I tell her I brought us food and we don't need to spend money, she snaps at me. "I have money I have saved too."

The man behind the counter has a deep Jamaican accent and asks Kadia where she is from. When she looks up to the menu, he searches her face, partially amused. She makes an order of beans and rice, and his trance breaks. He chuckles as he calls it to the kitchen. When we leave, I tease that I think the man at the register was trying to hit on her. Kadia raises the styrofoam carryout to her chin as we walk. She opens it and soaks her face in the hot steam that rolls out, closing her eyes and enjoying the heat before grabbing the plastic fork. Through her chewing,

she tells me my mother has warned her that Caribbean men are even worse than African.

By 2 p.m., we are finally at the Mall. The museums were boring to Kadia, and her favorite part of the Smithsonian was the carts of hot-dogs and pretzels at every corner. At the mall, she gasps at the endless stretches of grass leading up to the Washington Monument. It is less busy here in the winter, and the length of green extends as far as we can see.

We sit and I take out the grapes I packed, enjoying the rest on my legs. My phone starts to vibrate and I pick up to my mother.

"Your school says you are not there today. Why?"

I stand and walk some feet away from Kadiatou, leaving her as she closely observes the small groups of kids in human chains and janky pop-up stands that warn of UFOs or Race Wars.

Despite the distance I put between me and Kadia, I still whisper on the phone to my mother as I turn my back to our resting place. "Kadia finally wanted to get out. She is figuring it out, Mom. She needed to get out and she shouldn't be alone doing it."

My mother says that's kind of me. Alhumdulilah, she says.

"I am blessed with a kind daughter, but you should not do it again." I laugh lightly to myself.

"Na-eh-et-ti-ye," I say, measured and careful, through a smile.

"Huh?" She says.

My face goes electric. I contemplate trying again, but as I try to imagine how it might sound, my mouth falls decidedly limp.

"*Ne*-eh-et-*tie*-ye?" Mom corrects. "As in 'this is yours'?"

"Uh. Yes."

"Go. Say it then," she commands.

I say it slowly and again and again until Mom says it sounds clear. I hear the smile in her voice as she says something in Bambara, but I don't ask for the translation. After the call, my heart finds itself thumping harder than it was before.

I turn back towards the spot where me and Kadiatou sat but see my grapes have been left unaccompanied. She is standing still—a couple yards closer to the Monument, head leaning against her spine as she takes in its height. Her hands flex and ball and she starts to waver side to side, moving her head in oscillation now. I imagine she is no longer looking at the monument anymore, but eyes shut and breathing. A voyager in a sea of grass.

Ellie Sawatzky

A SYNONYM FOR ORACLE

On the island, I dream a million
violent openings, the feared species
invasion of my uterus. They say
I should have killed the face-sized
snail on my deck, but I can barely
dispatch a mosquito. Re-colonizers,
we're not supposed to be here
either. We brought the lungworm-
bearing rats from elsewhere, no doubt,
sowed the seeds for a slow influx
of nematodes. Anthropocentric,
we discuss the plural *mongeese*
and whether or not to pluck off
the coquís. Speak of dissuading
lava like it's just another beast.
A synonym for oracle in my
thesaurus: apocalypse. Even so,
I pretend not to understand the
gecko egg's dark prophecy,
carried home in my suitcase by
accident. How it broke open
under my thumb, one black eye,
a purple curl of a body on the
carpet trying to breathe.

Henri Meschonnic
translated by Gaby Bedetti and Don Boes

THEY ARE WITHOUT EYES THEY ARE WITHOUT HANDS

from *Parole rencontre* (Word Fray), Atelier du grand tétras, 2008

they are without eyes they are without hands
against the wall of light
their clothes no longer live
they settle for other poses
now they no longer grow
new skin on their hearts

Edward Dewar

SKUNK

To defeat soundly,
or a nocturnal
dawdler, an icon
of stink, a cat sized
mammal who's fond
of cameo appearances,
garden sheds,
cardboard boxes,
and that hole under
my back porch.
And when necessary
he can move
like he's escaping
with a government
secret. Sometimes
I get this notion
to domesticate him,
give him a jaunty
nickname. But
then I catch him
red-handed
with his snout
in the neighbour's
trash bin
and a defiant
look in his eyes
and realize
he would never
fit in with
the Saturday morning
dog walking crowd.

Joshua Whitehead

ME, THE JOSHUA TREE

We share a secret place in Calgary, the Inglewood irrigation canal that is a few kilometres from our home. I show you this place one day when we go for a walk, how I would run through the dog park and down along the canal while exercising. You show me a place beyond the canal, where the railroads cut across Bow sîpiy.[1] After the annihilation has set in for the death of our relationship, we walk down there after a weekend of stewing in depression. It's a beautiful Sunday, pîsim[2] is there above us, massaging our shoulders until they brown. We brush through a path and I stop us, I ask, "Do you hear that?" and you say, "It must be from the golf course nearby." I stop us because I hear voices, almost from underneath, as if they were in the catacombs of the canal, a whimpering, maybe, an exultation? What are the trees whispering to us in this moment? What of the water? What of the rocks? We continue on through this path you

1 River

2 Sun

have walked many times, a handful of them to escape me after I have hurt you, and you take me to the clearing.

As we continue along through the clearing, we come across a jutting out of land and an openness of water, Bow sîpiy is here, greets us through its steady rocking, sometimes a wave is a wave. There are duck feathers strewn about, a carcass, and a fire pit here on this little piece of land that believes it is a cliff. We sit along the edge smoking cigarettes, you skip rocks across the lake, I run my hands through the water, sift my fingers through the soft sand. This whole journey reminds me of the film *Stand by Me*, one of my favourites, where I feel like Gordie Lachance and here you are Chris Chambers. In this vignette I play in my head, I imagine us having started that fire, roasted that duck, slept here in the tall grasses, let sîpiy sing us to sleep. I'll ask, "Do you think I'm weird?" and you'll say, "Definitely, but so what? Everybody's weird." And in that moment my belly will bloom because this is a moment I have craved since childhood, latched onto the ghost of Lachance, and I live through the intimacy I share with characters. We'll talk into the night, the kind of talk that seems important until, as Lachance narrates, you discover girls. Of course, we have discovered girls but, in this moment, we are just two queer prairie boys discovering one another, the landscape around us, how our bodies are now braids separated, culled for the smudging.

How easy is intimacy, honesty, truth, when in a dream or when separated? How we grind into one another, spark flints for the fire we let die, and feast through the blaze we create now, here, in this moment, as individuals rather than a collective. Here we have come to see a body, which doesn't exist because this is a vignette, but we have come nonetheless and what I offer up is bodies in multiplicity: the river body, the earthen body, pocket of air, breast of rock, bicep of branch, me, you, us—we witness death here too, though in a different fashion, more holistic than nihilistic, that continuum where death kisses birth and is there such a concept as division? I come back into myself, having lived a life in the briefest of moments while that rock skipped across the lake and your forehead pores swelled so much they began to sweat and your index finger, with its scythe-shaped scar, uncurled from the hook you bent it into to skip.

You smile at me, I giggle back, and we sit down side-by-side. Across the river, a man fly-fishes, we watch him catch a fish and then leave, climbing back up the hill on the other side. There too, a cyclist passes

by, singing along to a song he intimately knows. sîsîp,[3] niska,[4] and ayîk[5] come to visit us as we sit together, kneecaps buckling, maybe even aching to hold one another, and pîsim beats time into our backs which forms continents from sweat. kâhkâkiwak[6] land in the middle of sîpiy which is disturbed by the leg of a railway, there, atop the railings they meet, cawing at one another, feathers extended into hands, greetings, they talk with one another and we are listening. What are these kâhkâkiwak talking about? Boisterously, they chat as if it were a reunion or a send-off—whatever is the difference? We sit silently witnessing askîy[7] talk all around us, a pair of ravens saying "I love you" in a language not our own but maybe also one we know intimately. Raven is a sign, I think, they are here to demonstrate the ravenous appetite of finality.

Finality is a horrendous word, it eats, you know, has teeth. I think and thought of finality a lot, especially in that final weekend when we decided to sever and spent every waking moment together healing. Finality as a severity is a word that I need to erase from my vocabulary, it's too linear, too colonial, we, as Indigenous peoples know that finality is simply an opening into continuity. I plagued myself with that word, I swallowed it whole and squawked up a stomach full of knots, continuums there too. My body rejected finality as an end stop, my own cells fighting against this invasion. It's funny, though, how mourning changes language, the grammar of being. Finality transforms morphologies into a series of becomings and of grievings, but, in that becoming I find how language wraps around wounds like a suture and I am a compressor pounding meaning into broken chains. Like the first time I heard you call me "Joshua" in the aftermath, there, my dorsal was spliced in half and I was kinêpik,[8] tonguing the decadence of a splitting letter: like watching how an A halves into a broken ladder and I am trapped in the abyss of signs. I too work the effort up to transform language, I call you by your name, or "friend," and as much as it wounds me to do so it tells me that transformation always begins with the tongue, that wonderful glossia. When I reminisce about you, I laugh, throw my tongue into the air as if

3 Duck
4 Goose
5 Frog
6 Ravens
7 The land
8 Snake

it were a newborn and I find a hinterland of thrush growing there upon it; the biosphere, askîy, finds me here too, grows upon my buds: I taste snakeroot, rain water, choke cherries, the taste of growth is nêhiyâwewin. This thrush, bush, forest-tongue, divides into treaties, a treatise with no subject, and my mouth becomes a geography of grammar.

In what ways is an essay an exhibit? In what ways are these words animate? Maybe you, reader, understand this as an artifact, sacred words from an NDN, or maybe you read me as a sex-worker of language, one who strips and fucks the page and spills himself all over it? Do you clone me? Do you seed me? Do you let narrative germinate? Do you shake the page and expect me to fall out? How do you read me? How do you envision me? Maybe I say I am a broken web, blown into singularity from a wind that knows no bounds? Maybe I say I am a sandglass and you are peeking into granularity? What I would tell you is that this specific chaining of letters, spaces, commas, punctuation marks, and white space is in fact an animate being, so least of all to me. You survey my body, my memory, my spirits, my heart, my emotions. You, in this moment, own me, or so you think you do, and I escape through the loophole of an end stop, that damning boulder, that prick of ink that bleeds the skin.

We are in Nanaimo, BC, and I am visiting your temporary home. We are in a "sketchy" part of town, as you call it, but it feels familiar—as if poverty is a universal look across Turtle Island. Your bed is on the floor, your living room is beautifully nostalgic for the prairies, your patio is littered with cigarettes, well-loved. I crossed a ferry just to meet you here where I saw dolphins and orcas come to greet this lonely NDN far away from his homeland. The wind salts my face, pores clog, I shine in the daylight as my hair tries to free itself from its braids.

I shower while you're at work, I wait for you to come to this place you call home, and in there I inspect the inventory of your identities. I pick up your soap and huff it before I use it. There are little whiskers attached to it, curlicue, here even your body hairs spell out stories to me. I bask in the scent of your armpits, your jawline, the way the bridge of your nose has implanted its oils here. I lather myself with your shampoo, I scrub the scalp clean of its dandruff. I rinse myself, dry my hair, and smell the scent of the towel afterwards. I linger like a ghost in the reeds of the fabric, reeling it all in. When you get home, you offer to show me around the town.

We visit the docks, stroll through the downtown, peck our faces with sand. You take me through a path in Bowen Park, show me the totem poles that have fallen down and are returning to the foliage of their mother. Here: bear, frog, orca, eagle lay side by side, not in a tomb, but as elders turned newborn waiting to be birthed into the soil from the roots of saplings turning into children once again. Later we decide to eat dinner, you take me to the Oxy, this lovely little pub that turns into a karaoke bar later in the evening. We sit in the corner, each order a pint, and sip, massaging the link between us as lovers reunited. Someone sings "Love Shack," and suddenly the whole bar is up and dancing. You and I are in the crowd of shimmying folks, across from one another, smiles wide as bucket handles. Your hair bounces when you hop, your hair again a curlicue, those beautiful curls that look like tendrils, or foliage, and I the NDN artifact, a totem pole, melding into them, rotting into nutrient. When the song ends, I notice you have gone up to the DJ, I have sat down with another round of beer for us. You are standing alone in the middle of the dance floor, your eyes are attached to mine, and a song comes on. It's the twang of country and the familiar banjo of Dolly Parton. You sing "Joshua" to me. I imagine myself as this isolated, mean, vicious man living alone in a shack with a black dog and you as the bee-hived Dolly arriving just in time to find me pondering pandemonium.

You tell me in a letter as we are in the midst of breaking up that you "can't see the forest for the trees." In this moment my mind is a viscous, flattened membrane, it is pulled to every corner of its being and my mentality is a stretched deer hide, pounded brain and all. Do, or have, I concealed the wilds of this act we call relations? Am I more a blockage than a blessing? How have you only noticed me, the Joshua Tree, in this hinterland of an ecosystem? If I were to be a Joshua Tree, would I not be a marker instead of a malice? Here, existing, as a dagger in the desert of a relationship withered into dust and stone, I see myself as my namesake, the waver, the guide, arms upraised in a thronged fashion promising entrance to a land since forgotten—but maybe I've forgotten the system of roots which let me flourish into an epitome of growth in a dead home, a dying landscape? I grow in groves fashioned from graves. I think of the Mojave and I am a kernel of maize that combusts in between the pressure of a molar pairing—I need moisture, warmth, I need apocalyptic conditions to blossom into edibility and I am looking for my sisters thrown into a pot of soup. Look at the tree of me and tell me there isn't already a forest grasping for oxygen within me.

Even my bed feels like a canyon these days, my house a desert of a space. The nail holes you leave behind are screeching and all I see are the bones of this home, memory leaking from the puncturing, my walls are quivering, and we are both collectively healing. I run my fingers over the wounds of our home, cartilage snapping, I find studs in the walls by seeking out nail heads, I hang pictures over the scarring, the watercolours of a painted bear bleed into the bruised wall and all I have to offer is the sticky smoke of sweetgrass pouring into tincture. I feel sorry for the holes as I see myself in them, I too am spilling memories from a broken abalone trying to hold the balance of a tide and the weight of this contraption I call a body—how heavy a burden it is to maintain the structure of a home, the flexibility of memory, the rigidity of skin.

There are days I wake up expecting to see you across the chasm of my bed but instead I find the trace of you, ghost of sweat, the yellow outline of your thigh curled into itself and I melt into the coils and search in those metal rings for your voice, a cough, the rhythm of your exhumation. I have a cigarette on my patio, reel myself in, my neighbour, a tiny mouse who I let live in my barbeque, scrambles beneath my feet. I suspect he has become used to sweetgrass embers and the burned ends of sage I lay in a little bush out back. The grass has been recently cut, there are severed tubes of plants splayed in front of me and I turn my eyes away because I have endured enough massacres in my lifetime. I'm sorry I let the weeds eat away at us, but, are weeds not also medicine? I make dandelion tea and I drink the root of you, sunshine and mud and sweat in a teacup.

I talk of you, of us, to my counsellor in Calgary. She tells me that I need to "tame my illusions." In this moment with her, I am cataloguing this phrasing because I think it's beautiful and also because this is a truth of myself that I consistently avoid. I have mastered being an illusionist, I am a mesmer of a man. Afterwards I tell no one of this magic I house, I throw up a shimmering of a veneer and cloak my mind in holograms. I think about the ethics of writing non-fiction, reach back to the moment of this woman counselling me into good health, miyopimatisowin,[9] and I see myself sitting there, swallowing whole her words like hard bread. What is non-fiction? How is it creative? Why do I add the "C" before the "NF"? Is it to hide? To vanish into the page so as to hide the body of truth from you? How do I write respectfully and honestly if I am consistently

9 nêhiyaw worldview of living the "good life" (as in, a good way of being with one's self, one's relations, and the land's self).

seeking out material in the constellations of relations I hold near and dear to my heart in order to excavate them for narration? Perhaps I have enacted wrought kinship measures with you and others, how I devour, never satiated, how I archive you into notations and am never really fully attuned. I conclude that I do this as a defense mechanism, become a house of mirrors, let other see me as they wish to, and, more importantly, see themselves as beautifully moulded reflections because I am simply wired to be a caretaker, such that, when you ask me "why do you wear that countenance" I can only reply that "I'm the only one in this room who hasn't seen the mask I wear, what do you see?"[10]

When we break up, we have a long conversation into the infant hour of the morning, we laugh and cry in equal measure and it feels good because we have been so debilitated by these acts of vulnerability for so long. I ask you, "When did you fall out of love with me?" and you, sparked by the stokes of an honest fire, tell me, "Eight months ago." This comment absolutely shatters me, quakes down the glassware of my illusions, and my stomach becomes a dead star, an exhausted mouth, nefariously nebulous. I feel betrayed, used almost, I blame myself for weeks afterwards trying to find a medicinal root in the ecosystem of this pain. I am angry but I don't know at who, maybe myself, for having convinced myself of this mirage for months on end, watering bedrock rather than the fungi I thought could feed us the protein we so desperately needed.

Do you remember our road trip last summer? Where we rode across the badlands looking for medicine in the hoodoos? We stop at Head-Smashed-In Provincial Park along the way, pick sage from the bushes in the parking lot, I still have those bundles in my maskihkiywat[11] at home. There, we see apisimôsos[12] standing on the buffalo drop, tongue wrapped around bundles of grass, and we simply witness them in their glory like a reminder that there is life abound even in spaces crafted for death so long as there is reciprocity and cyclicity. You take the time to teach a visiting family about a particular type of bird because this is a world you know intimately and I simply stare at you in awe and cascade into the stories that pour forth from your mouth, I bathe in your language, I dry myself off in your sunburnt lashes.

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10 A notation from Jordan Abel

11 Medicine bag

12 Deer

We learn of Napi here, the Old Man, who comes running from the west as warm wind, forever chasing another Old Man who ran from the north shooting arrows and bringing winter. We learn about Napi making the earth and molding people out of mud. "You must be people," he says, making first a woman and a child. I'm reminded of my own creation story, of muskrat diving to the bottom of the ocean to grab a mound of earth and placing it on the turtle's back. I'm reminded of you telling me once that you felt you had the ocean in you. I think about this often, those churning currents that you house and sometimes let crash against your intestines, body full of memory, water tinted with trauma, I hope you learn to let the waves settle into the pit of your belly, make a well of an offering. After you tell me this, I think, "M'boy I have the earth in me—and don't we make a beautiful creation story?" I sometimes place us into another vignette, me, reaching down into the whole, that cavernous hole, where askîy exists in you, that rich clay, button of perennial, and I take a handful, just enough so as not to waste, and I swim back up to the surface of your oceans. Here, I take this hand of clay and smear it into the earth of me, that withering garden full of bare root, dry root, starving root, and let the flora of me feast on the most intimate soil of you—they bloom again and I am holy, slathered in silt, I mound into a hill and dead-head infant medicine.

Halfway through our road trip, we stop in Lethbridge where I go in to rent a room with a single bed and you wait outside until it's finished so we can both sneak up stairs without having to out ourselves in this little prairie town. We lounge around on the bed awhile, you get ready, I take pictures, and we both plop into bed giggling like children to ourselves on this rickety mattress, in this colonized town, in this broken constellation of a country. And, as is our tradition, we decide to go to the casino for the evening where you discover the *Simpsons* slot machine and we smoke, drink, and play into the night.

In the morning, we finish our drive down to Writing-On-Stone Provincial Park. I am afraid of rattlesnakes from all the warning signs around and you assure me that you'll keep watch for them. We meander through hoodoos in the dry bone heat of the badlands, find thicket, listen to the love songs of birds, and emerge into the playground of stone and the whole of the Milk River is there rushing excitedly. You tell me stories of your family, of your grandfather's relationship to this river, to its connection with Saskatchewan, your hometown, the Cypress Hills, the monarchs—you're such a teacher to me and I find myself studious in

your joyfulness. We sit inside a hoodoo and ponder the dreams of stone, will ourselves to name this home as it ought to be orated, Áísínai'pi, listen for the manitowâk[13] who place story in our nailbeds.

This is a place of interconnection, where the physical and the spirit worlds kiss—we are in the cavity of worlds colliding into one another and I wait for them to wink at me, tell me to rinse the soup of pupa off into the waters. We hike to see "The Battle Scene," a petroglyph etched into the side of Áísínai'pi's cliff and here I see myself defeated as a nêhiyâw, but I don't shy away from this shame, I thank it in this Blackfoot world I am guest to. We survey the etchings of this battle, "Retreat Up the Hill" of 1866 and I look at my forearm, the fossa of my elbow, tricep, armpit, and find myself a pictograph, you are carved into the walls of me and I find joy in knowing I house you too. When we leave, we listen to Loretta Lynn's "High on a Mountain Top," she giddies into lyric, "God fearing people, simple and real," and we see Chief Mountain steadfast in the distance, Nínaiistáko, and avert our eyes so as not to stare too long, okîmaw wâciy, hill of sweetgrass, overseer of Niitsitapi, place maker of divinity, we hide our eyes so as not to bring forth the end of day or even days that this hill foretells. We are weary during this drive home, hair burned, skin pinked, stomach a barren well, and you nap. We pass Oldman River and I whisper, "See, Napi has come to wave goodbye." I thank the trout, the prairie, the sheen of rainbow scales swimming into aperture and the gracefulness of a creator not my own.

Open me to aperture, nitotem, the w/hole through which light travels as I am full of terror.

During our walk you teach me about the land, starlings murmur to the soft thrum of the Bow's ripples. You teach me about starlings, about how they're an introduced species, a colonizing bird. They sing whirring songs high in the trees—birds of mimicry. I imagine them re-enacting this moment we are sharing: one in grief, the other a doppelgänger. They become a haunting figure, endlessly remixing songs of mourning, they say your name when I walk this path alone, I imagine they mock me, in a Shakespearian fashion, Mortimer comes rushing from their gizzard, which confuses me to the point I believe this passerine asks me for more time. I panic, unable to differentiate what is health and ruin, and my heart becomes aflutter from the beating of a murmuration. Why did you

13 Spirits (animate)

steal away the egg, starling, crack open the shell to fling out a growing wing? What are you trying to teach me in this moment, if anything at all? When I return to myself you are beside me, the scent of wolf willow wafts around you, a sweet musk.

You stop us, kneel down, beckon me to look. Yellow flowers blossom in a patch of sunlight, buffalo beans. You tell me a story of this plant, of how a girl in your hometown ate the toxic pea and had to get her stomach pumped. It's a gorgeous plant but vicious in its delights. This is a plant you know intimately, it calls you home and I never bother you because in this moment, as you story yourself temporally and geographically, you are healing and I lean in to witness the majesty. I ought to tell you too that buffalo beans are also waypoints, indicator of rich game, of bison being ready for the hunt. But my, how I see the prairie in you, blue eyes alight, you are living sky and, in this moment, I take the time to jingle in the pool of your iris.

We continue along the path, looking for the refuge of the place we like to visit. There is a new bridge made to cross a little stream, bridge built from a pallet. You tell me to walk quickly over it so as to maintain the weight on the board, if you are to wobble, or stumble, or stop completely, gravity will crack you in half. I listen, thinking more so about the foundation of me than I do the waving piece of wood underfoot. On the other side, the sun looms overtop of us, pisîm lets us know that they will sit with us, guiding. We are in the shadow of a power line, a menacing giant, whose rickety metal bones cast bars across the grass and we are entrapped within its shadows—we both stop to look up, shield our eyes from the sun, to see the power line in its tall-tale rapture. Everything seeks to overpower us, engorge us, to take away this journey we have called an afternoon stroll. We stare it down, two Davids eyeing up behemoth, and we conquer this looming presence that was never really a power line to begin with. We continue on in silence to the clearing save for the medicine song of a consistent wind.

We sit along the edge of the Bow, feet dangling in the cool water, we light a cigarette. Staring solemnly, stoically even, headlong into the contours of the river, our knuckles brush, bones aching to touch. You skip rocks across the body and I slice open a cigarette to say a prayer to sîpiy before we begin this ceremony. A kin of mine told me to pray for water when smudging, I practice this when I light my medicines, he says he doesn't yet understand it but it means something different to everyone, that's the point, we all have differing relations to bodies of water and the

water in our own bodies—I think, what better way to pray for water and healing than to go to the body itself? I wave my hands in the tide and in nêhiyâwewin I ask sîpiy to cleanse us both, to soothe the friction burn of peeling our braid apart and to think of us in a sun shower. When I'm finished, you are watching me, I call you over, and together we let the tobacco offering be swallowed by sîpiy. You tell me that Bow sîpiy goes into the Saskatchewan River which divides into the North and South Saskatchewan rivers and ultimately empties into the Lake Winnipeg watershed before exiting the continent at Hudson's Bay. You tell me this for perspective, "When you put down your tobacco in the Bow, you send medicine home to Manitoba." I never forget this lesson you teach me. I am praying for the good home, a refuge where I can store us.

We sit down knowing what is to come next—I rub your back, feel the tips of your vertebrae, this broken part of you I ache to care for. When I think of your spine, and that dreadful accident you were in that happened just moments into our relationship, I nearly drown myself in empathy. M'boy with the broken back that will whittle into a bear trap over time. Did you know the word for backbone or spine in nêhiyâwewin is mâwikan? I break the word down into singular elements, search for covalence, find the following: mâwiso, or to "pick berries"; mâwihkas, to "cry after him"; mâwimowin, "crying for help" or a "cry of pain"; and I find the dreadful word again, "namâwîyak," or "no one, or nobody," a word I have weaponized against you in the past. Can I offer you solace, medicinal story, will you let me craft a basket for you brimming with the sage I save for you? M'boy with the pîkopayiw mâwikan,[14] I eat from the bowl of your vertebrae, give offerings in the convex, I pick berries, in full-iskwêw fashion for you to feast on, I lay otêhimin pahkitinikana[15] in the discs between your columns, plants I've plucked with my teeth, held in the mouth, seeds I store beneath the tongue, kin I've laid down tobacco for. In these moments where you cry for help, body brimmed in pain, mâwihkas, I offer wihkaskwa, braids of sweetgrass, which I weave in between the structure of you from cervical to lumbar; in exchange for namâwîyak, I eat the word, chew it into cud, regurgitate victory from violence and spit out mâmawi, or "together, in full number, as a group"—here, I find you again, mâmawi-tahto, nîcimos, even in these planes of pain I find relationality and I seek to transform them for you, it

14 Broken back

15 Strawberry (heart berry) seeds

is my right as an elder in the making, I too owe you reciprocity. Knowing what is to come, I offer you this word too, ka pîkopayik wihkihtowin, or "a break-up," see how these words revolve in continuums? M'boy with the pîkopayiw mâwikan, we are stretching nêhiyâwewin to fit around us in this impending decision, sheathing ourselves in language—we become pîkopayiw, broken, but look, m'boy, look at how linguistics hold us, animate us. As I do with your back, I do with our relations, I crunch language into new meaning, find signs in the gravel of my breaking molars, transform ka pîkopayik wihkihtowin into kaskamocâyâwin wahkohtowin, or "we build up inertia in an enclosure to enact 'all my relations.'" Let's do this together, nicîmos kwêskinaw nitôtem, wichihin nanâtawihiwêw ekwa niya asotamowin koci nâtamâkêwin kiya wakinew kîkway ka pihtokepayik miyomahcihowin, nitasotam mâmawi kimîyosinaw.[16]

You rest your head on my shoulder and I wrap my arm around you, squeeze the softness of your torso, huff in your now wolfen scent, which is almost metal, that pleasant smell of sodium, wet zinc. I think again about finality and choke myself. You say you love me and that hold breaks. I tell you that I have never loved so wildly as I have and do for you. And then you look up at me, the sun drowning in the well of your eyes. I wish I had learned to slow down time more, to enjoy, cherish, to revel in the acts of love we gifted one another. I tell you I don't remember our last good kiss and I cry thinking that our final love act was a simple peck goodbye. I ask you, "Can we have one last good kiss before we end this?" and you nod, say, "Of course." You kiss me and I grab the coattails of time to archive this. Everything pours into and out of this act we share much to the point that if I were to narrate it I would ultimately fail before ever beginning. Our teeth hug in this moment, tongues bow and say kihtwâm,[17] even our noses manage to wiggle a salutation. We hold the kiss amidst the man fishing across the river, the cyclists passing by, a train conductor wailing steam into the air, beaver, loon, duck, starling, wolf willow, buffalo bean, grass, river, rock, feather all come to witness this moment of goodbye and I hold the kiss steady. We have never been much of a couple for public affection, like when you grab my hand in a movie theatre scared from a

16 My lover turned/changed into my friend, help me heal and I promise to try to help/support you to bend into good health/good feelings/the act of feeling euphoric, I promise, together, we are good (as two people).

17 I'll see you again, soon (as we never say "goodbye" in Cree, finality doesn't exist)

horror film, I sometimes flinch, the optics of queerness often terrify me in spaces safe or otherwise but I hold you here, lips pursed into a tote and I am packing as much as I can fit, willing myself to stone, become a fossil, or an arrowhead, petrified wood for you to take, I mineralize just to meet you. When we pull apart, I lick my lips, I savour the rue of your saliva, a distinct flavour: smoke, peaberry, zephyr. We sit in this peaceful sliver we have created, together, holding tightly onto one another and you tell me I am your best friend. I return the sentiment, which really isn't a sentiment but rather the unabashed truth, I care—have, do, and will—for you in all of your wilderness and I am a man simply full.

And while we walk back to our temporary home, I murmur to a starling my name so that it'll follow you, hopefully guide, so that you won't lose me in the mourning. I didn't tell you this, but I prayed to Creator every day during the trial period of our break up. I smudged until my lungs blossomed maskosîy[18] seeds, I danced across the sky, flew to mother in a dream, drank the rich, musty water of sîpiy, baptized myself with amisk[19] in her dam, I shared kinosêw[20] bones with wacask,[21] ripped the wing off a damselfly and glued it on my back, I split open the abdomen of a kwêkwêkocîs[22] and drank its luciferin, I chewed the sinew of maskwa,[23] I did all this to pray and say: please Creator don't let the world take this love away. Which, of course it did, as all wendigo do, but what I found in the rubble of this sweaty, bloody mess was that love had shape-shifted, planted into a new body and we are hooved and galloping in that glorious afterglow of a morning since transformed. And here I exist, me, the Joshua Tree, guiding you to the good home which exists both within and without me—I hope you'll take me, at least as a seedling, into the gardens of your mitêh mîkiwâm.[24] And I revel in your joy, m'boy. I carry you with me, stickily, lovesap moulded into the crevice of this splitting heartwood.

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18 Grass

19 Beaver

20 Fish

21 Muskrat

22 Firefly

23 Bear

24 Heart home

Isabella Wang

SERENADE NO.1 IN SUNFLOWERS

for Mikayla

Children are born with the circadian rhythm of sunflowers.
When they laugh, their eyes dot the distance

between noon and night,

turn to where the sun shines brightest. Their arms are like hovercrafts,
outstretched towards the simplest things: a morsel of sunflower jelly,
and sun butter.

*

Light is a matter not taught for those blessed

with the heads of a thousand tiny flowers

and the inflorescence of tears
to make the whole world pure though some never learn to repress this.

*

Blow into your hand the petals
of the different hues of sunflower and you will see the sky

in pink, rouge, terracotta gold—

the sunset you and I have created from blooms.

*

tournesol is a French word meaning to turn with the sun,
and *une lumière perdue*—a lost light.

To find it again, you just have to kneel at a child's eye level and look,
really look.

Focus in closely

on what they are trying to show you.

*

Because one doesn't have to be made of glass to let light in...

*

Those who came before us, left with a graft of your stalk
to plant for another season

walked for miles on gravel
only to be replaced by the weight of walking

and sand that having absorbed the intensity of stars, now make up the
desert.

*

The average sunflower takes 60-85 days to pollinate.
100 days to grow seeds.
Only young flowers move. Only young flowers have to.

The mature wait for bees to come to them.
Do they ever berate themselves the way we do upon leaving behind a
measure of time

that some call the West, and some call serendipity
never being able to look back?

*

The sun fits 960,000 earths at its core. That's 1.969 x 109 sunflowers
per square miles on earth.

1.89024 x 1014 seeds I would plant with you

for every bird, and every person grieving.

*

If I gave you a seed, do you promise to throw it away
so that it has a chance to make the world better?

Because some gifts are not meant for hanging on to.

Because we'll have many more years to stain the grass fields yellow.

*

Because the word because is a beautiful word
you once used to explain to me why sunflowers are your favourite flower.

When you smile, you make the world bloom with the faces of sunflowers

for the people who hurt you
and love you the same.

CONTRIBUTORS

Gaby Bedetti studied translation at the University of Iowa and the Sewanee Writers' Conference. Her translations of Meschonnic's essays and other writings have appeared in New Literary History, Critical Inquiry, and Diacritics. Meschonnic was a guest of the MLA at her roundtable with Ralph Cohen and Susan Stewart.

Don Boes is the author of *Good Luck With That*, *Railroad Crossing*, and *The Eighth Continent*, selected by A. R. Ammons for the Samuel French Morse Poetry Prize. His poems have appeared in The Louisville Review, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *Prairie Schooner*, *CutBank*, *Zone 3*, *Southern Indiana Review*, and *The Cincinnati Review*.

Brent Cassan lives in Abbotsford, BC, and is a full-time writer and freelance bibliographer. Recent poetry has appeared in *Poets Choice* (India), *Grain*, *Prairie Journal*, and *Vallum* (Montreal). He is a graduate of Simon Fraser University and the University of Hawai'i. He also earned an AMLS from the University of Michigan.

Zachery Cooper studies creative writing at Vancouver Island University (VIU) in Nanaimo, BC, Canada. His writing appears or is forthcoming in *The New Quarterly, Event, The Quilliad, White Wall Review, Filling Station, Broken Pencil*, and elsewhere.

Edward Dewar has resided in Calgary for the past forty years and his poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Event*, *The Antigonish Review*, *The Dalhousie Review*, *The New Quarterly*, *The Nashwaak Review*, *Vallum*, and *Southern Poetry Review*.

Caragana Ennis is a queer woman of settler ancestry living in Treaty 6. She holds an Honours English BA and is currently working on her English MA through the University of Saskatchewan.

Emma DePanise is a poet from the eastern shore of Maryland. Her poems are forthcoming in journals such as *River Styx*, *The Minnesota Review, The National Poetry Review* and *Passages North*. Currently an MFA candidate at Purdue University, she is an editor for *Sycamore Review* and *The Shore*.

Stacey May Fowles is a multiple award-winning journalist, essayist, and novelist. Her bylines include *The Globe and Mail*, *Toronto Life*, *Elle Canada*, *Maisonneuve*, *The Walrus*, *Hazlitt,* and others. Her most recent

book, *Baseball Life Advice,* was a national bestseller and a *Globe and Mail* best book of the year.

Ariel Gordon is a Winnipeg-based author of two collections of urban-nature poetry, both of which won the Lansdowne Prize for Poetry. Gordon also co-edited the anthology *GUSH: menstrual manifestos for our times* (Frontenac House, 2018) and is the ringleader of Writes of Spring, published in the *Winnipeg Free Press*. Her most recent book is *TreeTalk* (At Bay Press, 2020), a public poetry project that involves hanging poems in trees.

Maryam Gowralli is an MA student in English Literature at the University of Calgary and is the Creative Nonfiction Editor for *filling Station* magazine. Her debut poetry collection, *Citizenship in Water* is forthcoming with That Painted Horse Press in 2021. Find her on Twitter @maryamgalli.

Fríða Ísberg is an Icelandic author based in Reykjavík. "Profile" is from the short story collection *Kláði* (e. Itch), which came out in 2018 in Iceland and is nominated for the 2020 Nordic Council Literary Prize, one of the most prestigious awards that a Nordic author can win.

Eliamani Ismail holds a degree from Scripps College in Africana and Film. A former youth slam poet, she is currently a T. J. Watson fellow exploring the intersections of writing practices and justice. You can find Eliamani's work in the *Stonecoast Review, ellipsis...* and *literature & art.*

Stephanie Jean is a Brooklyn-based poet.

Larissa Kyzer is a writer and Icelandic translator based in Brooklyn, New York. In 2019, she was Princeton's fall Translator in Residence and won the American Scandinavian Foundation's Nadia Christensen prize for her translation of Kristín Eiríksdóttir's *A Fist or a Heart*. Larissa is co-chair of PEN America's Translation Committee.

Henri Meschonnic (1932–2009) is a key figure of French "new poetics," best known worldwide for his translations from the Old Testament and the 710-page Critique du rhythme. During his long career, Meschonnic generated controversy in the literary community. "they are without eyes" comes from his fifteenth poetry collection.

Geoffrey Morrison's poetry appeared previously in *PRISM international* (55.4). He is the author of the poetry chapbook *Blood-Brain Barrier* (2019, Frog Hollow Press) and, with Matthew Tomkinson, the short

fiction collection *Archaic Torso of Gumby* (2020, Gordon Hill Press). He lives on unceded Squamish, Musqueam, and Tsleil-Waututh territory.

Colin Morton's work has received awards for poetry, fiction, and film. His dozen books include *The Merzbook: Kurt Schwitters Poems*, *Coastlines of the Archipelago*; *The Hundred Cuts: Sitting Bull and the Major*, and *Winds and Strings*. A guest on Algonquin land, he lives in Ottawa.

Tolu Oloruntoba was born in Ibadan, Nigeria, and practiced medicine before his current work. His poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Harvard Divinity Bulletin, Pleiades, Columbia Journal Online, The Maynard*, and elsewhere. His full-length collection, *The Junta of Happenstance*, is forthcoming in Spring 2021. He lives in Surrey, BC.

Ellie Sawatzky is from Kenora, ON, and currently finds home in Vancouver. Her work has appeared recently in *The Fiddlehead, The Maynard,* and *Best Canadian Poetry*. She was a poetry finalist for the 2019 Bronwen Wallace Award, and her debut poetry collection is forthcoming from Nightwood Editions in Fall 2021.

Christina Shah was born in Ottawa, and lives in Vancouver. Her poetry has appeared in various journals, including *Vallum*, *The Fiddlehead*, *Arc*, and *Grain*, with work forthcoming in *EVENT*. She has recently completed her first full-length poetry manuscript. On a hot day she'll be found at a good swimming hole.

Leanne Toshiko Simpson is a yonsei writer from Scarborough living with bipolar disorder. A graduate of the University of Guelph's MFA program, she was nominated for the Journey Prize in 2019 and named Scarborough's Emerging Writer of 2016. She teaches creative writing at CAMH and InkWell Workshops.

Angelique Stevens' nonfiction has won The Bread Loaf Carol Houck Smith Returning Contributor Award, Kenyon Review's Peter Taylor Fellowship, and Bennington College's Fellowship where she also earned her MFA. She finds inspiration in wandering—being in places that push the boundaries of comfort, experience, knowledge, and hunger.

kari teicher writes fiction, poetry, and complains. mfa from the university of victoria. work in *the puritan*, *room*, *canthius*, *joypuke ii*, *dalhousie gazette*, and others. kari lives in toronto with her bull terrier. she is at work on her debut novel about snag, yk.

Conrad Valone is a young Californian fine art photographer and graduate of the Savannah College of Art and Design. Her intimate artwork focuses on grounding interpretations of personal daydreams and nightmares through bleak minimalism.

Isabella Wang is the author of two poetry collections. *On Forgetting a Language* (Baseline Press 2019) and *Pebble Swing* (Nightwood Editions forthcoming 2021). Her poetry and prose have appeared in over thirty literary journals and are forthcoming in four anthologies. She is the editor for issue 44.2 of *Room* magazine.

Joshua Whitehead is an Oji-nêhiyaw, Two-Spirit member of Peguis First Nation (Treaty 1). He is the author of *full-metal indigiqueer*, *Jonny Appleseed*, and the editor of *Love After the End: An Anthology of Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer Speculative Fiction*. His essay, "Me, the Joshua Tree" is an excerpt from his forthcoming manuscript, *Making Love with the Land*, slated to release fall 2021 with Knopf Canada.

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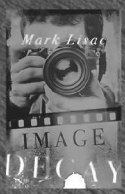

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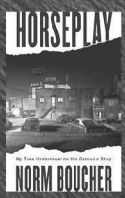

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"I think of the Mojave and I am a kernel of maize that combusts in between the pressure of a molar pairing—I need moisture, warmth, I need apocalyptic conditions to blossom into edibility and I am looking for my sisters thrown into a pot of soup."

— Joshua Whitehead, "Me, the Joshua Tree"

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