PRISM
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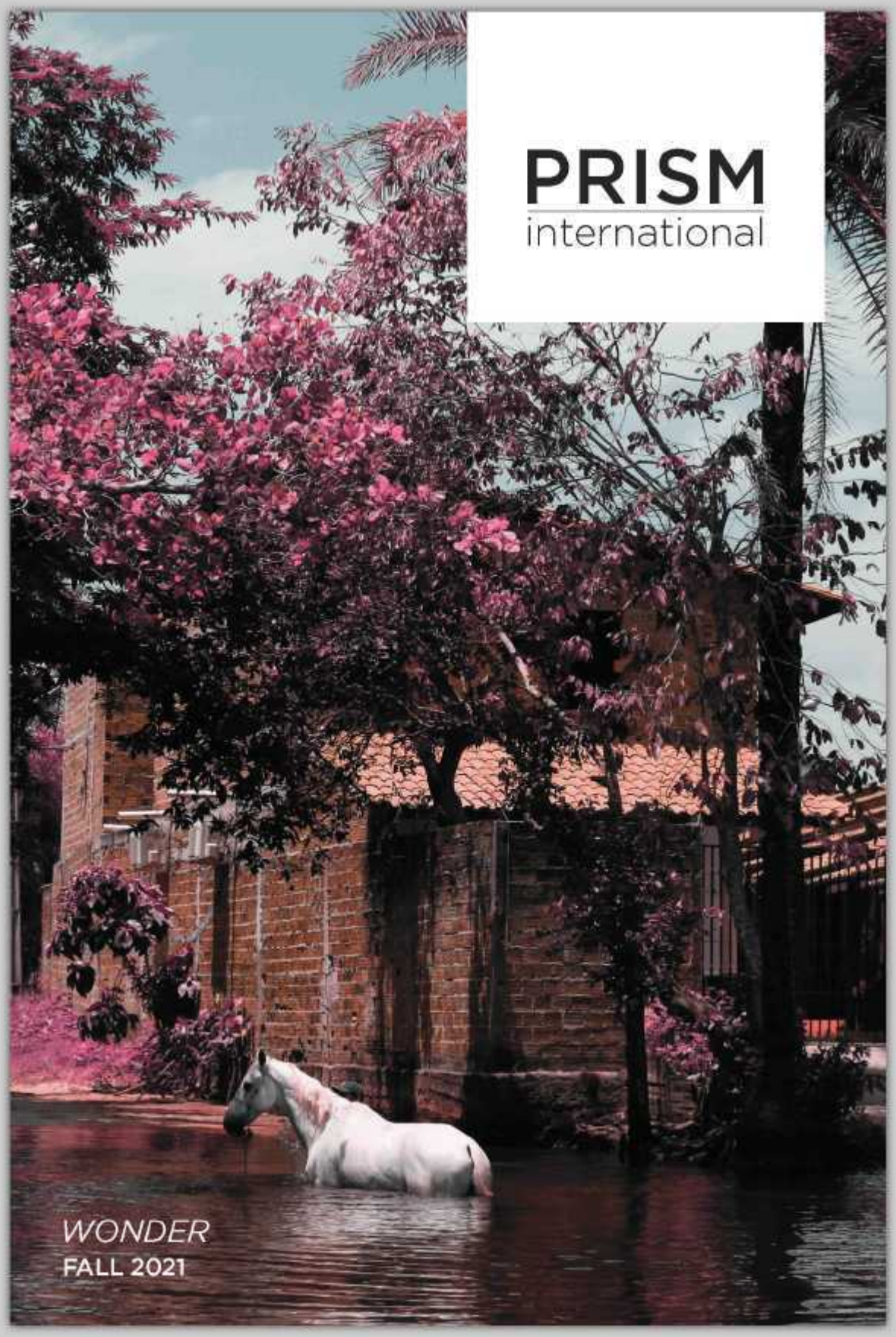

WONDER

FALL 2021

PRISM international

THE GROUSE GRIND LIT PRIZE FOR V. SHORT FORMS

GRAND PRIZE

"Most Nights" by Suzannah Showler

FIRST RUNNER-UP

"Pretext" by Moni Brar

SECOND RUNNER-UP

"What Are the Ethics of Picking a Stinging Plant?" by Delani Valin

READERS

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a place of mind
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LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Dear Reader,

What does it mean to live and frequent a time of global uncertainty, tension, and turmoil? How do we navigate between the histories and literature of different societies? Introducing *PRISM* issue 60.1 feels almost as unreal as realizing 2022 is just around the corner, so why not lean into that disbelief? Wonder entices us to levitate between the real and the imagined, the unexpected and familiar.

In this issue, we invite you to cross the borders of reality and imagination—to explore the pull of an apocalyptic desert, discover New York cities peppered with unnatural sightings, jam to Taylor Swift-inspired mountain hikes, and linger with the secret power of a young girl. In each instance, from a moment of uncertainty—bloom, adventure, and exploration pervades following it.

Similarly, in the Grouse Grind winners' pieces, we explore the undercurrent running underneath the living city and the self, between racism and belonging, as well as identity and place. What then, are the extents of the liminal spaces in this world?

Leave your troubles behind, or carry them with you as you step into the pages beyond. We hope you too will be inspired to flit amongst the stars, dance in spaces between the planets, and join our beckon into the forest—ever-changing, ever-open, and ever-resilient.

Yours truly,

Vivian and Emily
Prose and Poetry Editors
PRISM international

Suzannah Showler

MOST NIGHTS

The new neighbours below the place where we once lived together are raccoons. The city's swapping latches on the green bins again. Downstairs, they're preparing. They squat in the backyard like fur pylons and take turns with a Rubik's cube, chattering it into order, tiny fingers like static. I understand this: getting something right, ruining it for sport.

Up here on the balcony is another city. Feral, lawless. Canopy of roofs so close you could run across, follow a sloping path down to Bloor, scramble over apartments-over-bars, keep beaming south, Little Italy, Little Portugal, hover above Queen like the ghost of someone else's youth, watch the bars let out at their Puritan hour, Toronto the Good.

Below, the neighbours crack metal bonnets into the unchecked grass and strangle each bottle two-handed and tip way back, show one another their throats. They can kill a two-four in one sitting. Louder in the dark, they hurry empties in mean lines and shoot them with a BB gun, trilling each time they shock some new constellation of shards into the alley. It's like this most nights.

I wanted to tell you all this earlier today when I saw you on the street. It's that time of year when the sun lines up with the street grid, lending the city a drama it secretly craves. What was waiting on the horizon was less sunset and more a precise, orange nothingness, conjuring and swallowing streetcars. The light bled into you, and for a second there was only the marrow, wavering through the centre of where I was sure all of you had been. You kept walking, and it happened: that trick of the light where you can see someone is moving, but you can't tell if they're coming closer or getting further away.

K Ho

RECOVERY POEM

I know red better than I know green:
scarlet, crimson, vermillion, maroon.
I do know some greens: juniper,
lime, seafoam, sage. I like emerald
the most—birthstone, peacock's
feather, the flat back of the ocean
in a certain light.

I have a neighbour called Kelly,
her eyes are the green of her name.
she was a friend before moving here,
but *neighbour* rings sweeter now.
we live alone, anxious, hungry.
every week, a knock on my door
and a good long walk.

five o'clock finds us in the grove
behind her house, the sky grey
with soft dark veins. in my pocket
a species map of the trees. my finger
on the silver maple, uncommon here,
haloed. we agree to visit it last,
the wind unruly and sweet.

in third grade a teacher asked my class,
what do you want to be known for
inventing? building a time machine,
reviving the brontosaurus, soaring
to the moon? beside me, a quiet
girl whispered: discovering
a new primary colour.

at the grove, the red maples dizzy
and drunk on their loud autumn show.

the narrow spruces with their long
dark coats, their tilted hats. the copper
beeches already stripped and sinewed,
soldiering on to winter. our hands
full of leaves.

around the bend, the haloed tree:
bare at the top but feathered
and full-skirted, trembling
silver and half-dressed, as if home
from a night out still yearning
for something else, something more,
something good.

aren't we all a little like that? alone
and turning for change? watching
everyone forge past, or scatter?
I don't know. I held purple sycamore,
japanese snowbell, flowering ash,
smooth-leafed elm, american tulip,
the torn sheaf of the map.

don't you think the leaves were arrows,
Kelly? their flaring heads, their flung
compass? promise me *it is decent*
to forgive the body. we'll get there.
the sky was dark and the wind picked
up when we laid them down

and watched them fly.

Shaelin Bishop

HOW YOU'LL FEEL AFTER THE WAR

We live in a city where the sun never sets. Its rays fray on telephone wires, singe the muck in evaporated bird baths, roast beetles on the street stone. When we come home, our hair is warm enough to cook a quail egg. Sometimes, you almost burn me when I hold you, your shoulder blades like wings of heated ceramic. In the evening, the sky corals, the moon hung in the pink haze like a tusk, but the sun will still be neon and piercing the horizon—never lower.

Our apartment is cluttered with hanging pans, rusting house plants we nurse with thimbles of water, rugs on the walls to muffle the neighbours and keep the cool in. We shade the windows with cotton sheets and dab peppermint oil behind our ears and down the backs of each other's necks. When we are allowed to fill the bath from the well, we do soak there for hours. The water is always grained with sand. That's okay. That's how we scrub away god. Under the water, your skin is soft as a cherry petal.

At night, it's too warm to tangle around each other, so I only press my palm or my forehead to the spot between your shoulder blades and feel your heart through your back. Instead of holding my sweat-slick

palm, you simply link our pointer fingers like fish hooks. Sometimes we cannot sleep, so we'll rise at the latest, coolest, darkest part of night, when the sky is vivid as hibiscus tea, and sit on the windowsill with our knees together. Our apartment is at the top of a hillside, so we overlook the terracotta rooftops honeycombed below, streets cinched between the buildings like the sandpaper back of a rattlesnake. I pleat coolness over our shoulders with a bamboo hand fan while you count the stars. Five. Nine. Eight. Four. One night, you find twelve, and the next day half of them are gone again.

We rescue a stray cat cawing from the gutter above an abandoned pastry shop. Her tortoiseshell body shivers in the crook of your elbow, her marbled rust and black coat patched over a stark-boned ribcage, eyes like copper pennies. You name her Bird because her meows sound like a crow's cooing. She hunts the mice that scuttle behind our furniture and leaves their bodies at our bedside, throats punctured by her canines.

"Sacrificial offerings," you say, Bird tucked to you with one arm while you lift the jammy red carcass with the other. "This is a very holy cat."

Bird is like a wood stove when she sleeps curled against our hips at night. I try to push her away, but she crawls back. She sits on the counter while we cook dinner and beeps at us for scraps. We lie on the floor and play solitaire and she paws at our cheeks until we drop the cards to bump our noses against hers. She sleeps in the sink to stay cool which is so clever we start napping and reading in the bathtub for the kiss of cold porcelain. As soon as we start doing this, she jumps into the tub with us.

No matter where we stand in the apartment, she follows to sit between our feet with her tail python'd around our ankles. We are the only people who have ever given her safety. As much as she loves us, she does not trust that we will stay as soon as we are out of sight.

It has been this way for years. It started slowly. We hardly noticed the daylight shearing away a few minutes of dark each night. Morning rolled over night earlier and earlier. Night tipped over afternoon later and later. An hour of darkness, then less, then none. We'd met a few months before the sun stopped setting, and those nights have an added sacredness because they will be the only ones we ever get.

To us, newly in love, the long days felt like a blessing. The streets—once so tightly packed we could not walk shoulder to shoulder, only with you following me, hands linked or we'd lose each other—would be

empty at night, the sky dandelion or lavender. We hiked the bluff north of the city, sat in the orange dirt with a flask of mint tea and a sleeve of figs. We watched the moon spool to its peak over the rose gold city. Eventually, a group of pilgrims set up camp there, and would howl at the sun with their eyes open and arms spread while noon arced over their scalded chests.

Some people wrote scriptures on sidewalks. Some fled to the desert and lay in the sand with their arms open until dehydration husked them, this a preferable death to whatever they feared was coming. Others drank goblets of their own blood in town squares and claimed themselves prophets with their ruby tongues and teeth. People abandoned or devoted fully to whatever god or gods they'd followed before.

The first morning I ever woke in your bed, the sky peached out the window even though the clock read 3 a.m. I was so naïve to the breadth of this disaster. I cared only to watch sunlight lace your spine as if underwater. The sky was burning our city; I had never felt more at peace.

We come home one evening and Bird is gone. We wander the streets, calling for her. The sun looks like a white pupil in the ochre sky. We wear long-sleeved linen to keep it off our arms. Our footsteps slap the sandstone and echo through the narrow streets.

Just when we think we will not find her, you spot the whisk of her tail. We call her name, but instead of running back to us, she bolts through an alley and we follow, laundry whipping over our heads. We chase her up the street, behind boarded shops, and into the vaporized canal that borders the city. The basin is crisp with browned algae and the bones of desiccated minnows. We are not chasing Bird—she is guiding us.

We follow her up the cracked riverbed, and with the city now distant from us, find water guzzling from an underground aquifer. A single drop cuts through the clay, a ribbon that leads all the way to a pond.

Bird sits regally next to an oasis and her paws divot the sand. The pond is round and glittery as a full moon. Palms drift across the red horizon. The sun dips, then winks out entirely, and we're bathed in darkness for the first time in years. There are more stars than you can count.

If we walk too far from the oasis the night is gone—the sky blood-red, sun searing the city—but in the pool the night is soft and bloomed open like a morning glory. Moonlight silks the water and we dive into it, leave our clothes crumpled on the bank. We laugh under the surface. We kiss the water off each other's collarbones. We float in the darkness. We have never felt so clean.

We go back to the oasis the next night. The water is as cool and satin as before. You wander the sand looking for the cause, a shadow or a pinhole in the atmosphere, but find nothing. I don't need to understand it—I don't want to know. Miracles always have foul causes. I would rather watch moonlight glitter off your soaked hair, hover weightlessly in the reflection of the stars, than know.

In the city, the street stones are so hot they crosshatch our sandal soles with singe marks. Bird cannot go outside or the pads of her feet burn. When I see you walking ahead of me, the silver blade of mirage severs you into pieces: your hips misaligned with your waist, your neck misaligned with your shoulders. The sky is so hazy that it's like looking through a cat's translucent eyelid. If you do not shelter yourself under a scarf or a parasol the sun will dizzy you. Sweat molds our shirts to our ribs. Now that we have an escape, it is more difficult to bear.

One night, we lie on the bank with our knees in the water, pressing angels into the sand. You roll to your side and ask me if we should tell anyone. I am still wowed by the pearlescence of night; I crave to wash away the sweat and dust caulked to my temples and fingernails.

"What do you mean?" I say.

"Other people would want to come here, don't you think?"

I don't know how to think about this, so I don't bring it up again, but I think of your question when I see a child lean against a limestone column and clutch their burned forearm to their chest. When I see an old man find shade under the wishbone of an archway and it dissolves moments later. When I see a fox motionless in a courtyard, pink ears sunburnt, beige fur greyed with sweat, and I am unsure if it's breathing. You rescue geckoes slipped into empty fountains and jade songbirds concussed against white-hot window panes. I used to look at people and know that we were just like them. We were being swallowed by sun, yes, but at least we all were. Never have I wanted to be a king: to face the feeling of winning the war, and then sit with the cost forever.

A month after we find the oasis, an elderly man dies. He is the grandfather of six-year-old twins whose parents live in the apartment below us. That day, we watched the twins while their parents went to the market. The twins love Bird and she chases them around the apartment. Their grandfather gets lost and by the time they find him, the razor-sharp sun has exhausted him until his heart has stopped, like a cutlass slashing his

chest open. He dropped the basket of figs he'd haggled for the twins, the fruit stamped into the rivets of sandstone around his buckled knees. When they tell us this, I imagine one still spinning like a top in the centre of the street.

These kinds of deaths happen more and more, but it's the first time the sun has felled someone we knew. We don't go to the oasis that night; instead, we lie unable to sleep in our bed. The light brands the edge of our sun shade and light needles across our necks. Our throats are raw from the heat and the sand and little water, whereas in the oasis we drink it in gulps. I don't cry because it's not our fault, because it's not, but maybe it is.

I tell you I think we should go back to the oasis and you don't answer. You're crouched on the floor in front of Bird, who sits like an urn but pays no attention to you.

"I think she's mad at us."

I sit next to you and Bird slinks behind a chair so we can only see her tail. "She's not mad at us," I say. "She's just in a strange cat mood."

I lay my head on your shoulder, but you take several seconds to lean into me, and I worry it's because you know Bird is not mad at us, only at me. She trusted you to be good, and you are. Your goodness is why I love you, of course, but I also love your goodness so much that I ruin it.

The next morning, Bird is gone. I lag behind as I grab a canteen and scarf. The sky is white hot as a branding iron. Your voice rattles as you call her name.

"We'll find her." I drape the scarf around your shoulders, lift it to cover your forehead where sweat gathers like the beads of a crystal tiara, and sunburn scallops your hairline. "Remember last time? She came back to us."

Most shops are boarded shut. There is no one on the street to ask if they've seen her. The bridge of your nose and wings of your cheekbones have gone crisp and glossy but I cannot convince you to stop and drink water. You only rush to the next street, arms clutched around you.

We finally hear her bleating from a courtyard and scramble through the jigsaw of alleys towards her. She sits in a sundial's lip of shade, a bronze relic whose arrow is now meaningless. She tries to step towards us, but as soon as her paw touches the sandstone she wails.

You rush to her and lift her into your arms, clutch her to you like a baby. The pink pads of her toes have burned. You brush the dust ashing her fur away.

Bird sleeps in the corner, chignoned around herself into a faceless disk of black and orange stripes. You sit on the windowsill, back against one edge and toes against the other so there isn't room for us both.

"We found her," I say.

"She trusted us." You stare out the window, where the sky gradients from sienna to lotus flower. "She brought us there for a reason, and we let her down."

"Didn't she bring us there because she wanted us to have it?"

"I don't know, now."

The problem with the oasis is that it is only heaven as long as only we know about it. It is only as pure as it is silent. Only as holy as it is unknown. You want us to tell someone, but the question I have is, *who?* How do you give a heaven that can only fit two people with their arms outstretched to an entire city?

The heat in our apartment is so thick it feels like inhaling fever. You sleep curled in our bathtub while beetles scuttle under the sink because outside their innards boil inside their carapaces.

Outside, I look into the turmeric sky through my fingertips. I can no longer tell the difference between my own dizziness and the pirouette of sunbeams, if the kaleidoscope is in the exhausted swirl of my eye or the sandpaper air encasing me.

I cross the pearlescent border between night and day. The date palms shimmer, fronts bobbling. A white ribbon scintillates on the water, where the moon and its reflection conjoin. The sand sucks around my sandals and I step out of them.

I dive in and float up to look at the moon, a perfect alabaster disk. The water chills my skin, when with you it felt like silk. Moonlight bevels my hipbones. Water sloshes over my throat and dips into my collarbones. My spine and shoulders rock in the water, until I've been there long enough for it to still. I let the water hold me for a final time. The coolness makes me more aware of my breathing than I ever have been.

When I step back into the sunlight, for the first time in years the heat is a relief as it evaporates the water from my skin. The cold moth-wings off my closed eyelids.

A girl rushes to me, her hands clutched into an orb.

"Do you have any water?" Her voice croaks. She opens her palm to reveal a frog the colour of pumice. I touch its tacky skin. "I found it in a storm drain," she says. Children often climb into storm drains to look for old coins or cupfuls of mucky water to take home and boil.

She thumbs the frog's back with the same tenderness I saw in you when you lifted Bird from the gutter, when you nudge scarab beetles into the shade, when you move geckos from the centre of the street so they won't be crushed.

I tell her where the oasis is. Because she is a child, she believes me, thinks that this miracle exists.

"Can I tell anyone?" she says.

"If you want to."

She hardly waits for my answer and runs into the tangerine dusk, her braid slapping her back with each step.

You are sitting on the windowsill when I come home, and you shuffle your heels in so I can sit across from you. Bird jumps into your lap so her head triangles against your knee. She wraps her tail around your shin.

We remember when both the day and the night were sacred to us. Whether that was the presence of time, or that we were still new to each other. The night was a silent daze where only we existed. Each morning I got to learn what sunrise looked like in your pupils. When light fish-eyed through the window and chandeliered across your skin and to me, that was always remarkable. The way your laugh reminded me of noon and your whisper against my collarbone felt the same as dusk and the tickle of your eyelash like midnight. How the light filtered through our pothos plant and dappled against your back was a sunset in itself.

I'm not sure if I can take your hand yet, but you take mine, cog our fingers together and lay our pleated hands on your knee. Bird's whiskers tickle my wrist. I cannot parse a difference in my memory between the softness of your palm and the first time I fell into the silken water of nighttime. You are and always have been all hours, all times, each degree of night and day. You are and always have been a miracle I am not afraid of, and one I believe in doubtlessly. We will sit here every pale midnight. We will wait together for the sun to set, even if it never does.

Kyeren Regehr

FIRE ANT

solenopsis invicta

Blazing
a pheromone trail,
this sugar-ripe river
of legs, city
wide micro-invasion,
striding chorus
line, stilettos
a-go-go; follow
the slender-limbed,
chitin thin,
thimble headed
and rarefied, fine
backlit china, black
bone-licked spines,
daytime hourglass
sifting light,
cinched
at the petiole;
invincible
linchpins, fire
mouthed and
fervid, touchy
feely talkers
in cloven
tiaras, riding
the scent
of the sidewalk—
sidle on,
baby.

Puneet Dutt

NOT THOSE ROACHES

When we arrived in America—
  my sister tells me of the rats
—I don't remember the rats I tell
her, I only remember the roaches.
The long brown bodies that split open
giving birth, heaving to release that
small, gleaming capsule.

Afterward, I would watch them stumble,
leaving the egg sac behind, and it seems right
this leaving of something twice the weight of it.

How we survived is a wonder—
Survival is relative,
living with the poisons and bombs.

In some species the roaches can fly—those were not those roaches.

Somewhere I would find the hollow shells later, their legs up to the sky.
The thin sheet of wings, like the end of a tunnel you cannot see.

Somewhere there are roaches that travel for the heck of it
—we were not those roaches.

Meghan Demp-Gee

LITTLE BONES

When the car breaks down we'll continue on foot, carrying
what we can. In the moment, we'll decide what to leave behind
in the trunk or scattered by the roadside. As we walk we shift
into present tense and I am telling you a story.
It's a story about something, but I don't tell you what. Look,
I say, pointing out the sweetly desiccated orchard
on our right. What is this story about? What is that orchard
about? What are you asking? In the story, you're still walking,
but now you're silent and alone. You're walking along a trail
of light below a canopy of low white smoke (or is
it fire?) or maybe you're descending into an unfinished
cellar, you're in a horror movie, the wood steps creak and
floorboards roar under an extreme closeup of your creeping
feet. Meanwhile, outside the story, the day lengthens and threads
and needles itself into your smallest parts. Your stapedius
grins and titters, your incus and malleus nod in vegetable
agreement, your distal phalanges flutter and tenfold ache.
They say, These were once a wildcat's talons. These were a reptile's
upper and lower jaw. These are promising details, but like
all details these details don't matter, shouldn't matter, like
someone said once we're supposed to be outsiders looking out,
we're supposed to be moving across somehow, from here to there,
or better yet, from here to here. Your body asks, But are we
there yet? The orchard answers, We're not there. Our mandibles
want to know the story's moral, and in protest they open
and flick the phantoms of their lizard tongues. My story answers,
Here's what I'm for: I'm about a place that I don't come from
anymore, or maybe, better yet, I'm about a car
that repeatedly breaks down, about abandoned almond
groves, about my patellar tendon, about waking up
thick-tongued thirsty in the middle of the night, stumbling
to the bathroom to fill a cup like our sorrow, to drink and drink and drink.

Brent Taylor

BLACK DOG DAYS

1.
The black dog found me on the dirt road, not far from the cabin where I'd come to get away. The cabin belonged to my father, who we recently had to place in a nursing home. My mother was buried in the yard of the Methodist church back out on Highway 81, eighteen miles west. My house had burned to the ground, and I was waiting to see what the insurance company would do. My wife and kids were staying with her mother back in the city. She wouldn't talk to me when I called. She would hand the phone to my nine-year-old daughter, and my daughter would put it to the ear of her baby brother, and I would tell them both good night.

2.
It was my first full day there. I had been out walking on the dirt and gravel road, kicking at one stone in particular when the black dog found me. It had been lying on the side of the road, eating grass. There were no

other houses nearby. As I passed, it didn't move, and instead watched me with wide, unblinking eyes as black as its coat.

A quarter of a mile down the road, I looked back. It was following me.

I stopped, turned.

I kneeled, uneasy about stopping my progress, but I let the black dog come to me. I scratched behind its ear. I wondered: was it a stray or a runaway? It had no collar, but its coat was well-cared for.

I picked up the stone I had been kicking—put it in my pocket.

Of course, it followed me home.

3.

The black dog, that is. I carried the stone in my pants' pocket.

4.

When a black dog stands at your door, waiting—for what you do not know—what do you do?

This is the most ancient of questions: Western religions were developed around a dogma of evading this question; Eastern religions have sought the answer for centuries and centuries, though its answer has always been obvious.

At least to me.

I let it inside—made scrambled eggs.

5.

And fed and watered—what then, if the black dog still refuses to leave?

6.

I built a fire in the cabin's fireplace, though it wasn't nearly cold enough outside. It was getting dark, but I made black coffee and drank it by the fire with the black dog next to me.

I had no schedule, I was still on leave from work. I had been working sixty-hour weeks getting ready for the audit that had just passed. It went well, so my boss wasn't saying anything, especially when I told her about my house. I was getting calls steadily throughout the day, mostly numbers I didn't recognize—collection agencies, I assumed. My truck sat silent and still out front, half a tank of gas—it seemed to be waiting for me.

But I wasn't going anywhere.

I closed my eyes, dreamed the black dog and I were howling on the porch at the pregnant moon, the fire raging in the fireplace inside the cabin. But when I woke, we were still inside. The fire had died down, there was no moon in the window, and the black dog was silent.

7.

The black dog slept that night at the foot of my bed. The next night, it was much colder. I let it come in under the covers.

8.

On the third day at the cabin, I found a gun in the bedside drawer. It was a revolver of some kind, with a box of bullets, .38 caliber. I hadn't fired a gun since I was a kid—it was one of the many things my father and I never agreed on—but I loaded the revolver with one bullet, took it outside. I aimed it at a tree just off the porch.

I pulled the trigger.

Click.

I pulled it again—*POW!* The gun fired, kicked in my hand—a splatter of dirt about five feet wide of the tree. I loaded the gun, fired it a few more times. My aim was not great, but I got used to the way it kicked. I could hit something. Point blank, anyway.

When I came back inside, the black dog was sitting just inside the door, watching me.

9.

I took the remaining bullets out, held one round up to study it, put the round in, and turned the cylinder so the bullet was in the chamber. I put the gun back inside the bedside table.

The next few days it was gray, rainy, windy. There was nothing to do but stay inside—allow the black dog to lie at my feet.

10.

The black dog didn't whine, didn't cry. It didn't bark or howl. Once, it growled when I stood, startled, thinking I heard steps on the porch. I made all these noises myself—whining, crying, barking, howling—at various times and against the silence—but the black dog laid quietly at my feet.

11.
I stayed in bed for days. Outside, it rained off and on throughout the day. I didn't eat, I didn't bathe. I only got up to let the black dog out, let it back in when it scratched at the cabin door. Much of the day, if it wasn't raining, the black dog kept watch at the dirt road—or wandered the yard, sniffing at the patches of pine straw and weeds. If it started raining, it would come up and sit on the porch.

There's a proverb that says a black dog is like the fuse in a house with faulty wiring. It pulls the plug when one is in danger of burning down the house. I made this proverb up myself, as I laid there, with my head on the pillow next to the gun in the bedside table, one bullet in its chamber.

12.
At all times, I could see the black dog from the bed through an angle of my window from the corner of my eye. Or if it was raining, and it had come up on the porch—even though it may have been just out of sight—still, I knew it was there.

13.
Eventually, I went outside. It was the first sunny day, clear.

The black dog followed me down the dirt road when I went out—but it kept a good distance.

14.
I'd walk on clear days, see no one for miles. I'd come home, make coffee or tea, think about how the black dog had run ahead to see what was up the ridge, or around the bend. It was like the black dog always knew what was coming. It was like the black dog would always be there.

15.
I ran the dishwasher, pulled one of the two sets of clothes I'd brought from the wash. After I transferred my clothes to the dryer, I made coffee and toast, poured a cup of coffee from the still brewing pot and went to the porch to drink it. There was a loud thumping from the closet that housed the dryer—something had been left in one of the pockets.

I closed my eyes, sat there and listened to it, the black dog sleeping beside my chair.

After a while, the thumping stopped. The coffee was no longer brewing, the dishwasher and the toaster were off, the track lighting in the kitchen. I found the fuse box, saw one side was particularly overloaded.

I flipped the fuse that was blown, turned the clothes dryer back on—the thumping continued.

16.

Then, one day shortly after, the black dog was gone. It was a gray day again, the mountain a mystery of fog and mist.

I felt fine.

I walked in spite of the ugly day. It was a long walk. When I returned to the cabin, I was very tired, somewhat damp. I made coffee, sipped it by the fire. For longer than I could remember, my sleep had been feverish—a long swim across a deep lake. That night, the bed in the cabin was a raft, floating down a wide, slow-rolling river.

17.

In the morning, I rose, packed my bag, showered, and pulled the clean pair of pants from the dryer. I unloaded the bullet in the gun inside the bedside table. I got in the truck, unsure of where I was going. The gravel popped under the slow wheels on the driveway, and I found it rhythmic, meditative.

As I pulled onto the dirt road, I was thinking about the fuse panel in the cabin that needed to be balanced. I was thinking about the gun in the bedside table—thinking about my wife and kids. I felt something in my pocket as I pulled out of the cabin drive. It was the stone. The one I had been kicking on the gravel that first day.

I threw it out the window of the truck. In the rearview, I caught a glimpse of the black dog behind me, standing at the cabin drive. It was watching me, and it disappeared out of sight as I came around the bend.

Genevieve Wynand

SAN VITO DI ALTIVOLE, 1994

i.
This morning I went to Costco and
shuffled along the crowded aisles and
white-knuckled my list and studied
the orange shelves and pallets and boxes.

And on the end of one aisle,
for three dollars off, not raspberry jam
but fig marmalade—

seeds suspended in quiet amber
like the petrified fly in resin
that my daughter held
to the light in the gem store.

And I remembered, *figa, figa*.

ii.
We had slept late and your mother
stood in the thick-walled kitchen,
thick to block the heavy heat of the
Italian sun. Midbite, she turned.

A just-plucked fig dripped slick
syrup from her lip to her soft chin,
Ma non dovrei, she said. I shouldn't.

And she told me about the wasp
that crawled inside and lost her wings
and laid her eggs and was trapped. But
her children would leave as larvae.

And she said, *figa, figa*.

iii.
The night before, we sat close
in the backseat of a cream Fiat.
The boys in front, breath liquor-hot,
blowing their Marlboros and music, and

tumblerapping the only words
they understood: *Put your ass in my face.*
I love the way your pussy tastes.

The song and smoke, caught
in my throat, pushed hard against the
cracked windows. And the red lights,
suggestions only, streamed past.

And they sang, *figa, figa.*

iv.
Before they'd arrived, we kohl-lined
our eyes and smoothed our hair and
curled our painted lashes. You spun me
around, and I caught in the mirror

your chocolate brown eyes, your
breasts and your thighs, your fingers
light in mine.

Then you stopped my spin and
looked at me and raised your hand
to your cheek. Your finger and thumb
made a perfect O.

And you whispered, *figa, figa.*

Connie Pan

BIRTHDAY PARTY

At Mākālei Beach Park, a diver grills his fresh catch, speared along the jagged shore, places the offering at the covered picnic table's edge. With wooden chopsticks, we descend. I capture a moon of meat by the second dorsal fin. Someone insists, swatting my bicep, *Don't eat the 'ōkole. Eat the belly.* —And I wonder what kind of girl I am to not know where the good meat is. Or to know and choose what no one wants. Nevertheless, what I remember most about this day: wandering the beachwalk, noticing crab carcasses. Were they so in awe of the water they, perched on porous lava rocks, dried persimmon in the sun? I am no stranger to this admiration. Is it part of being gone too long, of not being able to identify the fish nourishing you, of wanting to know, but deciding not to ask?

Delani Valin

WHAT ARE THE ETHICS OF PICKING A STINGING PLANT?

I've been daydreaming of nettle. The underside of a flat leaf foaming with formic acid, little barbs licking wind. I've never harvested it before, but I think about bringing my scissors down to the lake. I wouldn't lay tobacco down like I'm supposed to, because I'd need to rip open a Du Maurier and scatter the arsenic. That's bad medicine, I think. Bad ethics. I have black tea instead. I don't have access to pure tobacco here, is that okay? I daydream of just taking the top three inches from ten or twelve plants.

I'm sleepwalking. It's the smell of hot soup wafting from the lake, leading me. Tadpole and lily pad and skunkweed stew, or is Campbells? I'm cooking up a way to wake up from this, but in the meantime, I tucked teal rubber gloves into my sweatshirt pocket. I felt real peace last summer when I filled bags with blackberries to burst. But neither fruit nor thorn know my name on this land, so I haunt their patches like a ghost.

The problem is that I'm a stranger to myself. And so, when Nettle asks where are you from and who is your grandmother, I can answer. It's all in the documents at home. It's all there in case you need proof. But when Nettle lowers their voice and asks okay and who are you? I think about my sadness and my credentials and a story I made up when I was seven. I say something like, I'm just trying to be here.

Nettle looks, and sees. Soup's on, they say. They mean nettle minestrone. They mean I am also in the broth. So when I wake up one day, my hands will still be stinging.

Sarmista Das

GANGA

I

The river Ganges flows from the divine peaks of the Himalayas down to the bustling Bay of Bengal, where it empties into the ocean. For centuries, devout Hindus have been bathing in its waters to pay respect to their ancestors, hoping that the goddess of the river, Ganga, will absolve them of their sins. Hindus scatter the ashes of their loved ones in this same river, in hopes that the river goddess will carry their souls to Nirvana, allowing them to finally rest in peace.

I've always wondered what happens to souls if they do *not* find their way into the Ganges.

II

November 1997, Quebec, Canada.

I'm fourteen years old, rifling through the newspaper in search of its comics, when a headline catches my attention. It reads, "Reena Virk's Short Life and Lonely Death." I pore over the article, absorbed until my

watch alerts me that it's time to go to school. Without blinking, I tear the article, stuff it into my knapsack, and make a mad dash for the bus stop.

III

December 1997, Quebec, Canada.

"Character foil: the character that contrasts with the protagonist." My English teacher writes this on the board and launches into an hour-long lecture on literary devices. We're told that we'll no longer be discussing plot-lines; now that we are older, we are capable of rendering more complex analyses of literature. We're told that analyzing literary devices can bring us closer to understanding the meaning of a story, particularly when the narrative has no clear conclusion.

In between taking notes, my eyes dart towards my backpack. I think about the article that's still inside since I left it there a month ago. I think about the way the contents of the article trickled into my day-to-day mundane thoughts, the way the story leaked into my nightmares.

We read some vapid story with an "interpretive" ending. The class collectively groans at the end of the reading because now we have to figure out what its meaning is, not by looking at the actions of the story, but by reading between the lines.

IV

According to Hindus, the river Ganges is named after the Goddess Ganga, who is believed to have descended upon the Earth with such force that she would have destroyed the entire planet had she not been caught in Lord Shiva's strands of lush black hair. It is from these very strands that Ganga transformed into the rivulets that brought forth water to the inhabitants of India, along with the mysterious cycles of birth, death, and the fleetingly brief period in between that's called life, something I feel I don't quite comprehend or deserve.

V

December 1997, Quebec, Canada.

The teacher hands back my test and I can see her eyes burning questions into my skin. *What happened to my A+ student?* they inquire. I look glassily at the red marks across my test. *Have you been paying attention in class?* they ask.

The irony is that I have been paying more attention than usual to her lectures. I've always loved English class, but lately, I've been drawn to the lectures not out of fascination but out of contempt.

I did not want to read beyond the plot. I did not want to see the "greater meaning" behind the story. I needed the finality of a conclusive ending.

I leave class, throwing the test unceremoniously into the dustbin.

VI

January 1998, Quebec, Canada.

My mind keeps returning to the English lesson on character foils from last semester. I allow my thoughts to linger on the similarities and the haunting differences. I begin to tabulate a list.

Similarities: Born in 1983. Born in Canada. Born to Indian parents. Unpopular. Bullied. Overweight.

Differences: Reena is dead and I am alive.

I review my class notes to help me rationalize this moment but it's an exercise in futility. There simply is no meaning that can be derived from this story.

VII

March 1998, Quebec, Canada.

I've spent the last few months examining every mention of her name, searching for clues, trying to determine what could have caused such a tragedy. The story garners national attention. *Girl-on-girl Violence!* The headlines scream.

Something bothers me about the way the story is covered. The focus seems off-base and inappropriate.

I go over my notes again and again. This is what I've learned:

Reena Virk was a troubled teen living in British Columbia.

She was at an outdoor party by the Craigflower Bridge when she was killed.

She was brutally beaten, stabbed, and drowned by a group of eight of her peers, most of them teenage girls.

The attack was set off when one of the teens approached Virk and burned the end of a cigarette onto Virk's forehead.

She came from a South Asian background.

None of the other girls were South Asian or members of any other visible minority.

The media focused on how the assailants in Virk's death were an example of a growing Canadian trend, that of violent young girls. Barbaric acts of assault, an issue previously thought to be reserved for boys, were on the rise for young women and girls. The message was that Canadians needed to do more to curb the growing violence in youth—that Canadians had to stop girls from glorifying violence.

VIII

April 1998, Quebec, Canada.

Half a year has passed since Reena's death and its aftermath. I agreed with the news that a lot had to be done to stop cases of violence, but these stories glossed over something significant. The burn mark on Reena's forehead was a detail from the story that was omitted from many reports completely. This omission spoke volumes to me.

As a South Asian girl who had been taunted with "red dot" jokes and insults frequently, this detail was not something I could simply ignore. This was something that us brown girls had to face on a regular basis. We were constantly made into targets by our non-South-Asian peers; even when we tried our very best to wash down our ethnicity and fit in with the "regular" kids, we would always be marked as different. Reena's literal branding was a visceral reminder to me that we would always be viewed as irrelevant and disposable Others.

I became more and more angry, more bitter and despondent. Why wasn't anyone talking about how race was a possible motive? Where were the talks of ethnicity-based crimes? Where was the national concern over *our* collective victimization, of *our* collective pain?

IX

July 1998, India.

The Ganges smell like feces. I walk to the river in my mother's village and glance at the waters. It's a putrid sight. My mother tells me that during Durga Puja, when Goddess Durga returns to Earth, the river is hauntingly beautiful. Devotees carry idols of Durga to Ganga's shores and submerge her in the water, wishing her a safe journey back home.

My mother urges me to step forward and look into the sacred waters. Reluctantly, I peer in—my face reflected in the soot-black ripples. That's when I see her distorted face staring back at me, her face swollen, veins protruding, a cigarette mark burned into her third eye.

X

December 2002, Quebec, Canada.

I go to a funeral. I've been to many in my life, but this is the first time I'm going to one of someone close to my age. We grew up together. His name was Amit. He and his parents were in a car accident. Their car fell into a ditch that was filled with water. We are told that they died from drowning in the car. We go to the funeral. The room is overwhelmed with three caskets, open for our viewing. We line up to view each casket. Each face, once so familiar, seems as alien as the next, their faces swollen and disfigured from their last painful moments. The casket I remember most is Amit's. His eyes are shut tight but I can see his accusatory pupils boring holes through his eyelids, asking, W*hy me and not you?*

XI

June 2003, Quebec, Canada.

I was miserable and felt guilty that Amit was gone and that I was still alive. I was angry at Reena's assailants. I was angry that the racial violence Reena faced didn't even register in the media. I was angry that it wasn't even considered worth discussing to mainstream Canadian news outlets.

These feelings stewed inside of me until my guilt and anger grew into shame.

I started realizing that I had been doing exactly what the news clippings had done. I'd been reducing Reena and Amit to their parts, fragmenting them and viewing them solely for the purposes of understanding my own mortality. I'd been foolish to think this was all about me and my existential crisis.

The lives of others shouldn't simply serve as a looking-glass—neither should the circumstances surrounding their deaths. To do so would be vain and self-serving, and would, in some way, deny the spirits of the departed.

XII

The waters of the Ganges run thick with bodies, ash, flesh, and bone. They run thicker with bodies and soot than the holy water itself, each soul crushing the other in a desperate scramble for salvation.

Vedic texts predict the death of the river in our current age, a reality that reflects what scientists and conservationists are announcing with increasing concern.

Without the river, countless species will find themselves endangered, perishing without a place to call home. With the death of Ganga, the soul's one clear path to Nirvana will be erased, leaving a trail of unholy spirits destitute and forsaken in its wake.

According to the Vedas, the death of the Ganges will end our current era, known as Kali Yuga, which translates to "the era of darkness." This era is one of human strife where morality plummets into the abyss of utter degeneration.

Vedic texts also reveal that like human life, the universe can also reincarnate, for it is predicted that once the Ganges die, a new era will be born. This era is known as Satya Yuga, "the era of truth," an era dichotomous to "the era of darkness"—an era of hope, peace, and divine deliverance.

XIII

November 2003, Quebec, Canada.

The questions don't cease and the clues still don't add up. I wonder about inane things—how did Reena wear her hair? What was her favorite movie? Which Backstreet Boy did she love (or hate) the most? I want to know the answers to all the mundane questions I will never know, queries that will never be asked or revealed in a newspaper article, all the silent little pieces that make her whole and human.

In my quest to learn more about Reena before her brutal end, I visit the library to search the meaning of her name in a name book. I find that her name means both "gem" and "reborn." With this new information, I imagine the cigarette burn replaced with a shimmering ruby, a bindi placed carefully on her lustrous third eye.

I flip forward in the same manual and find the meaning for the name Amit—"infinite, limitless, boundless"—and then something in me shifts. I imagine Amit no longer attached to his water-logged body but as a spirit-memory of a sweet-natured boy who loved watching *All Dogs Go to Heaven* with me as a child, who played Pogs as a tween, and became a well-liked young man passionate about playing the saxophone. That's the Amit I want to see, and I'm sure it's what he'd rather have me see, too.

I close the manual and take a long walk to the edge of the St. Lawrence River. I sit there for a long time, imagining Amit and Reena's souls floating past the river into the Cabot Strait, gushing into the Atlantic Ocean, making a long and winding journey across the oceans, eventually finding their way home to the Ganges. I whisper a quiet prayer and hope

the gods can hear me, but above all I hope Reena and Amit know I haven't forgotten their journeys, that I will never forget who they were, who they are, and all that they might be.

Alex Simões, translated by Carolyne Wright

CEMETERY OF THE NEW BLACKS

I
five thousand five hundred and sixty-three
fragments of bones were discovered
in front of the Cemetery of the New
Blacks, on pedro ernesto street, rio
de janeiro, in porto maravilha.
taking advantage of gentrification
in the city centre, archaeologists
isolated a part of the gamboa neighbourhood,
where they discovered, more than twenty years ago,
mortal remains of those who, enslaved,
disembarked from the slave ships,
dying of mistreatment and/or pride,
perhaps a refusal to serve,
dying as part of a historical
process and of resistance in struggle.
according to Julio Cesar de Medeiros
the "new blacks" were those transported
who, upon arriving on the brazilian coast,
died before going to the market
of people-parts for slavery.

II
(the archeological site is important
in so far as the studies progress
on the origin of the enslaved
even though the majority of brazilians
don't know about the place or its importance
perhaps because it looks like a rug
under which we hide from ourselves
three hundred years of slavery)

III
in that place six thousand one hundred and nineteen corpses
were thrown within six years,
that is, more than a thousand corpses per year,
discarded under a little bit of earth
(the image of the rug resounds here).
until here, of the remains discovered,
many, among them, it is known, children,
no skeleton intact, for one thing:
to fit more bodies in one place,
the practice was to burn them or break them up.
since in the new land they had no name
the modes of identification
refer to the presumed age,
the name of the ship and of the trafficker.

IV
the cemetery was discovered only
because some descendants of spaniards
determined to create a parking lot
in the neighbourhood and on the edge of the land
the bones of people were found

V
and while porto maravilha goes on
with the future museum of tomorrow
what to do with the unburied crimes?

Lisa Baird

IT IS RELEVANT THAT I'M OVULATING

I ride a cocktail of endogenous drugs with a looser laugh
& heavier hand with eyeshadow, thighs hips & belly pressing

warm grass by the bridge spanning the Speed River
just as it rushes into the Eramosa, propped up on my elbows

responding to texts, by which I mean
not avoiding the rivers or the trees but sending love

notes to everyone who hasn't heard back from me
in the last month: *I'm still here, I'm glad you are too, by the way,*

someone cared enough to make little wooden
shelters for all the snapping turtle nests by the parking lot!

My friend arrives with his partner & because I adore my friend
I plan to love his partner too, as well as their dog,

who yanks on the leash as we talk about a documentary
they've just seen until a slight movement to my right grabs my attention

& my arms windmill come-here-come-here motions
as I chant *OH my god OH my god OH my god*

at a pair of eastern garter snakes coiling a figure eight,
inches from my feet. They twist back into the undergrowth

& we wonder out loud whether they were mating,
since spring is long gone, or just making out—do snakes make out?

I remember my first time, nervous & elated
arriving at life drawing class, stepping out of my boots & blurting

Is she wearing a real snake? The nude model with a friend
draped long & heavy over her shoulders,

hugging her neck. During the tea break the snake
slid off, reappearing in the oven, which was not on at the time.

I asked the model—I might not have slept that night
if I hadn't—*I've heard that reptiles don't feel or express*

affection because they don't have limbic brains,
is that true? She shook her head emphatically no,

said the snake was as tender as any of her cats.
I tell my friends this, wanting to linger in the invitation

from snake bodies inscribing infinity on warm dirt,
no beginning, no end, like they opened a world outside of time

& allowed our rushing in, like we learned
a new language for an instant & it was ardent & necessary,

like I could call this holy, & no one would laugh.

Véronique Darwin

MYCELIUM

A half-deflated giraffe floatie waved from the bed of a truck as it lurched down the logging road. Pippa, wearing a baseball cap and quick-dry pants, pulled the RV into the campsite. She cranked a handle to level the vehicle, then lifted and clicked in the awning. She tossed open a large beach mat and swept off dirt with a child's broom. She hooked up her new portable stove and wiped it down with a J Cloth. Pippa was a supervising nurse; procedures like these did not in any way overwhelm her.

Her three friends, with their tops rolled up above their stomachs, occasionally glanced over from slingback camping chairs. They portioned the mushrooms on coloured paper plates, rolled a few joints, and combined and grated the cheeses with which they would later make macaroni, though no one had remembered the pasta. They talked incessantly, about whether wool was better bought raw or spun, about which of them had distributed their old unlocked phones to the unhoused, and if not, why. They talked about the narrative through-lines of various reality shows, and the recent oil spill—where their trucks had been during the time

frames reported in the newspaper. This was the kind of confluence-of-consciousness conversation they needed to transition into the wild night they hoped to encounter. There was a moment of quiet as they cracked their beers to the midafternoon sun.

"Do you think Pip's going to join us, or…" Suze didn't give another option. Holly considered what she'd do if Pippa stayed in the RV all night. She supposed she'd join her.

Holly said, "Her kids always melt down when she goes away."

"Who's melting?" said Suze, and pulled off her shirt to fan herself. She wore a bright pink bra with baby chicks on it.

Lou laughed, then covered her mouth with bright green fingernails.

"How's renal?" one of them asked.

Holly felt herself redden. "It's a learning curve," she said. It wasn't a learning curve. She'd learned everything on her first ten-hour shift and then asked, *Is that it?* She'd gone home and rewatched a low-budget show about Saskatchewan ambulance drivers until her next shift, buzzed off all the caffeine she'd needed in emerg.

Renal was all stories: in the four hours it takes the kidneys to flush, each patient runs through their store of personal dramas in an endless refrain of *My family is the most important thing to me:* daughters who move in to basement suites and husbands who arrange meals in same-sized glass containers and nephews who make enough money to pass on the lease of a Corolla and a famous director cousin who offers bit parts in shampoo and deodorant commercials. Holly didn't believe any of it; she smiled and hooked up and checked in and was called "the cold one" and she didn't mind. She had a full-time job and she didn't take her work home.

Through the screen, Pippa yelled, "Come pick your beds," and once they were all four in the RV, "Look at you, you're such children."

Holly, who recognized when Pippa wanted a compliment, praised her camping skills.

"We couldn't do this without you," she said, and meant it. If Pippa injured herself tonight by letting a bit too loose, Holly would be logistically unable to navigate them along the cliffs that bordered the reservoir. Was that why Pippa thought of her as a child? Holly's family had never camped, so this kind of excursion was still novel to her, and one she associated, somewhat anxiously, with female friendship. Even the overnight camps she'd gone to as an introverted preteen had been about finding a best friend.

She picked the kitchen table, which Pippa promised her would later turn into a bed.

The sun was still high as they skidded down the muddy slope to check out the water. Holly found a particular way—ninjalike, she thought—to run her feet along the edges of the dug-out path, and she turned back to explain it to the others. They wore shoes, and had chairs and drinks with them.

"It's easier if you do it like this!" she shouted, slipping her way back up to show them her technique. She'd finished two beers and eaten nothing.

"You're making the path worse!" cried out Lou, and though it was true, Holly also felt she had consciously made the choice to sacrifice the path in order to demonstrate a better way of descending a body down a slope.

None of the women used her method, and she turned her back to them on the rocky beach. The water was thick with bugs and pollen. Spindly, dark trees mottled the slope across. A lush, bright undergrowth was thriving beneath.

"Fire a few years ago," said Suze, who had some background in forestry. She remained a casual nurse so she could tree plant locally a few weeks in the spring or fall.

"Wait till you're on mushrooms," Pippa told Holly. "You always cry for the trees."

Suze planted her long beach chair. She lay, shirtless, on her front, and covered her head with her arms. She moved her long brown hair to one side. It almost touched the rocks.

"Don't talk to me for thirty minutes," she said. "Or until you miss me."

"Suze!" shouted Lou, in the water to her shins. "Suze! We miss you!" Lou shook her loose white tee-shirt away from her body and pointed with her shiny Birks toward two men fishing in a skiff. "Howdy!" she called out. Sometimes at work when Holly needed Lou she found her outside smoking with the custodians. She spoke to everyone like they were her brother. Lou turned to Pippa. "What kind of fish are in here?"

"I don't know everything," Pippa replied. "Carp? I have a fishing line."

Holly said she'd grab it, as she had forgotten her beer and could use a chair. Pippa told her she wouldn't be able to find it and followed her up the hill.

"Did we make a mistake in inviting them?" asked Pippa.

Lou and Suze were so young they still carried their phones everywhere. They jiggled their boobs when they heard a song they liked. They blinked around at the world and stared hard at each other, as though the only things gaining more significance to them as they aged were their own selves.

"I might not take the mushrooms," said Holly.

She took them last time they went camping and she had come to learn the trees with an intensity she wasn't prepared for. The old fallen beech with its peeling skin had made her weep for her aging grandfather; the lodgepole pines had mocked her from up high and the Douglas firs kept giving her the finger. She'd hidden from the nervous laughter of the aspens and had found refuge beneath a sad mother cedar, whose baby cones she collected into a pile.

"Of course you'll take them," said Pippa, who retrieved the fishing rod from the bed of her truck and placed it at Holly's feet. They stared at it: it was no longer an item either of them wanted. They walked up the dirt road without discussing why. Their days off matched on every ninth rotation. They would travel somewhere together for two or three nights, their calendars on repeat until retirement. "You'll take them and you'll have fun."

Holly bent over a dusty huckleberry bush. The fruits were dark and shrivelling. She enjoyed Pippa's hold over her. It was comforting to be bossed around. But when they'd been in the grocery store earlier that afternoon, Holly had noticed how often Pippa used this predictive, almost omniscient tone when she interacted with her children. She thought she was so in control that she could actually determine what happened next.

They'd dropped the kids off at Pippa's mom's log cabin down the old highway. The kids didn't say goodbye before running through the yellow field to their grandmother, who was walking with her horse. Pippa's daughter reached up to pet the horse's neck. Pippa stopped at a distance and called out to her mom, who replied in such a tone of disapproval that Pippa reared back to absorb it. She shook her hair out as she walked back to the truck, and didn't do up her seat belt as she skidded through a three-point turn out the gravel driveway. As they drove to pick up Lou from the café, then Suze from her girlfriend's apartment, Holly asked: "Are we doing this too often? Is your mom finding it hard to have the kids the whole weekend?"

Pippa lowered the sun shade and looked at Holly. "She's the one who convinced me to have kids. She'd better love looking after them."

Pippa and Holly climbed the road past the provincial campground, where a young dad barbecued on a small Hibachi and a group of meth heads dragged each other around in a red Radio Flyer wagon. Pippa picked a furry dandelion and blew it. The wind took the seeds in the direction of their campsite and they turned to follow.

"They're a different generation," Holly said. "I mean, they're in a different time in their lives."

"What time are you in?" asked Pippa. Then she said, "Different, I get it, people are different." She kicked a rock down the hill. It picked up speed and went hurtling off the cliff. They leaned over the road's edge to watch the rock form its concentric circles. To the left, on a bank of dry soil with roots hanging off, a mom presided on one foot over her nest of baby herons. Pippa didn't notice the birds, and Holly didn't say anything, and they walked on.

The mushrooms were chewy and bitter-tasting. They passed a bag of Sour Patch Kids around the fire and Holly turned away to pick at her molars. The RV was lit up and moths swarmed its screen windows. Swatting a dancing ember from her waxed knee, Lou asked what if they forgot about the fire once they got high.

"That's not how it works," Pippa answered. "You'll just become even more attentive."

They were supposed to pledge what they hoped to get from that evening's trip.

Holly shared how she'd recently read a book arguing for the therapeutic use of psychedelics in creating new neural pathways. She was intent on rewiring the way she had of smiling to herself in mirrors. As a child she'd been afraid of Bloody Mary, but now that she'd seen the new Mary Queen of Scots movie with Saoirse Ronan, she was ready to face her fears. She was a real woman, after all, and had nothing to be afraid of.

"That's the wrong Mary," said Lou softly when she took the bag of candies.

She announced her intention to retell the story of her childhood. "I just want to see it for what it was."

Suze pushed Lou so she almost fell off her chair. She announced she was looking for a better connection with the mushrooms themselves.

"I have all the ID cards, I just don't want to die."

Pippa shook the candies into her mouth and said she wanted to get fucked up.

"I have something else," Holly said, and put her beer down at her feet. It had begun to taste like nothing.

"Don't talk about my kids…" warned Pippa.

"What do you mean?" Holly asked. "Give me an example of when I talk about your kids."

When Pippa couldn't think of one, Holly started the story from the gator sanctuary last year. It was her parents' twenty-fifth wedding anniversary at their timeshare in Florida. Isabelle and Mikey and their boys got the master bedroom, and Holly and her now-ex were meant to share the couch, or—as Holly understood in retrospect—it was probably expected they would get a hotel.

"Stop!" shouted Pippa. "We want to have a fun night."

The two other women looked away. They seemed to know her story without her telling it to them.

Holly wanted Suze to take off her bra. Suze was swimming, and asked if she should do that, and Holly wanted her to feel free. She was proud of Suze, for the way she kept her long hair healthy and her body so fit. Holly felt lucky to have friends she could look up to, each so successful in their own way.

She walked up a dirty bank to a soft clearing next to a willow. She looked back down the slope. It was the same one as earlier. Why did they have such difficulty with it? All they needed to do was climb on hands and knees. Then she remembered the trouble was not coming up but going down.

Pippa shouted at her from the beach, but Holly knew the trees wanted her close. The high was coming in peaks and troughs that roughly matched up with the other women's, but not quite, so each of them were climbing and descending hills and only running into each other every once in a while. She settled into one state of mind and came to understand it and then was introduced to a new one. She approached the fat-bellied willow and hovered a hand near her knot, checking whether the tree wanted to be touched. She was warm. Holly leaned in.

On the little bridge over the fake river, Isabelle had told Holly, "You're not." She'd waved her gold rings, loose on her fingers. "I'd know it if you were pregnant."

"But I'm telling you I think *I* know." Holly was carrying a milkshake and wearing a baby doll dress their mother wore in the seventies. Her hair had humidified.

Isabelle kept arranging Mikey and her kids in matching flowered Florida shirts in front of colorful walls at boutique ice cream shops. Holly was waiting to be invited into these pictures, but she understood she wouldn't be until she had kids.

"You'll never regret having them," Isabelle was saying. "But you might regret not having them." Isabelle spoke in hypotheticals far more terrifying than Pippa's certainties.

Isabelle's kids were boys, and they were taunting an especially large gator through the glass they weren't supposed to touch. There was a small fence set up to teach kids what an electric fence could be. It turned bright red and went *buzz* when they touched it, and they were far more interested in this technology than in the alligator it was protecting them from. The animal sat pensively in its fake jungle, staring at them from beneath its eyelids.

The bridge shook under them as the boys ran past, and Isabelle turned to watch them. She seemed to be admiring her good work—she'd moved quickly from lemonade stands to Barbie spreadsheets to engineering. Then she turned to Holly and told her that if Holly's interest in her children was any indicator, maybe she shouldn't have kids at all. She said it like it was the result of an equation Holly had yet to calculate.

Holly miscarried on the plane. The first thing she wanted to do was phone her sister, not for comfort, or retribution, but to prove herself capable in her sister's eyes of discovering what she wanted—having, in fact, renounced something she knew she didn't want.

Down on the water echoed the sound of a ball being struck by a bat. There was a crackle of twigs and dead leaves and then Pippa appeared, out of breath. She picked her cap off her forehead and flattened her hair back.

"Solved the rock mystery!" she leaned with one hand against a birch and giggled.

Holly needed to learn about the rock's mystery and its resolution. She clambered to her feet, out of the tree's rooted arms. "Oh, I'm high now."

Lou turned the music up on the beach and Suze cheered. Pippa peered down through the branches.

"Great. Suze took her bra off."

The bra was floating in the same spot when Holly went back to the beach early the next morning. She carried the fishing line and a camping chair and set herself up in the water; exactly the same temperature as the

air, it felt like nothing but pressure. Her toes imprinted in the greenish mud. When she picked up a foot, the mud closed up and swallowed her footprint immediately.

Suze's empty breast pads sagged toward her, and she picked them up. When she was still pregnant, Isabelle had reminded Holly of a promise made when they were both little. Whoever got married first would buy a house and the other would move into it.

"What if you worked part-time," Isabelle had suggested on the phone, days before going into labour.

Holly couldn't remember what she'd answered, but now she worked in renal and she'd never been asked to babysit since. She'd also never offered. Without kids, she had thought, wasn't she still a child herself?

Suze cheered for her bra, then tossed it in the morning fire. They ate nachos with all the cheese on them for breakfast.

"Mycelium," explained Pippa. "We tuned into the network."

The fire was almost out as they packed their stuff, but when Lou bent over to blow on it, sparks jumped into a pile of leaves. Without making the decision consciously, Holly walked into the small flames and put them out. The three women stood at a distance and clapped, and when the video went up later, everyone who commented thought she was stomp dancing.

Emma Rhodes

LOVE: A TSWIFT STORY

I never liked hikes but today,
how the sun played lazer-tag with the trees, reflecting
off the snow and into my eyes taught them to see

not in scoreboard anymore, and not in darkness and not
with UV light. No, what got me out were the smiles
on mine and my friends' faces that stretched up out and above
our cheeks to shake hands with the sun and say thank you

for the light. For the snow-now-ice that we slide down and the trees
whose branches we scrape our hands on and the cacao beans
that travel here on roads to become our post-hike hot chocolate thank you.
I never liked hikes

like I never liked Taylor Swift but
on Saturday I belted Love Story as loud as I could with my
booze scratched and stammered voice with arms out to catch
the love story I think my friends carry within them for me

to share. Arms out to hug. I never liked Taylor Swift
because I never liked liking things. Liking was lame and loaded
looks from my friends not friends took the blank space in
me for love story to reach her arms out and sing evermore.

Instead, she muted herself. Played quietly
on CMT and if anyone asked I hadn't heard it yet.
Everyone liked Taylor Swift. Everyone
likes Taylor Swift. Because she's cool.
And to think of the years I wasted.

Scratch and stammer that not wasted—to think of
the years I was teddy-bearing myself from shame. Trying
to soften my blow because what more does a teddy bear want,
what more does a young girl want than to be hugged and

loved and appreciated for who she thinks she is, and know
that might not be who she becomes or will become after that.

What more does a young girl want than to be allowed to love
what she thinks she loves. To listen to popular music simply
because she likes it, to slide down ice hills with friends
and thank the sun for the world she's so lucky to live in

but was never allowed to say so. To love and for that love to wrap
around itself, make new shapes like the trees that reach
for that very same sun.

I must be growing all the time.

Jason Spencer

PARABLE OF PROCESSED CHEESE

We jammed at his house because
he was the drummer.
At that age, you do that.

Our heads did not tilt to electricity bills.

The five of us, and maybe a bored girlfriend, were in that basement
nearly every day.

The drummer was more mature, even though his mom and step-dad gave him,
"Enough rope to hang yourself with," I believe was how they put it.

Is he that way with his own now?

He made me more aware of my dysfunction.
His mom, younger than mine, when she had him.

He mostly kept it together
employing fragmentation
at the cost of volcanic anger.

That's why he was the drummer.

We played our first show, fifteen years old
Sunday afternoon at Toronto's Full Moon Saloon.

My eyes lifted from the stage floor to the hot light once, maybe.

When I close my eyes, we're in the basement, he's banging away in a faded
Knicks' jersey until sticks break.

We gather around the stereo
fire

that sits upstairs on the living room carpet
rhythm

We eat what's in the fridge mustard sealed between Wonder Bread slices
impermanence.

Morgan Cross

PANDEMIA

One day everything starts moving fast. There is no seeing it coming and no making it stop. It begins with the steaks on Thursday. Marie sticks them in the oven raw, and after only fifteen minutes the smoke alarm goes off. So we put in new steaks and crouch in front of the door, watching. In five minutes they go brown. In another thirty seconds they begin to char. We carry them out onto the porch, a little disturbed but mostly impressed. That's when our jaws start working like bunnies. Mild conversation spills over into sociable mania. We finish dinner in twenty seconds. So we go inside to shower, put off by our own appetites, not to mention the smoke in our hair. But as soon as we finish towel-drying, we're filthy again. Just like that. Our pits reek, our feet waft vinegar, and there are scratches on our arms and food stains on our chests that we can't place. So we shower again, and filthify and shower and filthify. We go to bed exhausted, momentarily clean, and turn out the light before either of us can consider touching the other. Then we're up an hour later to do it all again. Worst part is, the agains come more quickly than they ever have before, in swift succession, so that one again hasn't finished before

another begins. The dishes stack and jolt across the counter, plunge into the bubbles and streak under the faucet. The roses in the vase lose all their petals in one trembling display, and not more than two minutes later Marie's got her fist around a brand-new bouquet of bulbs, which almost immediately burst into bloom. We cannot keep up with the double-bagging of the compost and wheeling out of the garbage and sorting of the recycling. We dash around the house collecting and stuffing and swiping; we need to take advantage of this newfound speed. We cannot let ourselves be enslaved by it, cannot be made miserable by it. As soon as we decide to, we're out in the yard chopping apart the old cherry tree. Ten minutes later we've constructed our cookie stand, and five minutes after that we've got both the stand and a fresh pan of oatmeal-raisins down at the roadside, steaming into every open car window. People love our cookies. People slam on the brakes and pull into the ditch for our cookies. It doesn't take us long to perfect the recipe, since we produce upwards of sixty batches in a day, Marie and I taking turns sprinting up the winding driveway to the house and back down again, red-faced and oven-mitted. For a few days we're rolling in dough. But the rolling doesn't last. As much as we earn, we spend—Marie blowing her entire wallet at the consignment boutique on a handful of short-sleeved spring dresses, me shuffling twenty after twenty out of my pocket at the nursery for all sorts of evergreen bushes and flowering climbing vines and intricate rockwork and artisan patio stones. One day we're eating garlicky crab and the next baked beans. We decide to put a stop to the cookies. They're enabling our inner one-percent. Not only this, the cookies seem to be increasing the insane speed at which we already live. So we down the last pan on a single intake of breath and chuck the parchment paper in the garbage. Then we go to bed and sleep. We sleep and sleep and wake and wake. Finally we rise for work on Monday morning. The Cookie Days feel like a hazy childhood dream to us now. At the office we complete months of work in one day. We make ten thousand copies of important documents. We mail out thirty thousand letters to potential clients and customers. We type at an average rate of 300 wpm. At the end of it all we come home like we always did, only this time we do not wipe down the counters or begin chopping vegetables or flick on the TV or even bathe, we simply put down our bags and drape our bodies across the living room rug. Side by side, Marie and I, we link fingers but do not look at each other, we stare up at the popcorn ceiling like we once stared at a canopy of oak leaves in a distant university garden many many years ago,

on another continent, in the middle of a particularly humid day in June when we had nothing to know but the tidal surge of our hearts in our ears; and as the ceiling turns first blue and then black, spreading like a giant bruise above us, we understand that it will never slow, whatever this is, but it is ours, at least, to be still with—as long as we like.

Mike Alexander

A STARTING POINT RATHER THAN A PARTING

I'm clumsily cleaning fish,
a rainbow of scales glistening
in rhythm with the knife as old
ones laugh amongst themselves.

Off to my side, the young carve cedar paddles
with so much determination that we just might
free ourselves from this place.

Let us never again grieve for company.
Our paddles cut through currents, swift
in song while marsh grasses sweep past.

Our hair, strong, black, and long.
A reminder of our spirit forever fighting
to remain in this moment together.

Cale Plett

EVEN NOW

on the dark highway a few miles out,
you turn on the radio—
sometimes it catches the audio
from the drive-in theater if you hit
the right station. tonight, alternate static

and songs by men for men yet talking
at women. who's speaking love to who,
then? you claim this place as home when we pass
the 'welcome to' sign and another with a
number we can call to be saved. home,

though your nails are bright wrapped
around the steering wheel. though
you leave trails of dried orange
peels behind you and when you point out
the church you tell me how every sunday

you moved one pew further back. now
you've made it outside. do i hear
a hallelujah? biking down gravel roads
at night, dead centre, is the true
act of faith. then you prayed to our lady

gaga, to the stars and mercury.
star-crossed growing up
where cruelty started when you
came out as vegetarian. you park
diagonally in front of boarded-up

stores on the main drag. this is nowhere
unless it's connected to
the smile you angle toward me.

static sparks
when you take off your hoodie

to reveal the dress underneath. it's taken
years to find clothes to spin in
and nights to find a street empty enough
to dance in this place. driving away,
we can say we were here when

the streetlight flickered
and flatlined. when no one else
stood by it, we said goodnight.
fm grabs a car chase at the drive-in.
always this movie, you say,

even now.

Sik Siu Siu

SONGS OF MY FAUCETS

The faucet I ask
water
from
wants to be different.

Some days it makes a steady
sound, like that of a soothing brook.
Other days it gives me spasms
of splashing sounds, splattering water
that satisfies no one.
Still other days it sacrifices
only seeping, dripping sounds.
And most days it sustains its
sounds of silence.

I ask the plumber if it's normal.
The faucet, she says, is getting old.
I take her advice to get
a new one, one I can control
on an app on my phone.

But soon even this new member
of my kitchen starts to make all
sorts of sounds, some sweeter
than the sweetest sounds
of a sonata, some sadder
than the saddest sounds
of a requiem, some more
solemn than the most solemn
sounds of an elegy.

Every day,
as water comes
out of this singer, I
wonder
if there aren't inside all things
some persistent
songs of change,
of rebirth, of individuation,
that are far older than we think.

Wendy Elizabeth Wallace

RAINBRINGER

Mabel could make rain.

She discovered this when she was nine. She and her family were at the beach, and she snuck her younger sister's juice box from the little red cooler after she finished her own, because whenever Lila was around no one watched Mabel very carefully. With all that juice in her body, she felt the uncomfortable swell of her bladder.

She told her mother she needed the bathroom. She had to say it twice, because her mother was doing that staring thing, where she looked blank-faced at nothing for minutes, hours. It was new and it scared Mabel.

"Your mom just took you twenty minutes ago," her father said. "You can hold it, champ." He was on his back, holding Lila up with his feet and she was making airplane noises.

Mabel closed her eyes, focused on holding all that water in, but she could feel it building until it seemed to be flowing upwards out of her, and what a fabulous relief it was, for it to escape and form elsewhere, far above her. When she opened her eyes and tilted her head up, a cloud hovered and she felt herself in it—she recognized her own creation, like

when she looked at a picture she'd just drawn. After a moment, the rain came. She cupped it in her hands, watched the drops pit the sand and turn her mother's and father's and sister's hair dark and lank. After she helped her mother fold up the water-heavy towel, Mabel felt light and a bit dizzy, as if her hand in her mother's as they walked to the car was all that anchored her to the earth.

She made it rain again, two years later, when her mother left. Her father explained to her and Lila that they shouldn't be angry. He wasn't angry—she needed to work on herself. People needed to do this sometimes, so they could come back and be a stronger version of themselves. Mabel knew that her mother had been sleeping too much, sometimes not even waking up for dinner. And the staring thing was worse—when she spoke, she looked to the left of people like there was something she couldn't reach just over their shoulders. She used to sing, used to show Mabel how to flip pancakes, used to swing with her and Lila, their legs pumping together as they flew closer to the sky. Mabel didn't understand why her mother couldn't just be like that again.

After her mother and father loaded a few swollen suitcases into the Subaru, Mabel ran from her mother's attempt to hold her. In the upstairs bathroom, she filled ten paper cups, lined them up on the counter and drank each one down. She breathed and felt the water slide deeper into her body. Her mother was coming up the stairs, her soft footfalls against the carpet rising. Mabel shut the door and sat against it. The feeling rose as she sent it upwards. More water from the sink, and release. If she made a large enough cloud, her mother wouldn't be able to see against the storm, wouldn't be able to drive away. Over the knocks on the door thudding into her body, she heard the patter of her rain against the roof, beating and beating.

She made little rain showers when she wanted to see the water slide down the windows and pool in the gutters, when she wanted to smell wet asphalt and worms. She made it rain for Lila when her sister was too nervous to play in her first soccer game. She told Lila about it, let her watch as she drank and drank and closed her eyes and emptied herself. It thrilled Lila.

"I'm so lucky. My sister is a real life fairy tale," Lila said. Mabel opened her bedroom window and they stuck their heads out to catch raindrops on their tongues, Lila laughing into the humid air. "It tastes like magic."

Mabel made another storm for Lila after her sister penitently showed their father the B she'd gotten on a math quiz, and her father said, "You're better than this," which made Lila run to her room and cry so hard, she began hiccupping.

"Watch," Mabel said, as she opened the sky for her sister. She led Lila into the backyard, where the rain washed Lila's face cool and clean.

Lila asked to see it again, then begged Mabel to send rain to plague the girls who'd noticed Lila had no mother to pick her up after school.

"Just once," Mabel agreed. It wasn't something her mother would have approved of, getting revenge. But this made Mabel enjoy it all the more, following the younger girls just close enough outside the school so she and Lila could watch them hug their arms to their chests or hold books over their heads against the downpour. Mabel was getting better at directing the clouds, creating localized storms. They stood, just outside of the wet circle, Lila clutching Mabel's hand and laughing. Mabel felt weak and a little sick, as she always did after using what Lila called her fairy powers, but forced her spine straight. The more rain she made, the more she felt unmoored, hollow, dried-up inside.

After she'd tried to keep her mother from leaving, Mabel had been in bed with a fever for two days, her father pressing wet cloths to her forehead and hot tea to her lips. She'd heard him calling her mother, asking her if she could stay for a few days until Mabel was better. But Mabel had learned that nothing was dire enough for her mother to return, that her goneness was permanent.

"Can you rain on them every day?" Lila asked, when the girls struggled inside the doors, dripping.

"Not every day. I'd be late for school." Not that Mabel really minded being late—more often, she didn't even bother showing up. She had trouble following when teachers spoke, didn't understand why everything needed to turn into patterns and rules and formulas. Why couldn't everything be fluid and change like rivers? Plus she felt like she kept the wrong kind of secrets—now that she was in middle school, the girls wanted to talk about the boys who they were talking to or wanted to talk to, or they were sneaking makeup from their mothers. Mabel never felt any of the fluttery feelings the girls described towards boys, even though she'd tried, and there was no mother to steal from. During a game of Truth or Dare, when Mabel used to get invited to sleepovers, she told everyone about the rain she'd made when her mother left. The room became strained and silent, and some of those girls had enough

pull to get a good portion of the school to call her "Weird Girl" after that. It wasn't very creative, and it wasn't as bad as being called "Troll" like Abby with the body odor problems and prescription deodorant, but Mabel preferred spending her days in the public library, where she'd told the curious women at the desk she was homeschooled, and was therefore mostly ignored. She was always careful to be home in time to intercept voicemails or letters from the school, even though she was pretty sure her father would be too tired and distracted to notice them even if she hadn't.

But Lila was smart, brought home suites of As. She didn't know it was an option to not sit at her desk and learn. And Lila had an easy laugh that drew people to her. She was invited to parties and traveled in a small flock of girls with neat ponytails. The ones who teased her, it seemed, were an anomaly. Mabel saw all of this with a jealousy she tried not to let interfere with her pride, her support for Lila. One of them, at least, needed to get things right.

"I'll make a shower for you on your tenth birthday," Mabel told her. "A huge one that will soak everything and fill our yard with puddles."

"You're the best sister ever! No one else gets fairy magic for their birthdays." Lila bounced excitedly. "Do you think Mom will come to my party?" She'd asked this about Mabel's birthday, Christmas, New Year's, Easter, and the fourth of July—each time, with the same measure of hope and excitement.

"Maybe," Mabel said. This was what their dad had been telling Lila, and maybe a part of him still believed it. But Mabel wasn't her dad—she kept her eyes open, paid attention. She thought about what Lila must have said to the girls Mabel had unleashed the rain on, imagined Lila's open face insisting that her mother would be back. They'd see her hope—mistake it for ignorance and stupidity. And who knew, maybe the girls Lila had invited to the party would think the same. Anyone could change in a moment, leave her behind. Mabel couldn't always be around to punish them. "No," she said. "Lila, listen. Our mother is never coming back."

Lila's face went slack for a moment—the way it did when their dad was disappointed in her—then hardened again. "Dad says she loves us. If she loves us, she'll definitely come back."

Mabel had hoped it wouldn't be this difficult. None of this was even her job. "It doesn't work like that. She's too sick to be a good mother to us, and that's just how it is." She reached out to put her arm around her sister's shoulders, but Lila stepped back.

"She doesn't know about what you can do. She'd want to see it. We just have to tell her that you can make lakes whenever you want, and she'll be here like that." Lila snapped her fingers. Her voice was steady, certain.

Mabel took a deep breath. "Lila. There are two things you have to know. One is that nothing is going to bring Mom back. The other is that you can never, ever tell anyone about what I can do. Other people won't understand." Lila shook her head vigorously. Mabel crossed the distance between them, held her sister's head in her hands firmly, but not too hard. "This has to be our secret."

"Let me go," Lila said, trying to wriggle away.

"Promise me."

"Fine. I promise. I won't tell."

"Good." Mabel released her hands, and Lila skittered away from her, fussed with her hair until it was smooth again, then turned away to walk into the school. Mabel watched her, the way Lila's backpack now looked like it had been stuffed with bricks—it pulled at her shoulders, weighing her down. Mabel felt the bad kind of light, dry and brittle, like the husks of cicadas that snapped when she stepped on them. She definitely wouldn't be going to class today, she decided.

"What's this about you being able to do magic?" Her father's firm hands were planted on Mabel's shoulders, and she could smell his onion sweat. He always smelled like sweat, and she knew it was because being the only parent was too much for him. Before, he'd been the fun one, the one who never really dealt with serious matters and was all ice cream and trips to the park. Three sets of problems, his and his daughters', frightened him. This was different, Mabel realized, enough to force him to confront her. "You know your sister wants something to believe in, and giving her something ridiculous like this—well, it's just irresponsible. I thought you were smarter than that."

Irresponsible. She couldn't stand the way he was looking at her, like she was the one letting Lila down instead of her mother, or him. She was the one who made sure Lila got to school on time, checked that Lila finished her homework, teased her into eating the green things on her plate, listened to her sister's string of daily concerns the way Mabel figured a parent should. When he forgot to make Lila's lunch in the morning, which was at least once a week, Mabel made her sandwiches

with just the right amount of jelly and pushed a heart cookie cutter into the centre.

Mabel stared at her dad's face. She'd wanted to keep her powers from him—she'd never been sure how he'd take it, and keeping the secret, she'd thought, bound Lila to her. But Lila wanted her mother, and Mabel should have known this was more powerful than anything Mabel had to give. She wanted to be angry, but mostly, it just made her feel miserable, that she'd never be enough. "I can do it," she said, lifting her chin to her father. "It's true."

Mabel supposed she should have seen it coming, her father sending them to therapy. This was what happened when people believed impossible things, even if they were true.

He talked it all through with her—Mabel was delusional, or she was lying to get attention and stringing her sister along. No matter the case, she needed help. He should have insisted that Mabel's mother get help before her condition became worse, and he wasn't going to make the same mistake twice. He wasn't even mad at Mabel for skipping school (her teacher finally managed to get a hold of him at work)—he just wanted what was best for his daughters. He explained this to Mabel in a range of different ways and with varying amounts of what was unmistakably, despite what he said—anger. Or even worse, what seemed to border on crying, a desperation that quavered his voice.

For the first few sessions, Mabel refused to speak. Not that there was anything wrong with Dr. Vani, who sat across from her with a kind curiosity on his face. One of his shelves had leather-bound editions of *Lord of the Rings,* her favorite books to read in the library, and his shirts were always a little rumpled, unlike her father's—he always got up early in the mornings to iron them. But she couldn't think of what to say to this man. Afterwards, in the car, each time she had protested to her father that she could, in fact, do the things Lila claimed, the worry on his face deepened. She'd shouted that she could prove it, and he'd sent her to her room, where she couldn't find any water to drink.

During their third session, when Dr. Vani said, "Show me," Mabel looked up from her clasped hands. "I've heard you can make it rain. Let's see."

Mabel went to the cooler in the corner of the room and poured a few paper cups of water, enjoying the deep glubbing as the bubbles rose in the tank. After she'd drunk, she sat back in the seat and concentrated.

But as Dr. Vani watched, Mabel felt her throat parching—even with her eyes closed, she felt his gaze, scientific and disbelieving. She saw the sharp angles of her father's face, peering close to her own as he told her how concerned he was about her, saw Lila sitting in her spot, insisting that Mabel had super powers, heard the retreating footsteps of her mother and the whine of the Subaru backing out the driveway. She tried to send the water upwards, reached for the familiar feeling, but it kept slipping away. Her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. Her breath was coming fast, panicked. She opened her eyes and filled more cups of water for herself, but her insides were arid, wrong. Dr. Vani turned his head to the window, peering above, pretending to look for results.

She whispered, "I can't."

The man smiled and nodded. "Good, Mabel. This is an excellent first step."

The next step was to talk to Lila. She needed, according to Dr. Vani, to admit to her sister that she didn't have any special powers, that it had all been a coincidence. He explained that some people managed to convince themselves and others that they could make supernatural things happen if events lined up enough times. Of course, no one really had any power over the weather. She was a smart girl. She knew that. And misleading her sister would prevent Lila from developing properly and integrating into society. "This is important," Dr. Vani said. He leaned toward Mabel, his eyes level, serious. "You care about your sister," he continued. "I know you'll do the right thing."

Sitting on the couch across from Dr. Vani, Mabel explained this to Lila, holding her dry palms open. This was not what Mabel wanted. She wanted to split the clouds for Lila, show her a storm that would burst the roof of this sterile office, but she'd become afraid. What if it didn't work again, if she reached into herself and came up with nothing? What if it had, in fact, all been a freak concurrence of events? It was, as Dr. Vani kept saying, the only logical conclusion. And he was right about how people around Lila would react. Mabel had been careless, thoughtless. She needed to fix it.

"Why are you lying?" Lila said. "I watched you do it. You told me you'd give me rain for my birthday."

"It was all pretend," Mabel said. "I was trying to make you feel better, so you'd forget about your problems. It was just a game."

"It wasn't." Lila's voice was getting thin and frantic. "Why are you saying this, Mabel? I don't get it. Is it because I told Dad? I know I wasn't supposed to break my promise, but I wanted Dad to give me Mom's number, but he wouldn't and then wanted to know why I wanted it, and I—please, I just want things to go back to the way they were."

Mabel glanced at Dr. Vani, who nodded encouragingly. *I know you'll do the right thing.* "Lila, I'm not upset with you. I'm telling you this because it's true—there's no such thing as fairies or magic. There's nothing special about me or any of us."

Lila stared down at Mabel's hands, then at her face. The blankness in her eyes frightened Mabel. "I'm sorry," Mabel said. The words felt flat and useless.

In the corner of her eye, Dr. Vani was leaning towards her, hands on his knees, saying, "Well done, Mabel. Thank you for being honest with us."

Lila began looking at Mabel like her mother had looked at both of them in the days before she left, with the same over-the-shoulder stare. Mabel tried to get her to speak again, brought her library books about blonde-haired middle school girls who looked almost disgustingly happy, even stole a few bars of chocolate for her from the drug store, but no matter what she did, Lila refused to react.

Mabel knew the only way to bring her back was to make it rain again, but she'd begun to understand, more and more over time, that it was a delusion. She'd found a few psychology books in the library that explained how mental illness could pass from parent to child. She wouldn't be sick like her mother. She knew the truth now, was cured. Lila would soon follow. The shadows that deepened around Lila's eyes and mouth weren't permanent, Dr. Vani reassured her. Mabel could trust him. Trust was important. He gave her a box of sleek-tipped pens to draw with during class, which helped her pay attention. He taught her how to talk to the girls who had shunned her—to learn just enough about them to ask things that would encourage them to talk about themselves, and to only speak in interested questions

Most of the time, it worked. Now, when they called her "Weird Girl," the inflection had changed, seemed more affectionate. A girl in her English class had even invited her to come over and study, and they'd read Shakespeare together a few times now. Mabel was cautiously optimistic that she could call Tara a friend.

But weeks passed by icily at home, the rift between Mabel and Lila palpable even when Lila wasn't there. Their father had gone back to his usual mentality of letting things be, likely convinced that he was doing all he could by taking them to Dr. Vani. Mabel heard him talking to a friend over the phone about how tough it was to be a single parent, how exhausted he was all the time, and how a therapist made him feel safer because he believed that his girls would turn out all right.

Mabel wanted to tell Lila about it, wanted to crawl under Mabel's bed together with a flashlight and whisper about the almost definitely haunted house down the street and the cities they wanted to visit—like they used to. But Lila's door was always shut—not locked, because locks weren't allowed, not since their mother left. Mabel knew better than to just open it herself. The last time she'd tried, Lila had just stared through her, hands limp in her lap, motionless.

"It's nothing to worry about," Dr. Vani said. Lila was perfectly chatty with him; she was still getting good grades and engaging in healthy social interactions with her peers. Lila had just come to terms with some important truths about her mother and the nature of reality, and Mabel had been a part of that difficult process. Mabel might have created an illusion out of kindness, but she hadn't meant to hurt her sister—Lila would realize that, would appreciate it, even, in time. Mabel just needed to wait. Lila was fine. Everything was fine.

And then Lila was gone.

It was the morning of Lila's tenth birthday—a Saturday, sunny and clear. Lila didn't come down for breakfast, and when Mabel cautiously peered into her room, she found the bed empty, the closet empty, the cupboards Lila used to be able to fit into—empty.

It took Mabel's father two hours to believe it—he seemed to think Lila was either hiding cleverly in the house, or had just gone out for a walk—something she never did.

And then there were the calls to each of the girls who were supposed to come to the party tonight, and all fifteen sets of parents said Lila wasn't with them, and asked if this couldn't be some sort of mistake. *Lila didn't seem like the type of girl to—and hadn't they checked the—and how far could a ten-year-old girl get?*

Far. Lila was smart enough to keep everyone but Mabel believing she was fine, smart enough to take the five hundred dollars their father kept in his bedside drawer. When he and Mabel began ransacking the house

for a note or some sort of clue, he was livid to find the money missing. Mabel hadn't even known about the emergency cash, would probably have peeled bills from it and hid in places besides the library if she had. And then maybe Lila wouldn't have gotten so far, so quickly.

Even after her father had given up and phoned the police, Mabel paced from room to room, and then up and down the street. She watched the flashing lights instead of the officer's faces when they asked her if she had any idea where her sister could be. It was better than seeing how they looked at her when she said no, as if, like everyone else, they'd hoped for so much more from her. When she closed her eyes, she saw a web of dark after-images.

Mabel imagined Lila with her skinny arms tucked into a seat on a bus, or looking at the fields skimming by on a train, or with her nose pressed to the window of a cab. And anyone could grab her. She wouldn't be prepared for it, for someone to press a hand over her mouth and muffle her screams before throwing her in a basement and tying her to a chair. Dr. Vani kept warning Mabel about reading books about violent crimes, but someone had thought them up, and people were capable of doing these sorts of things.

Her father thought that Lila would try to find her mother. He called Information to get her mother's number, which was listed under her maiden name. She hadn't heard anything from Lila, but would let them know if her daughter appeared. Mabel could hear her voice, thinned through the receiver, and thought for a moment about grabbing the black handle from her father, shouting at the woman whose face she could barely picture anymore that this was all her fault. But it wasn't. Mabel had known Lila wasn't alright, known that her sister's real face was the one that stared dead-eyed from the bed. Dr. Vani had been wrong. He'd been wrong, and Mabel had done nothing about it.

Mabel stared for a moment at the phone, now lying innocently back in its cradle. Lila might be able to find her mother, if no one abducted her before she got there, but she wouldn't do something so obvious. This wasn't about her mother. It was about Mabel.

Mabel knew what she needed to do. She brushed past her father, who was scrambling to make another useless phone call, and rushed upstairs to the bathroom. She turned the sink on high and made a bowl with her hands, put it to her lips. She would have to pour everything into this, and then more, bring a storm so powerful that it would turn the sky the color of an open throat with drops the size of fists. A storm that would flood

Lila's school, wash over the library steps, turn roads into rivers that would flow and flow, taking up space until the whole town was water. A storm that would feel impossible to everyone but Lila, who would be hidden somewhere, waiting—listening for the rain.

Mabel hoped she could do it. She hoped.

Moni Brar

PRETEXT

after Bhanu Kapil

I
When he threw the axe at you, he didn't intend to kill you. He aimed at the back of your knees. He was young and didn't know what to do with his rage. This is the explanation, not the excuse. There is no excuse. Reframe: It gave you the opportunity to imagine life as a one-legged bandit.

II
You learn a better way to cut an apple. In the lunchroom, Ryan makes four clean incisions and lifts away a neatly cubed core. It leaves you in awe and feeling foolish you've done it any other way. You watch your friend baste a turkey. Wonder what it feels like to tend to an animal so carefully, so lovingly, and then to consume it.

III
What scared you most was that the fear in Chimwemwe's eyes was yours, too. You witnessed it in Domasi, but you've known it in the parking lots of Surrey, drowned out by the rumble of the sky train.

IV
One day you'll drive east until you reach an ocean. You'll see if the prairie skies are as big as they say. Vast. You'll learn if the Canadian Shield offers you protection. You won't need a map because you'll trust the green and white signs. They have authority. You'll stop at a diner for pancakes. Everyone will stare because your shade of brown doesn't occupy a booth much. You'll leave the waitress with the wet mouth a large tip because you're trying to prove something.

V
A month in NYC, and it feels like home. You blend into streets, dive off every building. No one blinks. Weeks in Bangkok, and you feel the same. Decades in Calgary, and you get empty beer cans thrown at your head, racial slurs in the boardroom. Assimilate.

Lisa Slage Robinson

BIRD WITH LAVENDER TONGUE

The girl was a wild little thing, slight with tangled hair, ragged fingernails, and impossibly dirty feet. Pretty doesn't come to mind but I found her mouth beguiling, its sap-stained corners, the dusting of blue-black soil sprinkled like cookie crumbs on her lips. I told my brother's wife about her, how the girl wedged high up in an oak tree had pelted me with green acorns that summer I ran the trail at Swann Creek Park. Each loop was only about a mile or so, and I had made up my mind to do six or seven laps before I punched the clock for my shift at the Dairy Mart. As far as my brother was concerned, running was my only talent, my only ticket to college, the only way he and his wife could be released from the burden of me. I generally agreed with his assessment. I had an unforgivable, lackadaisical nature and a deep aversion to schoolwork. But I could run with abandon. I reveled the burn in my chest and the rhythmic thwap of my Adidas pounding mile after mile.

Otherwise, I was a layabout. I stayed up late watching Johnny Carson on the black and white portable, sipping gin, any which way (up, on

the rocks, or dirty with olive juice and a splash of vermouth) and once the TV had forsaken me and all the networks signed off for the night, I reached for one of my mother's books, of which there were hundreds, and another tumbler or two of gin. In this way, I puzzled together my mother in a way that I couldn't puzzle math or my brother or our father.

My brother's wife convinced him to accept what she called my eccentricities, brought on by what she believed to be persistent and delayed grief. So he didn't say a word when he found me lounging in a bubble bath reading a swollen copy of Ayn Rand or lying down in the back seat of my mother's car, the one that hadn't crashed, with *Silent Spring*. But the day my brother came down to breakfast and found me sporting our father's fishing hat, fishing lures and flies jiggling as I wolfed down the last of the Cap'n Crunch, thumbing through a dog-eared and underlined copy of Jaqueline Susann's *The Love Machine*? Now that was something else.

"What the fuck are you reading?" he said. He smacked it out of my hand and proceeded to pound me with his law school hornbooks. Those things were thick and heavy hardcover treatises, nothing like my mother's paperbacks. He heaved *Corbin on Contracts*, *Prosser on Torts*, *Laurence Tribe on Con Law*. Even *Black's Law Dictionary* had a turn. They left welts and later bruises.

Yes, running was my ticket out.

I told my brother's wife how I was just hitting my stride, soon to be in the zone, where a euphoria better than a boozy haze could be found, where I'd soon be floating rather than racing to the top of the hill—when the first round of insults hit my shoulders, making contact with the bruised places my brother's justice had administered. "Hey!" I shouted. I picked up a rock, intending to throw it the next time around. It felt good and jagged, authoritative in my fist. But the next time around, I heard laughter, there was no menace in it, just delight. I looked up, salty sweat stinging my eyes, the sun filtered through the leaves obscuring my vision. I looked higher still and saw her, a girl around my age straddling a branch, bare feet swinging, the folds of her white dress aflutter.

I wanted to show off—I ran fast—gathered tokens along the trail and left them at the base of the tree with each passing loop. The jagged rock, a fistful of Queen Anne's lace and wild snapdragons, a handful of

mushrooms, fiddleheads, a salamander. I sang her a song. I pleaded with her to spare my heart. Wouldn't she please come down?

Still, she refused.

I hadn't planned to hit her, or hurt her. I just—wanted her. The rotten core of me picked up the rock that I had offered earlier as tribute and hurled it, heard it ricochet off the trunk with a smack. On the final loop, as I crested the hill, I saw a body. It was the girl lying flat on her back, dress askew—exposing one small breast and a hint of her private regions, the proper names for which didn't readily come to mind. My brain could only summon paperback euphemisms and back-of-the-school-bus vulgarities we boys snickered loudly and often. Her glassy green eyes stared up into the sky.

Certain I had killed her, too dumb to check her pulse or try CPR, I prepared her body for the inevitable. I wept as I arranged her limbs. I plucked leaves and twigs from her dress. Before I covered the porcelain swell of her chest, I extracted a splinter and kissed the angry spot where it had been lodged. I raked my fingers through her auburn hair but it refused to be tamed, it seemed rooted somehow—so I braided a crown with flowers and fiddleheads and wreathed them into a halo on her head.

I thought I should say a prayer or something, but since I didn't believe in God anymore, I conjured a poem from one of my mother's books, the one about Xanadu and Kubla Khan.

The dead girl smiled so I lingered. Marveled at the beauty of death because—even in this pretend version—it was lovely and more than I had previously been permitted to see.

I bowed my head and whispered, "Who are you?"

The tree quivered, its limbs sighing with a ribbon of summer breeze. A warbler trilled to the far-off percussion of a woodpecker's rapid-fire drill.

And then she wrapped her legs around my waist, pulled me toward her, flipped us around, her on top, straddling me. She pinned my arms above my head, leaned in and kissed me, hard then softly, with her dirty mouth. She smelled like juniper and honeysuckle, tasted like spiders and loamy earth. When she finally told me her name, she spoke like a fairy story, sentences riddled in rhyme.

"The trees call me Phoebe," she said. Her voice mossy, a thick slurry of twigs and bitter berries. A little bird with a lavender tongue. Her pelvis a hot insistent pressure. "I am the guardian of this grove. With the power invested in me," she said, the full weight of her pressing harder, "I claim

you as my consort." Then she promised she'd share with me the secrets of the universe, what cannot be said in words, all that she had learned from talking to the trees.

I returned to the shade of the great oak every morning that summer. Sometimes, I'd linger for hours hoping to catch a glimpse of her. Sometimes, she'd be waiting for me with a wood nymph's smile.

After high school graduation, my brother's wife couldn't convince my brother to indulge my intention to major in poetry or philosophy.

"I mean, what kind of bullshit is that?" he said.

So I majored in journalism and landed a job with the *Toledo Blade*. It was a print and pay situation. Ten cents a word. Given my lack of enthusiasm for the kind of assignments awarded to young reporters (The Peach Section—weddings, funerals, movie reviews, Peach Girl profiles), it wasn't long before I was evicted from my shitty apartment. I slept in my car for a few weeks before I summoned the courage to ask my brother and his wife if I could return to the fold and crash on their couch. He was working at the law firm by then, hoping to become the firm's youngest partner. She had quit her job to concentrate on baby making. My brother had responded tenderly the first time (even the second and third time) when she confessed that the life inside her had inexplicably expired. From the sidelines, I watched him cradle her, bring her cups of tea, rub her feet.

But the fourth time, four months in, on the cusp of the big trial, the night before *voir dire*, she interrupted a meeting with the jury consultant. The news about her incompetent cervix was not received with great compassion. I took her to the clinic, held her hand (despite the doctor's outraged and ardent objections) while he scraped and suctioned the residual fetal tissue from her womb, while my brother and the jury consultant discussed peremptory challenges and the vulnerabilities of the jury pool.

The procedure didn't take very long. Afterwards, I drove my brother's wife home, stopping on the way to buy her sanitary pads and Tylenol at the convenience store. I also bought us a video, potato chips and French Onion dip, Heavenly Hash ice cream and cheap red wine.

I settled her on the sofa with the snacks, wrapped her in an old afghan, and popped *The Princess Bride* into the VCR. The machine zip, zip, zipped and whined. The screen turned black. I pushed the eject button, releasing the case and loops of videotape tethered to an invisible hand deep inside.

I grabbed her spoon, licked off the marshmallowy chocolate, lifted the little door, peered inside the dark chamber and was about to insert the spoon into the VCR's womb when my brother's wife yelled, "Stop!"

I thanked her for saving me from certain electrical shock and reached over to pull the plug. But she confessed as she grabbed the spoon back and plunged it into the ice cream tub that she wasn't saving me. The mangle of tape was just too much for her to bear.

We sat there for a long time—passing the tub and the spoon back and forth. Refilling our glasses. Staring at the speechless TV, divining meaning in its silence.

When we ran out of wine, I went in search of gin. I found a couple of airplane minis stashed behind a battered and yellowed copy of *The Little Prince* from which I read out loud to her well into the night.

I showed her the illustrations as if I were a kindergarten teacher at story hour. She laughed at the pictures of the snake and the hat and the elephant and the little prince with his yellow scarf flagging. Noted how lucky he was, that prince, to own a rose and three volcanoes. But she soon fell sullen and teary-eyed, turned her face away, her chest heaving. She unscrewed the tiny bottle of Tanqueray and downed it with three determined gulps. "He shouldn't have left the rose there—all by herself—on that asteroid." Flicking the tears away, she repositioned herself on the sofa, stretching her legs and settling her feet into my lap. I watched her fingertips trace the circumference of her empty belly in slow sad circles. "Tell me a better story," she said.

I wanted to peel off her fuzzy striped socks, rub the misery from the arches of her delicate bony feet, wiggle each pearly-pink nail-polished toe. But I didn't dare. So I told her about the girl but not what happened after.

I told her how the girl lived in the branches under a canopy of flowing gossamer sheers as thin and delicate as bees' wings. I told her how we picnicked, the food we ate: little cucumber and egg salad sandwiches on buttered white bread with the crust cutoff, biscuits with clover honey and strawberries and cream. And wild concoctions of tonic made of bark and flower buds which we sipped from cups fashioned from the folds of oak leaves. I told her the girl had porcelain skin and copper penny hair that had a habit of braiding with the tree's roots. When this happened, the girl's lips would curl up into a lopsided smile, as if someone had just whispered a joke, a bit of delicious gossip. When she wasn't tangling with the tree, she preferred the upper reaches of its canopy. She'd tease me,

crawl out to the furthest reach of a thin branch that was too heavy for me to traverse—as it would surely break from my weight. My frustration. Her laughter, tiny chimes flirting with the wind.

"And did she ever tell you what the trees said?" my brother's wife asked.

Not then, not exactly. It would be years later, many years after we first met. I suppressed a grimace, searching for the right words.

"You loved her, didn't you?" she said playfully, jabbing my thigh with her toes. I wished that I had. I was a boy then. What did I know about love?

"It's been a long day, you should go to bed," I said.

"No, not yet." She arched her back, shifted her hips and sighed, "I'm not sleepy."

We both knew she was waiting for my brother. Around two-ish, the clink of keys in the porcelain dish in the hallway announced his arrival. He glanced at us, waved his hand dismissing any words of greeting, shook his head, mumbled something about the fuckup who had come to save the day, and slowly climbed the stairs. A few hours later, when my brother's wife heard him showering, she rose from the sofa, stiff-limbed and shaky, to make him a pot of coffee. She left behind a scarab shaped stain, a mirror image of the blackened ruby blemishing the seat of her grey sweatpants.

In the kitchen, she helped my brother wind his yellow tie into a smart double Windsor knot. She relevéd, up onto her tiptoes, to give him a kiss. But he was distracted by the convention of crows loitering on his brand new sedan. He rushed out the door, waving his hands, cursing at the bloody motherfuckers. But they didn't budge, just laughed at his passionate outrage, reminding me of the girl in the tree, the last time I saw her, how we parted ways. Red-faced, he marched back into the house, grabbed his keys and suit jacket, gave my sister-in-law a curt peck and said, "Gotta go." The crows clung to their perches, on the roof and the hood and the side-view mirrors as he backed down the entire length of the driveway. Not until my brother sped away did they condescend to spread their wings and take flight.

Dagne Forrest

BIRDS IN THE VERY EARLY UNIVERSE

We didn't have birds in the very early universe; we have birds later on. …
We didn't have time in the early universe, but we have time later on.

—James Hartle, astrophysicist, explaining the no-boundary universe he and Stephen Hawking proposed.[1]

The initial rounded base of the shuttlecock model
envisaged for our universe was a place of "pure space"
unburdened by time, its dark bell all potential.

What might emerge from the unseen depths before
time began? I think of that swiftly expanding frame
like a magician's hat, silken black, full of surprises.

A murmuration of starlings, wings tensed, straining:
they are competing with comets, skimming the edges
of black holes when I picture them, but this couldn't be.

If I'm to picture birds in the very early universe,
it was more like an empty theatre, all muffled shadows.
The birds would have hurtled from silence to silence.

Nowhere at first to perch as the universe redshifted
in its smooth progress outwards. The songbirds mute
in their wandering, alighting on stardust before lifting

off in a dark shimmering cloud of pure energy. No dawn
to provide a chorus for, no dusk to cue a quiet roosting,
yet somehow I can see them creating a perfect space
that never existed in the hushed shadows before time.

1 https://www.quantamagazine.org/physicists-debate-hawkings-idea-that-the-universe-had-no-beginning-20190606/

Ciarán Volke

THE ISSUE OF TSAR NICHOLAS' TEETH

Have you ever kneaded the earth with your foot,
soothing the lumbar of an old Danish princess
or avoided snails as they make their great pilgrimage to Buddha

Have you sat beside your window and listened
to the straight couple make sex talk while you watch
the night colours ink into dust

Have you seen a butt crack on an old man, or a little girl, and thought
my oh my,
we really do sever the heart from the body

Have you ever used your graphing calculator after high school,
and if so,
have you found the polynomial function of my imperial debt

Have you let an onion dice you, let garlic mince you,
have your bones been made into a broth—
it's your last chance to say yes before we drink you

Have you ever reassembled the signs outside churches so each one reads
"rupaul fracks"
before I forget, have you thought about pipelines lately

Have you ever been pushed out of the earth, dark and shapeless—
like a colt being born,
blue, glossed in smegma, shimmering, brilliant

Have you found clothes in an underpass and thought to try them on,
never mind the shit stains,
no fast fashion for you baby never mind the cost baby

Have you ever been kissed by fountain mist,
a prayer from El Dorado,
as we throw out your last baby teeth

Have you defended my claim to the throne of Russia or
are you waiting for the next election
are you waiting for the new set to grow in

Have you called your mom or
are you still not on speaking terms
I've always said every ruler's got mommy issues

Have you sat beside your window and listened
to the straight couple sing
Mulan's "Make a Man Out of You"

Have you learned that being a man means
being at the small of my back, kneading
kneading kneading

Have you learned that being a man means
finding the hypotenuse of your love, your spine, your last few inches,
and throwing it all away

Have you ever let the wind take your luck away
take your luck away
take your luck away

Jim Marino

NOCTURNE FOR SECOND BANANA

I saw your ghost before you died. Public radio was keeping me company in my little Airbnb while I chopped scallions and nursed that night's drink. A moonlit shadow crossed the fire escape. A flit. A hover. I reached for the cast-iron skillet, considered dialing 911, and realized it was you.

The window, thickened by sloppy decades of paint, took three tries to open. You stood barefoot on iron grillwork in Boston's unforgiving cold, wearing a sleeveless black dress and your dark hair cut short as if you'd slipped out of the Emmys. *Not gonna be there if they call our name,* you used to say. *Why give them the satisfaction?* You were drinking from the Deco hip flask I bought you in Silver Lake, looking toward the river neither of us could see. I leaned out to say "Janie?" and you spilled bourbon down your chin.

"Oh shit," you said. "This hallucination sucks."

I stepped onto the fire escape and wished for a coat. It was February, and I've lived in California so long I've grown old.

"Here alone?" you asked. Your face had the full-moon flesh of your mid-forties, shadowed by stray lamplight, and I could smell the old

familiar smells of you, talcum and stale coffee and cinnamon breath mints and fair-trade shampoo.

"I'm commuting. Just the spring semester."

"Right. Back at the old school. Teaching kids to be funny for money."

"I'm trying it out."

You laughed with the low, conspiratorial warmth your laugh once had. "I'll bet. No marriage troubles here, officer. No. Sir. Eee."

"I go back on weekends. Denise and I…" I stopped, because I was trying to justify myself to someone who probably wasn't there. "Would that make you happy?"

"Yes, Ted. Your inability to maintain a relationship is my greatest achievement. It'll be the first line of my obituary."

"I don't know. I think that goes between our early work and the solo stuff."

"What happened, Ted? You used to be fun." You held out the dull silver flask. "Want a sip?"

"No thanks."

"Suit yourself." You drank and scowled at the sober red brickwork of the Back Bay's back walls. "I always forget, is Denise the second wife or the third?"

"You know damned well." You've rejected two and a half of my marriage proposals. I've only turned down one of yours. "Why are you here, Janie?" I was afraid to ask how.

"I had to get out of the hospital for an hour. Some of those tubes are in uncomfortable places. Also, my roommate's hellbent on croaking before I do. Women are so competitive."

"They're trying to save you."

"Don't start your saving-me bit now, Ted. It's late. At least when you wanted to stick a tube in me you bought me a drink."

"Janie. No one buys you drinks because you're an alcoholic."

"So fucking rude. I've done fifteen of the twelve steps."

The first three, five times each. One of your bits I've heard too many times.

"Oh, don't give me that face," you said. "I'm powerless over my addiction."

"Yeah. So am I."

Your mouth twisted at the edge, something that started towards a smile but never got there. "Do you tell the kids how it really was? Who came up with our best lines?"

"Why should I?" I said. "Everyone knows." My phone began wailing Adele, Denise's ringtone, on the kitchen island. I glanced inside and when I turned back you were gone. I was just a fifty-four-year-old man, coatless and bare-headed on a fire escape, conversing with winter air. The radio murmured listener-supported jazz and the voice-mail bell tolled. I stepped back into warm subletted light to get a sweater and return my wife's call.

Denise said, "Have you been to see Janie?"

"Not exactly."

"Don't not go and then make me listen to twenty years of guilt."

"That's fair," I said. But I taught my classes, in a classroom with my own name on it, and kept my phone and Skype dates with Denise, and went to the airport every Friday. There was always an excuse not to go to the hospital.

My students didn't know you were in Boston but they asked about you, indirectly at first. They also decided to ask you about me, once they found your memoir in the college library; thanks again for that description of me naked. A few even started streaming or bingeing *Midnight Shift* as a way to ask us about each other. They were preoccupied by the same questions I was at their age, which no class ever answers. Were they talented? Was their writing special? Did they have The Gift, and if so, whom should they speak to about cashing in? Instead of addressing those questions, I continued talking about plumbing and laying brick: how to rhyme A and B plots softly enough that the audience wouldn't realize it noticed, how to use act breaks to generate momentum. One by one, I saw the students swallow less polite questions that started occurring to them. Maybe I never talked about elusive magical gifts because I didn't have any. Maybe twenty-nine years of writing credits with three different partners, all those shared nominations, was just good luck in writing partners. They were coming to suspect what everyone suspects, the networks and agents and studios and even, sooner or later, the college: you were the genius all along. Maybe so, kids. Maybe so.

I don't mind anymore. Better to have a minor talent and know it. I'm done trying to create my heartbreaking solo masterpiece and have learned to leave certain ambitions and mysteries in the desk drawer. It took almost thirty years to understand what I do. I'm a co-writer. It's the comedy version of singing harmony. No one's done better work than they did with me, and check your IMDb page if you doubt it. It's not a gift anyone dreams about having. There are no prizes. Studio execs don't

throw money at it or pay lip service to it or gamble on someone having it when they don't. But it pays. And no, I can't do it without a partner, but it doesn't have to be you.

I was flying another red-eye from LAX, the thrilling conclusion of the latest let's-work-on-the-issues weekend, marking up some hopeless screenplay I'd been hired to doctor. "Goddamn flight attendants act like I'm invisible," you said from the seat beside me, and the air was suddenly full with the smell of your scrubbed skin and your oatmeal soap.

You looked just past thirty, skin rosy with hormones and long hair tied in a bun, wearing sweatpants and one of my old Smiths T-shirts because you were seven months pregnant. You said, "Is this what you thought it would be like, both of us back home?" I shook my head, the smallest *no* I could make.

"Don't want to talk to yourself on a plane? Come on. You could finally get that rep for eccentric genius you wanted."

I flipped over my screenplay and wrote *is this a dream?*

You raised an eyebrow. "Do you dream about me all big and pregnant? Kinky. But also, repulsive." You clasped your hands above your head and stretched. "I hope you're making Denise miserable."

I wrote *she tells me to go see u.*

"Jesus, really? She's like Machiavelli. Seriously, how could you marry someone older than me?"

I wrote, *have to see it thru.*

You brought your tray table down, uneasily balanced on your waxing belly, and carefully lined up three airplane-sized bottles of vodka. "Is this your starting-over-clean shit again? You and your stupid grad-student apartment. Come home to Boston for rebirth, so you can wear elbow patches and write some fucking novel?" You unscrewed the first nip bottle and tilted it back.

Dont drink that please.

"We already lost this baby, Ted. That's what quitting drinking got me."

I wrote *STILL.*

You turned. "Oh, honey." It had been so long since you'd looked me in the eye. "It's too late for me, too."

I reached for your hand without knowing if it would matter, but you pulled away. "God. I have to wake up to pee. What the hell is the catheter for?" You were gone, and I was gripping a JetBlue armrest as if I could

squeeze something from it. I turned off the overhead light and failed to sleep. There was nothing left to do but scratch away at my work until sunrise and the airport and Monday's first cup of burned coffee.

My manager called to say, "Are you coming back? Because if this is a career change, let me know."

"I'm a visiting professor, Oliver. It's a visit."

"You're missing pilot season and, okay, actually I envy that," he said. "But it's pitch season before you know it, and I have people who'd like to meet you."

Younger people. More exciting, promising people who needed an agreeable graybeard to restructure their botched season arcs and run interference with the network suits. "Let me think about it."

"All I'm asking," he said, abandoning a hopeless cause. "But if you see Janie out there, tell her I'm sorry about that thing."

"Oliver. She's got other problems."

I didn't know whether to send flowers to the hospital or bring them with me, so I did both, the way I used to write two endings and let you choose which to cut. Your ward had that resolutely cheerful air nurses develop once they learn everyone can't be saved. I asked for your room number and the person behind the desk said, "Oh, she's so funny."

"That's her," I said. But I was wrong. You were on the inside half of the room, with the window. On the near side of the curtain your roommate was hooked to her dialysis machine, entertaining a clutch of chuckling family members like a trouper. Her material wasn't great, but the audience was on her side. I slipped past the curtain to find you sleeping fitfully and your sister Trish sitting guard. She closed her paperback and stood to greet me with her North Shore accent.

"All the way from sunny California." She was unhappy to see me, but not for the usual reasons. I was one more bad sign.

You lay punctured with tubes, your face hollow and waning and your skin yellowed like a page in a forgotten book. Wilting Christmas cards lined the windowsill while the TV re-ran CBS sitcoms you'd always hated. *Can't Believe this Shit*, you called them. "Noisy crowd next door," I said.

"She just got here like, Thursday," Trish said. "The last one…" She grimaced, unwilling to say how the last roommate left. Trish would have made a good nurse. You slept and Trish told me how long the list for liver donations was, how maybe if your next test numbers improved they'd bump you higher. How there was hope. My job was to nod and agree.

The laughter fell and rose on the other side of the curtain, vigilant against silence.

You woke and said my name, but not much else. You were busy. Holding on to life, or leaving it, took all your energy. Then, exhausted by small talk, you stared aimlessly at the TV. No sign of pleasure. No hint of disdain. Your hands reflexively clutching and releasing your paper gown. I repented every bullshit cinematic hospital-room scene I've ever ghost-written, all those formally-satisfying climaxes. Things don't happen at the end. There's no time. Anything we didn't fix before you got to this room is going to stay broken. What I'd dreaded most had been confirmed: I could no longer pretend that showing up would do any good.

After you drifted back to sleep, the TV ran a teaser promo for *Midnight Shift*. Nick and Paula! Would those crazy kids ever get together? "Guess I'll go. I've seen that one."

"Every night at seven and seven-thirty," Trish said. "Unless there's a Bruins game. Helps pay the doctors, right?"

I cancelled my Uber but did not cross Charles Street to the bar. Instead, I picked my way across the treacherous mile-and-a-half of sidewalk ice until I was back inside the empty apartment that wasn't mine, with the radiator hissing me and the oval rug so small it called attention to its inadequacy. Your ghost did not come to keep me company. I had already seen your ghost.

After a while Denise said, "We're not kids. You can't keep taking the red-eye every week."

"I'm not giving up on this."

"I know," she said, in the voice she uses with unreasonable clients, "I'll be here." She didn't say *if*, but we're married. I heard it. "Maybe in the spring I'll fly out to visit."

"I'll get us a hotel suite when you do." The Four Seasons, maybe.

"You could live in a hotel now, Ted. The bachelor-monk apartment's just a nostalgia trip."

Arguing about money wasn't productive and justifying myself was a losing cause, so I said, "Maybe."

I spent more time in Boston, where I no longer knew how to spend time. The city hadn't changed, but I was now prosperous and respectable and on a low-sodium diet. I saw plays at the ART and the Huntington, watched the Celtics almost live up to their potential. I went to the Museum of Fine Arts and the Gardner and sat looking at bare spaces

where stolen paintings would never be returned. I talked to my wife on the phone after midnight. When St. Patrick's Day came I stayed clear of the bars and thought about drinking with you at the Black Rose thirty years before.

My students continued their secret dialogues with muses and parents and other people who weren't in the room. I went on with the work in front of me. They were trying to guess how many of my little fortune-cookie maxims were originally yours, but these days I have to guess myself. *Make every exit count* was you, sometime in our second season. *Act three begins the next episode* might have been both of us. *It's not tension if it can never be resolved* was from after our last breakup, when my next writing partner wanted to repeat *Midnight Shift* move for move.

A student opened her mouth without any sound, shut it again, and then spoke, as if against her better judgement. "But how did you keep that tension in *Midnight Shift*? Seven seasons without, without…?"

Consummation. Resolution. Honest intimacy. *Is-you-is-or-is-you-ain't-my-baby?* Instead I said, "Without jumping the shark?" and the students laughed on cue, like a studio audience. She had a fair question, even if I'm no longer quite who she wanted to ask. "I could never pull that off now," I admitted. "But back then? When it came to avoiding commitment? I was a goddamn genius." This laugh took them by surprise. I used their relaxed mood to set some things up for next time and let them go.

"You should definitely fuck her," you said, perched on the seminar table in your shorts and T-shirt from the morning after graduation, when we'd packed the car for LA. You had Wayfarers over your eyes and Dunkin Donuts coffee in one hand, your legs dusty and bare.

"Fuck who, now?"

"You know who." You added two echoing dollops of cough syrup to the Dunkin's cup, and then a third. "The perky one with the tits." That didn't really narrow it down. They were kids.

"You've never understood my taste in women."

"You've never had any." You raised an eyebrow over your sunglasses. The medicinal cherry odor crowded the air, as it had in our little Hyundai, and I shuddered. "It's time to change your life again, isn't it Ted? New girl, new 'career.' Same. Old. Shit."

Then I saw, as your shirt rode up, part of a tattoo you didn't get until turning thirty-eight, when you checked out of rehab for your birthday. It

said—says, *Winners never quit*, but I could only read the first three letters. The rest I had to remember.

"If there's something you want, Janie, I think now's the time to ask."

You turned away, glowering, and slurped your doctored coffee. "Ah, fuck. Here comes Trish with the nurse." Then, with the impeccable deadpan of rage, you emptied your drink onto the classroom floor. I watched the relentless slow stream pouring out, then the dark smeary puddle at my feet spreading everywhere in rivulets—swift flecks of bitter grounds riding the flood tide. This was happening. I couldn't deny it. But you were gone.

The chaotic miniature lake of spiked coffee soaked through every paper towel I could scavenge, leaving them sodden, corroded mounds. I donated to renovate this classroom, maybe three years back, from my half of our syndication money. When I finished clearing the mess and felt only a little ashamed, I went out onto Boylston Street and took two deep gulps of air I could pretend was clean.

It was near the end of March, when the sky had decided it was spring and the earth was unconvinced. I'd planned dinner at the Union Oyster House and then Improv Asylum's second show, but even if I walked I'd have to kill two hours in the restaurant bar, so I wandered with the tourists in the Public Garden. There was still pale sunlight overhead, making leafless silhouettes of the trees, and ice the colour of an empty milk jug floated in the pond's inky darkness. The Swan Boats would be back in a few weeks. Maybe Denise would enjoy them. Tomorrow afternoon it would snow. I took out my phone to call my manager's assistant, but she put me right through.

"Hi, Oliver," I said. "Why don't you set up those meetings? I'll be home in six weeks." I walked on through the Common, picturing April and planning for Denise's visit. I should reserve symphony tickets. The snow was dirty and dwindling, wetting the paths without rain and laying bare the tough, unlovely grass that had made it through winter. People strolled with coats unzipped in the faint mist. And once again I found myself having that memory that is not a memory, the old, stubborn daydream of the future I thought you and I could have.

It's Thanksgiving, and we're bundling the children into the car. I see a Volvo hatchback with bumper stickers: WGBH and the Aquarium. I've packed the kids sandwiches, and we drive toward Cape Cod with cool, brilliant November light over the sea. You entertain the children we never had with word games and riddles and the search for rare licence plates.

A boy and a girl, seven and almost ten. They nap in the back seat while I doggedly work our way through the Route 3 bottleneck, the endless succession of brake lights stretching ahead of us like dimming coals. Then, as clearly as if it once happened, I see us pulling into my parents' driveway in Barnstable, the warm light of the kitchen waiting and your parents inside waiting, too. The grandparents stooping to hold out their arms and our children breaking into a run. I have pictured it so many times, long even after I stopped hoping.

My reverie left me on the edge of Boston Common at dusk, with pedestrians stepping around me and cars grinding by. The house on the Cape was sold long ago. There were never any children. Our parents are dead. I will go back to California to live in sunshine and find new things to occupy my heart.

Someone said, "Wake up, dummy," in that musically amused alto, and you walked by on Tremont Street. You were nineteen and luminous, streaked blue hair falling over your eye, wearing the army surplus jacket from a distant October night when I didn't know your name. A smartass smirk, a lightning flick of the eyebrow. "You coming, or not?" You kept walking, the way you did when you knew I was watching, but this time I didn't follow. You reached the Park Street T and turned back to look as the escalator took you, inch by inch, from my sight.

My phone started buzzing three blocks later, reporters from LA area codes. I haven't answered. They want a quote for tomorrow morning, a pithy one-liner-queen's epitaph, and I've got nothing. I passed the restaurant and kept walking into the North End, wandering the crooked half-forgotten streets. Eventually, I'll have to turn back. The mist is getting colder, and my breast pocket hums like a wasp dying in a jar. I know what they'll say and I'm not ready to hear it and I don't have the line you deserve. My last chance to let you down. But the sun hasn't set in LA, and there's still time left to work. I have the whole night ahead of me.

CONTRIBUTORS

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"The mist is getting colder, and my breast pocket hums like a wasp dying in a jar. I know what they'll say and I'm not ready to hear it and I don't have the line you deserve."

— *Jim Marino, "Nocturne for Second Banana"*

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