PRISM
international

COVER ART BY KIN CHAN

FALL 2022

PRISM international

GROUSE GRIND LIT PRIZE FOR V. SHORT FORMS

FIRST PRIZE

"How to Lick the Tongue of Black Ice" by Destiny Pitters

RUNNER-UP

"Lichtenberg Figures" by Courtney Bill

SECOND RUNNER-UP

"Funerary Rumors" by Robert Walikis

JUDGES

Oluwatoke Adejoye, Vivian Li, Jasmine Ruff
Andrew Calderone, Eleanor Panno

PRISM international

THE 2022 JACOB ZILBER PRIZE FOR SHORT FICTION

JUDGE

Heather O'Neill

GRAND PRIZE

"The lory of Dirt" by Neal Giannone

RUNNER-UP

"If It Wasn't For the Nights" by Chido Muchemwa

2ND RUNNER-UP

"Shifting Baselines" by Rachel Shabalin

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a place of mind
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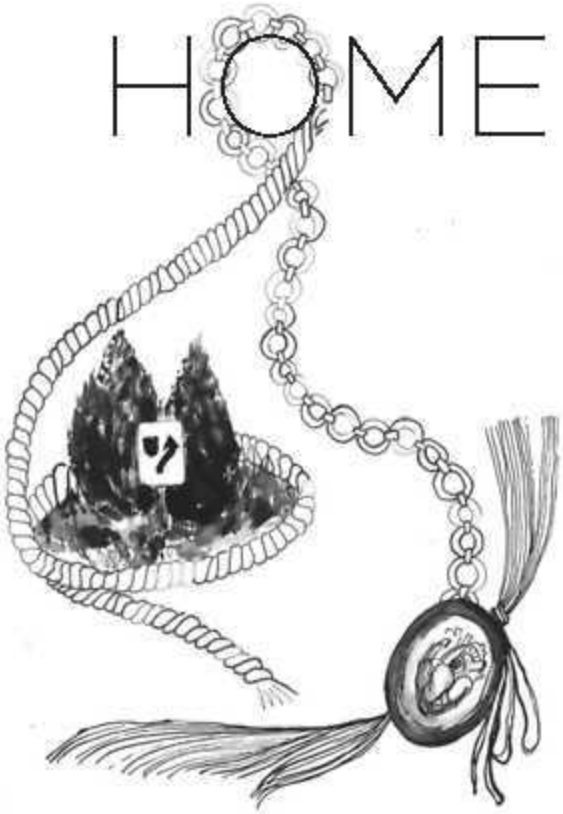
PART 1

HOME



roundabout by Melanie Evelyn (2022)

Destiny Pitters

HOW TO LICK THE TONGUE OF BLACK ICE

I hear you hold old words in your mouth like new fruit. *Jojoba and castor; sorrel and cerasee; tamarind and gizzada*. They are grand and pure, carrying the sweetness of lingering ancestors. The 're the smell of your shampoo on a Sunday morning—waxy and orange—and the reward as you emerge from nighttime journeys, a frozen bus stop two blocks back in the dark. You tell me your warm bones weren't made for Canadian winters, but damn if the sunset on a river of ice isn't the closest you've been to magic in a while. The thought triggers a pang of betrayal and the heat of a growing sensation—home. *And the air hurts my fucking face, man*, released in puffs of breath as we point from the open kitchen window—andromeda, draco, gemini. You deal with it, knowing in a month the earth will be soupy with mud and spit. For now you watch the white boys skate with sticks in hand, wondering what it'd be like to glide so

smoothly over hard, hard times. You deal with it, thick with body butter and twists sealed with oil, bonnet on tight. In the mornings you wrap your hair in bodacious patterns, bringing life back to the cold, grey landscape. We go to Christmas parties and fool around in the falling snow. I watch you start to have a good time as you slip, face inches from frigid tarmac. Your grumbles catch with laughter on a terrain full of surprises. *My feet weren't made*—and you hate it here and you love it here, so you deal. Standing up tall and with a running start, you throw yourself over the ice, into the mouth of the winter black. Struggling, releasing, welcoming—home.

Wiley Wei-Chiun Ho

THE HOUSE

The house in Taiwan where I was born only half exists now, half a world from where I am today.

The mansion with the curved staircase and carved newel post, on which my Ah-Po used to hang her black wig at night. In the dark, Ah-Po's black-haired ghost patrolled the sleeping house. So, I refused to go
d
o
w
n
the
stairs
to
the
bathroom,
and peed in bed instead.

Ah-Po, who would grimace when she called for me, her youngest granddaughter, not by my name but by my position in her traditional house (which is to say patriarchal, which is to say woman-denigrating): *Zui-mui-e. Last One.*

Neither a nickname nor a term of affection, it was her prayer for no more girls after me.

Ah-Po spoke in Hakka, even though she knew Mandarin and knew it was what I understood. She was generous but once a year—on Lunar New Year—when she would hand flat envelopes to the girls who were expected to receive her meagre affections with both hands and voluble gratitude. With my head bowed, peeking up, I could still see Ah-po extend bloated red pockets to my brother and boy cousins. When she caught me staring, Ah-po's glare was how I learned I was half the worth of a boy. Why it has taken most of my life to claim the other half.

I doubt Ah-Po cared that she didn't get a chance to say goodbye to Zui-mui-e. When she died, I was already in Canada, so I didn't have to fake-cry. They say you shouldn't speak ill of the dead, but who are they?

I have spent my life fleeing from that house. But when my aging father calls and orders, "Time to return home," my body obeys.

Hurtling 10,000 kilometres from Vancouver to Taipei, at 30,000 feet in the air, I am served chicken or beef in foil trays. Sitting around me are passengers with features like mine and compact bodies that have no quibble in Economy seats. A white-haired couple in the row ahead of me is speaking in Hakka. The woman complains about the tasteless meal: *M-ho-shit!* Her guttural consonants resurrect my Ah-Po. My neck hairs bristle. My guts roil and I am suddenly unable to decide whether I am coming home or going home. A homecoming or a ritual sacrifice? My flight grips onto every solitary hour until the wheels bump down.

As I emerge from the thin shell of the 787 Dreamliner, the air is humid, laden with wet forest and pollution, my skin the first to recognize its birth home. Taoyuan International Airport is a marvel of glass and steel, bilingual signage everywhere to welcome the English-speaking tourists—and the illiterate diaspora.

I have gone / come
home.

The house is a shadow of its former self, cleaved in half and sold by unsentimental Big Uncle after Ah-po's funeral, my father says, tearing up. Baba is trying to preserve the remaining half as best he can.

Darkened on one side by a massive partition that has bisected the building, the house feels small and awkward. The haunted staircase is gone, either torn down or walled off from view. Either way, it's no longer my concern.

As Baba's health falters, so does his speech, but his Japanese, drilled into his generation by Japan's fi ty-year occupation of Taiwan, is still sound. With a shaky finge , he points proudly to the polished wood paneling around the living room, "Hinoki," he enunciates and explains how the mighty red cypress, once so dominant, is now endangered. He sighs unsteadily and his gaze guides mine to the wall behind us.

In framed portraits, high up on the living room wall to signify their exalted positions, my dead ancestors linger on, so that Ah-Po in her black wig and pursed lips manages, still, to frown down on me. I nod my acknowledgment: *Ah-Po, ni hao.*

I take in the house; the house takes me in.

Though it's been chopped in half, its insides gouged, this house stands firm. Shaken countlessly on a quake-prone island, there is but one crack along one wall, a diagonal zag behind Ah-po's image—traceable but not structural. This house, I realize, is also a survivor of chagrin.

Hava Zitlalik

INHERITANCE

On some strange shoreline I'll bury
our hearts in the sand. This world is endin

and all I have is a mouth full of ashes, your hair
in my locket, a white flag gone g ey

with too much use. Before you cut the wires
the weatherman told you that I'm a good person

I don't feel like a good person
but I'll accept the statue anyway. In the mirror

I smile like you used to. Your omens
come in currents: old sweaters, posed portraits, lost dogs

that jump all of my fences, the wave of regret that lets loose
as I swallow my tongue. Do you remember

our trip to the Atlantic, whatever it was that touched at our legs
in the tide? It will always be in me to save the drowning, so go ahead

I'll get the next round. You say the forecast never calls
for storms like these anymore. You say I never call

but your line is always ringing. These days
I keep a photo of you pinned in my coat

for when I wake in strange places. In it, you're winning some race
tangled up in the finish line, for once coming out ahead, for onc

running from the gun and not towards it. I don't know where I am
in the picture. Maybe I'm behind you

a second out of frame. Maybe I'm at the camera
waiting for the right moment to shoot.

fi e angel by Melanie Evelyn (2022)

Hava Zitlalik

UNDONE

Some highways don't stretch
coast to coast, some lives
like yours run their length
unexpectedly. Maybe unexpectedly
is the wrong sentiment
for both endings. Signs sprout for miles
advise diversion

raise red flags: the lanes a e closing
last chance to turn back. A lazy hand
points out *you are here*, leaving
room to argue its finalit . When the time came

did you consider an alternative? This worl
to you, unyielding. The clock unhinged
at midnight, the bed unmade
day out and in. Warnings unmask
in hindsight, no one can escape

expectation. When the call came
the question held itself between receivers
how'd it happen, the answer
unstated. Hanging

up the phone, a jump-cut
between realities: in some other world
you turned around but in this one
you chose your end

you were here. Imagine another universe
where this poem goes unwritten

where your tires trace a circle
off the oad, back on it

FURTHER PROOF OF SECOND-CLASS STATUS WITHIN THE EMPIRE

April 4, 1914
a ship sets sail

anchors in
Vancouver's
harbor
May, 23
1914

376 prospective South Asian immigrants

aboard Gurdit Singh Sirhali's ship

The SS Komagata Maru

337 Sikhs, 27 Muslims, 12 Hindus

all men except two women and four children

all Punjabis and British subjects

many with service in the army of British outposts in Asia

all independent, self-financed or family-financed economic emigrants

looking for jobs available to unskilled labourers

prepared to do menial work

wait on
deck and
bridge

but not
allowed to
disembark

a ship is
forced
to depart
July, 23

"To admit Orientals in large numbers would mean the end, the extinction of the white people. And we always have in mind the necessity of keeping this a white man's country."
- Sir Richard McBride, Premier of British Columbia, 1914

Khashayar "Kess" Mohammadi

MY MOTHER HANDS ME LANDSCAPES

her landscapes colour my silence

there's more to this than nostalgia

there's more to intelligence than history

beyond the mountain Qaf

through my binocular —

a vision

ornamental wings

ornamental mouths

their linear incantation of prayer

when teeth weigh heaviest in the skull

matrilineage

of a somber understanding

an open tome

fringed at the spine

I forgot the ritual

of permission

before entering a doorway

a frame

enforced

on either side of the eye

Khashayar "Kess" Mohammadi

THE PSYCHEDELIA OF DISCOVERY

a porous skull
a porous thought
and I am space itself

if I am brimming with ghosts
it is a radical empathy
an episodic eruption
of daemonic auditoria

at the precipice of the plunge
I spin into the earth's core
where I speak every language
waiting for the curtain call:
            an archetypal blue
dysfunctional to a clear sky

"I"
a relation
valuable outside the paradigm
an accursed transmission
raveling and unraveling
across millennia

a mound of earth pearls the treasure chest
a redemptive coincidence
held
in the womb of the house

transmission
to
translation:

"Do you want me to show you
what you want me to show you?"

Leanne Charette

LINDEN

Mentions the Nazi T-4 Euthanasia Programme, ableism, eugenics, and violence against disabled and chronically ill individuals.

Scent of honey wafts
from the linden on my lawn.
I slide from my wheelchair
and lean my curved back
against its rippled bark,
trusting in its stalwart strength.
Ivory blossoms drift on the breeze,
disguising the odour of the city.

Die Linde, my beloved tree, adored
by my ancestors too, whose compatriots
planted it in new lands,
as the shadow of the Reich spread.
Who brewed tea with its fl wers
while others lined walkways with its tall proud trunks—
paths, perhaps proceeding from locked iron gates
through which people
valued less than bread
were led towards tall proud chimneys.

Did its perfume mask the acrid ash
that spewed from furnaces
where disabled people,
bodies like mine,
burned,
the deathly evening glow
before night of frayed yellow stars?
Did the soft fallen petals beautify the ground
where the dust of their bones was scattered?

Across the sea,
these transplanted roots stretch under the soil,
tangled in my home's foundation.
Holding it together
while tearing it apart.

TAKING THE WATERS

Soaking in the healing waters
of Little Manitou
(*Cree: spirit, mystery, God*)
the Dead (*Indian*) Sea of Saskatchewan,
a terminal lake,

floating, eightless, an astronaut in tea-green space,
a (*white*) jellyfish in *dark*) water,
wallowing in this scar in the earth
gouged by glaciers, given (*to those who live still*),
now (*stolen and*) commodified for p ofit

I have (*not*) paid (*enough*) for this privilege.
For the moment, nothing hurts.
Salt seeps into my wounds
sealing cracks, repairing skin and soul
yet

taken water should eat my foreign flesh
dissolving meat from bone, destroying me.
I want to sink like a stone, but gravity betrays.
Wrinkled and healed, unable to grasp the ground,
I dive but cannot reach bottom.

Climbing out of the water, palm pierced by a pebble,
my body becomes too heavy to bear.

PART 2

ORBIT

slowly angel by Melanie Evelyn (2022)

JT Maruyama

THE LEMON AND THE DRESS

The train smelled of luggage and dust, like burnt clothes. Through the grime-covered window, Seth looked out at the green pastures and farmland, at the distant mountains covered in trees. The dawn rose like a sick yawn. His heart ached in the rose-blood hues. Although it was summer, today was cloudy, a hint of rain. His eyes and mind were exhausted, body sore like he had been swimming for ages, his chest filled with hot oils.

When Seth arrived in the city of Ives, he breathed in and out. Th people, readying for business or morning walks, moved leisurely, like dancers. He shivered—it was cold. His ribcage felt fragile. The lip of dawn, pink and purple like a bruise, wandered along the lines of his heart, an ocean he wallowed in. He was alone in a new city with only a backpack.

He ran away from his home this morning a couple hours before dawn. A few weeks before, he found a dress and stashed it in his closet. On the night he tried it on for the first time, the moon glowing around his figu e, his world ended. The e were shrieks and sighs of shame from his parents, like he had committed an atrocity. And now he was off wandering in the world, trying to find somewhere to stay.

The grand malachite snapshot of forest framed the downtown that spanned several blocks. At a corner, he saw a clothing shop. A sign hanging off a black pole read *Reisz Clothing Shop*. On the glass window, a small poster read *Hiring*.

The glass window revealed a couple headless mannequins adorned with cardigans and dresses. Beyond were racks of clothing. It looked warm and gentle. In his reflection, he wore dark blue jeans that opened a little calf-down and a simple thin black jacket made out of cotton, over a white shirt. He hated his clothes. They looked wrong on him. Th clothes didn't match the body. The body didn't match the clothes. It was like being contorted.

But the clothes inside glowed.

Heart beating, Seth pushed one of a set of double doors open. It led into a hall with russet-coloured tiles. The door of the clothing shop was closed. He took a deep breath and turned the rusted doorknob. A bell chimed. He entered. It smelled like old, boxed-stored fabrics and a light scent of apples. The door closed behind him.

Seth surveyed the shop. Racks of clothing—cardigans, t-shirts, pea-coats, sweaters, jeans—sat across the area. A black metal staircase spiralled in a circle up to the second floor in the centre. He found bags and totes, small boxes of tea and candles, like peach and spiced vanilla, on wooden shelves. He discovered numerous kinds of clothing—an amaranth rib t-shirt, a long-sleeve black blouse dotted with small yellow, green and red flowers, pumpkin orange slip-on shoes. A white silky crop top with a garnet romper. It was a gallery of clothing. He took the sleeves of the blouse with the tips of his fingers, nuzzled the frizzled ends. The blouse was serrated in lines, the torso tight, neckline low. Everything was beautiful.

He ached to try it on. His heart raced, thinking of last night, and he let go of the blouse.

A woman appeared from the back. She had curly black hair and warm dark brown eyes like jam. She wore a thin currant-red jacket. She smiled.

"Hello. Can I help you?"

He couldn't speak at first. He hadn't spoken for a long time. His heart was locked. Then he asked, "Are you hiring?"

"Yes. Are you looking to work?"

He hesitated. What was he looking for? All that his heart told him was to run away. He was an hour away from home. It might be the only option for now. He simply nodded.

She noticed his backpack and the purple under his eyes. "Well, let me run to the back really quick and figure things out."

Once she left, he wandered around. On one of the walls was a painting of a woman named *The Lady of Night*. She wore a white dress and long black hair. She was running through the streets, the night high above her, lights guiding her way. She was full of bliss, like the cuts of summer and winter. Nothing stopped her.

Moments later, the shop owner caught Seth looking at the painting and approached.

"Little is known about her," she said. "All we know is that The Lady of Night roamed the streets and grew fruit trees, and made enough to make the moon as succulent as a fruit."

"She looks so free," Seth said quietly.

"She really is."

A few moments passed before she offered Seth some food.

"Why don't you put your backpack in the back and we can eat. You look like you've been on a long journey."

The two went to the back and ate at a small table. She brought them coffee, eggs, and bread. Most of the food was intended for Seth. He took a very small bite of the eggs while his legs shook.

"I'm Reisz, by the way," she said, holding a cup of coffee. "What's your name?"

"Seth."

"How old are you?"

"I'm 21. I go to college."

"Do you live with your parents?"

He trembled. "I did."

"Do you have anywhere to stay? Friends?"

He shook his head. "I ran away," he said. The statement stopped his movements.

Reisz waited a moment before asking, "Can you tell me why?"

"There was a dress."

"A dress?"

"And my parents. It was nighttime."

"Your parents? What about them?"

"It was the dress…my father…didn't like it."

"Did you put on the dress?" she asked.

"Yes."

"What did he say about you putting it on?"

"He said he would kill me."

It all came out of his mouth, yet he did not cry. He felt immobilized, body as still as a statue, memories flashing across his mind.

Reisz said nothing. She paused.

"And he said I was sick."

When he approached the train station near his house this morning, it was a few minutes before fi e. Something dark and cold followed him. Heart hammering, he threw his gaze behind him, his backpack rubber-banding against him. Shadows formed around tree trunks and cars. Hisses slithered in the dark. He hurried to the train. Once he arrived at the doors, the shadows melded to the concrete and curbs in thick stringy wads, yet formless and clunky. His body shook.

The train conductor said, "Ticket?"

The shadows crawled, about to lunge. Seth screamed inside, jaw clenched.

His hand shook as he held his fork. He masked it. He breathed in and out, then took a bite of his food.

"Well," she said carefully, eyes concerned, "you can stay here. We can figure things out. Don't worry about anything."

After they ate, she offered him a position. She took him upstairs, the backroom of the shop, and a couple of other rooms. She showed him the tasks she did throughout the day—making sure everything looked nice, looking at online orders, labelling products. Seth discovered a book with numerous kinds of birds—broad-tailed hummingbirds, Lewis' woodpeckers, barn swallows. He was fascinated with birds. Sometimes, blue jays or ruby-red hummingbirds fl w outside his house windows, fluttering freely or perching along the fence.

"Where exactly could I stay?" he said moments later. He felt ashamed to ask.

Above the shop was a floor of empty rooms. Reisz took him to one. The room was small. On the left was a desk, nudged beside the door, with a bed in the right corner. A large dark brown shelf covered one wall. There were cardboard boxes and dusty furniture. It was silent—the creaks in the wood crackled like bones.

"This is the best I can do," she said.

Seth nodded. "It's enough. Thank you."

"Stay as long as you need. It's no problem. I'll be downstairs whenever you're ready."

Once she left, Seth let out a breath. He threw his backpack onto the

bed. A flur y of dust detonated and trickled down. He unzipped the backpack. A pair of jeans, a couple shirts—a white one, a light blue one with a single pocket, socks, and underwear. All clothes he hated—plain and loose-fitting, lack of vibrance. Boyish and masculine. It made his skin crawl. Shampoo, toothpaste, a hairbrush, and other toiletries slunk to the bottom of the zipped-up net pouch. He sighed.

Then he sat down at the desk chair. It was close to fi e in the afternoon. His heart felt carved and splintered, burnt and flaking. He put his hand over his chest. Would he live here forever? In a closet? He closed his eyes, overwhelmed by exhaustion.

~

Seth woke. Confused, he found himself lying on his bed. He looked at the clock above the door. It was six in the morning. Groggy, he breathed carefully, smelling the dust and old wood. His limbs ached. His eyes felt burned. His heart beat slowly like a sickness.

He exited his room to use the bathroom. At the end of the hall, a door was slightly open. Curious, he walked to it. It said *Storage* on a slip pasted over a small sign that read *The Dressing Room*. Seth snuck in, looking behind him, and closed the door. Inside, it was warm—the colours like coffee, auburn, taupe. The door closed, it seemed that nothing could enter inside. He had this place to himself. His own secret.

The floors creaked. There was a bed, several dusty shelves, and a collection of cardboard boxes. In the corner, on a headless mannequin, he saw a white dress made of tulle with light orange-red, almost translucent, fl wers dispersed throughout the fabric, an accompanying scarf wrung around the neck and silky seashell-white sleeves. A headdress of the same fabric sat on the top, with a black velvet bow at the nape of the neck. Th dress reached the ankles. It looked beautiful. It had a soul. It was perfect.

It was a bizarre sight—a beautiful dress, breathing with enraptured lungs, waiting to be put on, standing in a storage-like room, among discarded papers and old boxes.

He approached the dress. They were alone. He placed his fingers at the ends of each sleeve and pulled them to the side, and he, as well as the dress, became two bodies, connected and bonded. It was like looking in a mirror, like finding the other piece of himself severed from him.

His mind returned to the night before. He cringed, his stomach twisted. The memories came in fragments. He had tried on the dress in his room. His parents had opened the door. His father. He stared at

Seth's body in the dress. Something ugly blew up inside his father. His eyes were ferocious. *I will kill the woman in you.* Seth searched for his mother's eyes behind his father. *The e's nothing I can do. I'm sorry.* Seth knew he was dead.

His father dragged him downstairs. Ripped the dress off of him. Left him on the floor. He ran to his room. Stripped and humiliated, only in his underwear. He heard the snips downstairs. They cut up his dress. With every cut, they cut him up, too. Shadows erupted in the corners of the room, pooling the floors, drowning him in murky pond water. He thought his heart might explode. The screams shattered his soul.

I will kill you.

Seth trembled. He left the dress in the storage-like room.

~

The next day, Reisz asked Seth if he could stamp price tags on clothes. The sight of the blouse he saw the first time he arrived here caught his eyes again. He rubbed the fabric. Reisz pulled out a lovely pair of maroon pants with a belt string woven into a bow. "What about this with that?" she said, smiling.

Seth, taken aback, laid his eyes on the pants. It was beautiful. He imagined the clothes touching his skin. But it felt wrong. He imagined what other people would think. His heart beat in shame.

"It looks nice," he mumbled, avoiding her gaze and the pants. It felt as if she had looked right through him, through his veil, into the depths of his heart, of what he wanted—beautiful clothes, to look feminine. Th cutting of vulnerability burned.

She paused and made another attempt at a smile. "Well, I'll keep it in the back if you ever want to have it. Same thing with the blouse."

He nodded. He couldn't look at her.

The time reached near the end of his shift.

"I think I'll go for a walk. Thank you for everything," Seth said and left the shop.

In the distance, he saw a group of trees and dense bushery on the other side of a creek, alongside an old, abandoned house with a porch and a rocking chair. A couple of lemon trees grew beside the house, the lemons all colourful and plump. Curious, he wandered over a bridge to the lemon trees. Each lemon hung like a yellow bell, wing-wrapped marigold bats, sun-citrine earrings. Some were sleek and smooth, some bumpy and contorted. All beautiful. It was like standing under bulbs of

lights, under yellow ornaments. They breathed and glowed, hummed and sang; made his heart feel as full and fleshy as a fruit. He felt a sort of ecstasy, a sort of rejuvenation.

It was a strange sight. Lemons grew ripest in winter, yet here they were, in mid-June, the lemons, the brightest things he could see.

He was delighted by the lemons—their yellowness, their sleek skin, their temperament. The were pleasant in that they simply existed, as baubles of yellow hanging from a tree, letting their glistening glow and self float above the ground. He was tempted by them, too, just like he was tempted by clothes.

Little yellow bells, chiming, ringing sweet in his ears.

The lemons were themselves, and Seth wanted to be a self. To no longer feign who he was.

He looked at the ground. On the bed of grass was a fallen lemon, sleek and bruised. He knelt to inspect it. It was like a sleeping bird, wings wrapped in itself. Carefully, he slipped his fingers around the fruit, the sleekness kissing his skin. He rubbed the skin and thought back to the dress. He thought about Reisz showing him pieces of clothing, the kind gesture.

He dug his fingernails into the skin, acidic juice biting under his fingernails. Then he dragged the thick layer of skin, strands of netlike white sticking to the edges, until it stripped off and landed onto the grass, curled and asleep. A lemon's shedding.

Seth ventured back to the clothing shop. He fl w up the back stairs, zipped down the hall, and entered The Dressing Room. Shutting the door, he planted his back against it. His breathing startled him. His heart pulsed. Sugar venom surged throughout his veins. He shed the lemon and a wave of realization fl w over him. He placed his hand over his heart, eyes tilted and tired but lulled with happiness.

He could shed this body and become another. The body was no more than a robe that one could strip and play with.

He walked over to the mirror and looked at himself—the facial hair, the bump like a bulging root on his throat. He looked to the side, his reflection disappearing. He pinned the tips of his fingers around an invisible thread sticking out along the hairline and forehead and pulled, like a transparent sheath of fabric, glistening with web-like sparks, and the thread opened like a zipper, shedding this body, and said *hello.*

Ella looked at herself in the mirror. She felt around her throat. No bump. It was smooth. She cut the apple from her tree. Somewhere it went—collapsed on the floor like an exhausted fruit, excavated its seeds in fertile grass outside, for someone else to eat with sudden glee.

Her skin felt smooth, like a fruit. Above all, she felt more than anything other than a man. But she knew, deep into her core, that she was still the same.

Her old body, or whatever you could call it, was still there. It laid along the floor, on its side, as if sleeping. It was an unperturbed kind of sleep, cozy and peaceful like a hibernating animal. She didn't want to disturb it. Or wake it up. She wasn't sure exactly what to do. The e was a strange sort of feeling staring at her old body, lying so soundly and quiet, but in a sort of husk. A separate body. She couldn't tell if it was breathing. It seemed alive, but if you were to shake the body, she felt it would never wake up.

She eventually knelt down and put one of her arms under his neck, the other under the back of his knees. She lifted the body, surprised that it was light. She laid the body on the soft blankets. "I hope that's okay for you," she said. *Who are you?* she wanted to say, but, at the same time, she knew who they were.

Now, she returned her gaze to the dress. Th elegant white dress with blood orange-red flowers stood before her on this mannequin. She removed the dress from the mannequin. She put it on her body like a robe, then looked into the mirror. She smiled.

She walked over to the glass panes and opened them. She gazed out the window, elbows pressed against the railing, the white silk-like arm sleeves against her skin and the wooden frame. A strange calm, like a wicked rain cast over her limbs, held her in place, mounting her so that she could look out at the view of the streets, the walking people and the trees full of fruit.

She could see clearly, walk without restraint.

Her heart hummed like a dream. And slowly she danced.

I'm golden and blue. I'm sparkled and jewelled. I'm a delicate touch.

I'm dancing in this cramped room, the moon watching me, through the rain-stained window, my hair silky and smooth.

I'm a carousel.

My past, just shadows in the dark.

~

In The Dressing Room, the second time Ella stripped her body, a wave of ache and tiredness overwhelmed her, like she had been hit by a train.

It caught her off guard. She steadied her breathing, then ignored it. All she cared about was that she was in this body, in her body. And that she could roam the world in this body.

Ella dressed in a short white shirt, silky and smooth, with a beige patterned overall, the straps wrapping around her shoulders. She slipped on brown slip-ons, the colour like rich soil, and grabbed her backpack. Her old body laid on the bed again, sleeping peacefully, with a smile. She looked at her old clothes, the ones she wore on the other body. She grabbed them with her hands and put them in a drawer, closing it shut.

She looked at herself in the mirror and smiled. She walked to the door. Her heart hammered. *Will anyone hurt me? Will anyone recognize me?*

Instead of leaving through the door, she opened the window and made her way down the exterior metal stairs. She entered the world with a new body. People strolled—to shops, to sit on cobblestones or a wooden bench. She blended in. No one seemed to notice her. She felt a smile. There was a sweetness, a light touch, like the skin of a lemon, to be seen fully clothed in this being, not a man, yet to also be unseen, among the crowd, as simply, as any other.

Ella ambled to the clothing shop, opened the door and entered. Shopkeeper Reisz fiddled with boxes and shelves behind the counter. At the sound of the bell, she turned to look at Ella. She said *hello* and smiled. Reisz's eyes remained on her. *Does she recognize me?*

"Is there anything you're looking for?" Reisz asked.

"Oh, um," She was finding the words to speak, as it had been the firs time in this body. "I don't think so. I guess I'm just looking."

"Do I know you?"

"Oh, I, um, I'm Ella."

She smiled. "Nice to meet you, Ella. I'm Reisz. I feel that we've met before."

"I think maybe we have. I love your shop."

"Thank you."

"I have to get going, but thank you…for what you've done. That I'm able to be here. That…I can be me."

Ella smiled and quickly left through the door. The bell chimed behind her.

Ella crossed the bridge and walked among the lemon trees. A deep autumn orange bike sat beneath them, its front wheel turned to the side like a curved nose. Its front and back held a basket filled with dried fluffy sticks, a nest for birds. The wheels were black. There was also a persimmon tree, an apple tree, orange and pear. Soon enough, she found a grape

vineyard crawling over a pergola in the fenceless backyard and an entire garden. Each held their own drooping fruit, all simple and plump, existing.

She walked under the trees, drawn to the lemon trees in particular. She pushed herself onto her tiptoes and grasped one of the lemons, feeling its sleek skin. She took the lemon from the stem with a gentle snap and pulled it towards herself. Feeling the skin of the lemon on her skin was like magic.

Finally, she had a fruit in her hand, with no one to tell her to let it go.

Night arrived. The hops were closed. Everyone returned to their homes. The world slept. Lamp posts hummed like bees. Ella walked, alone. The she ran. She ran with a sudden fervour, the moon high above, watching over her, the lamp posts lighting her way. The chill bit her lungs, tore them in threads. She ran. Her heart murmured and glowed.

Suddenly she became The Lady of Night. She ran through the night and no one saw. She ran for the lemon trees. She ran for the moon, the cold air cutting through her throat down into her lungs in splitting bliss. She ran and ran, till her lungs split in two, grew into exalting trees laden with fruit.

When she disappeared into the night, Seth woke up in the bed in The Dressing Room, confused with a hazy sleep state, thinking about the dream he had last night, spinning along the streets, like a haunted dancer, blissful under the cool black sheet.

~

It had been over a week at the clothing shop. Reisz, like she always did, accompanied Seth and gave him food a couple of hours after the end of the shifts, then went home. He remained in his dust-smelling room on the second floo , like he was locked away, staring outside in the dusk-approaching sky, thinking about his parents, his home before this place. A wave of sadness washed over him.

Pulling himself off his bed, he exited his room. He thought about putting on the dress, changed his mind, and went downstairs into the shop. He found the blouse he saw when he first arrived. He took it back to his room and switched off his shirt for the blouse. It felt sleek. It made him feel secure and pretty. He smiled a thin smile.

Whenever he stripped his body, it was like he fell asleep. He woke up confused yet elated. Then he thought of her. She was distant, like a

dream, but so close, an entity he could hold in his hands. It was because of her he was able to put on this blouse.

Thank you, Ella, Seth thought, *whoever you are.*

~

When Ella was in The Dressing Room again, a week later, it was nighttime. She put a pin and a spool of string in her pocket. The room was lit with candles and a dim ceiling light. When she stripped her skin again, a wave of exhaustion flew over her. It shuddered through her body. She felt something different. The spark, the happiness—like warm coiled hands—didn't come to her heart. Instead, she heard the shadows. They rushed along the walls, sending gushes of cold air throughout the room, the candle flames whispering in chills. They mumbled and groaned, sneaking in the corners, on the ceiling.

Ella caught her breath. Her heart stumbled and cracked. She didn't know where these shadows came from, but she felt, that when she had split again, shadows slipped out as well, to haunt and hurt her. All these shadows—she always carried around.

Like a mad breath, one of the shadows flew into her and scratched her dress. Soon, shadows swooped from several directions and dashed through her dress, drawing their talon-like fingers through the fabric, cutting her skin. The shadows bit and tore her dress, like mutilating flesh, and chewed and swallowed. They ripped it off of her and dragged it out of the room like a body, leaving her on the floor, screaming and crying. The door slammed shut.

The shadows fl w out of the building. Stripped, humiliated, Ella tossed on a white shirt and shorts and slip-ons and ran to the closed door, hesitating. She held back tears. Eventually, she yanked the door open and floated with quick steps across the hall, down the stairs and out the front doors. She looked at the sky, dark and spoiled like rotting fruit. A storm was coming. Her stomach unravelled.

Some of the lamp post lights flicke ed. She followed them. The lights spun in silky arcs, glowing spider webs, the strings of glow pasting to the glass for a few seconds, then disappearing. Eyes sunk into them, tears leaked. *Hope. Any kind of hope.* They were hot—candle wax droplets pouring down her cheeks. The shadows pulled her dress along the dark ground in the distance, the dress dirtied, torn and ripped. She swore she heard someone screaming. She ran as fast as she could, her knees burning, her heart ready to burst.

The shadows took the dress to the fruit trees.

"Give it back!" she cried. "It's the only thing I want! The only thing I have!"

The shadows settled beneath all the beautiful trees holding the fruit. Ethereal and strange, their dark, cloud-like shapes blending with the night, released their pinching fingers. It dropped to the ground. The dress dropped to the ground, like a headless body. Th shadows disappeared with a cackle and a hiss.

In the darkness, she stood, chest heaving, legs burned and exhausted. The only light was the lamp posts along the streets, watching at a distance with shameful heads. They hummed in sad tunes, waiting. She walked to the dress and knelt down. The fabric was torn with thousands of scratches like slashes across a canvas. Dirt covered the dress in patches. It looked limp and fragile. It was devoured. The chest moved up and down, weak, as if it were breathing weakly. Ella took the sleeves in her hands and moved her arms under the silky fabric. Her heart ached. Tears fell. She felt nothing from the fabric.

Suddenly she felt sick. A twisting pain in her abdomen. It bit at her insides, it twisted and wrathed, lighting trickling in electric shocks across her body. She forced a struggling breath out and placed her hands on her stomach. A storm was brewing within her. She pulled out fruits from her abdomen—browning lemons, bruised apples, skin-chipped dewberries. She held them, smushed and dead. She was contorted like the fruit.

"I'm sick. I'm a sick person," she said, crying. "I deserve this. I deserve to die."

She thought back to the night she left to come here, the cutting of her old dress, the shadows in the room, the stillness of her body. And now she lost this dress, too.

She pulled the pins and needles from the back of her pocket. She sewed herself together, connecting the strands and strings in her abdomen where the fruit used to be. Somehow, she fell asleep, among the fallen dead fruit, her eyes towards the night sky, thinking, *I want to go there.*

The next morning, before sunrise, Seth's heart hurt so much he felt it could burst out from his chest. Something was wrong. He slipped out of his bed, crossed the bridge, and ran to the fruit trees. He gasped and covered his mouth. All the fruits had been peeled, the flesh ripped out, only husks. And there along the ground, a husk, torn and shredded, was the dress. Seth fell to his knees and cried.

An hour passed. Seth's stomach hurt. The tears had stopped coming, but they stained his face. The sun had risen. It shined through his sunken cheeks. The early morning summer air was chilling. It wrapped around his body like a cloak. He shivered. He felt the lines of hot pain along his limbs. He found scratch marks, dried with blood. His chest was a cavity, carved in and out.

The trees were fruitless. It was cold, like winter had invaded a summer day, an uninvited guest that blew in and destroyed all the tables and chairs at an outside party.

Nearby, the orange bike, warm and rusted, rested against a tree trunk. Next to the bike was a shovel. Seth grabbed the shovel and gazed at the dress, then picked a spot to dig a small ditch. He made it half a foot deep, sweating and panting. He grabbed the dress, the dead fabrics touching his fingers, and threw it in the grave. He tossed a few fruits in there as well—a few rotten apples, a clump of grapes, a bundle of lemons, some sweet-looking, some blackening. He flipped back the clumps of dirt over the fruit and the dress, sealing them over. He tossed the shovel aside.

Back in his dorm, as night approached, Seth, burnt out, had one ounce of light left. The Dressing Room. The door creaked. He slipped inside.

Chest icy, Seth stood in front of the mirror. It had been a long time since he had seen his reflection. He was taken aback. Like the dress, he was covered in dirt, the clothes rumpled and dishevelled. He was a walking dead body, a contorted fruit. He looked away. He stuck his fingers on his forehead. When he tried stripping again, his heart shattered. It was like a hand clenched his heart and squeezed. He couldn't strip. He returned to his room and drowned in sleep.

When Seth woke up, it was warm. It smelled like candle wax and old papers. He was in his room, the place in which Reisz allowed him to stay. He remained slumped. It was silent. Outside, the clouds were out. It was cold, a post-storm sky, full of ache.

He forced himself up. He felt exhausted—every piece inside of him squeezed out like a fruit and struggling to expand out. The time, how much time had passed, he didn't know.

She is dead. She is dead. I am dead. I am dead.

She is a ghost. I am a ghost.

On the table next to the bed was a cup of coffee and banana bread.

Please eat, a note said. He put his hands around the cup of coffee. It was warm. Tears dripped down Seth's face. He wiped them.

Seth, hands shaking, took a sip from the coffee.

Later, Seth returned to The Dressing Room. It was just a storage room. Dust. Boxes. Old papers. He noticed a note on one of the desks in the room.

I'm under the fruit. I'm under the earth.
The roots entwine in my body, like sewn strings.
I'm the one caught between the land and sea.
Soon, I'll become forgotten.
You will forget me.
And you will forget yourself.
But I'm divine. I'm divine.

The mirror stood tall and vacant in the room. He walked over to it slowly and looked at his reflection. What he saw was not what he expected. He saw her. In that dress. Her long dark brown hair. He saw no bump in her throat. He felt his throat and felt a bump. But he could see her. And she smiled, softly.

She saw her.

She stormed out of The Dressing Room. She sped through all the people roaming the streets, not caring that they saw her. She ran along the streets, under the sun, by the shops and restaurants. Reisz watched her from inside her shop, hands behind her back. Ella reached the garden of fruit trees, staring at all the dead and contorted apples and lemons, and settled near the dirt-shifted spot in the earth. She grabbed a shovel and dug, tossing out all the dirt to the side. When she saw the dress, she threw the shovel on the ground and grabbed handfuls of dirt and fruit. She dragged out the dress, like ripping out tree roots. When she extracted the dress, she pulled out an entire body. She pulled out herself.

And she was unleashed, like the fury of a chained bird, gripping the sweet taste of cool-cutting air with hardened teeth.

"I'm so sorry! I'm so sorry!" Ella cried. "I didn't know you were so hurt. I didn't know I was so hurt."

Ella pulled her out from the grave, and suddenly, they became one.

She breathed in and out. Her heart pumped like a rose, receiving water after years of drought. *I am myself.*

Out of her pocket, she pulled out an apple seed. She stuck it in the earth. She would let it grow and out would come a beautiful tree.

She planted several trees. To make life.

~

"Know I buried you underneath the trees," she said. It was a statement of truth. She was thinking of her old body—when she dropped the apple seed into the earth. She was saying goodbye. To that boy. And she smiled.

She thought back to the night where she looked at the stars that longed in her eyes, her stomach a bowl of fruits, and thought about herself now. She wanted to stay rooted to the earth. *I want to live.*

She crossed the bridge, returned to the clothing shop, and went over to Reisz. "Thank you," she said, "for everything. I had a home because of you. You let me start on this journey."

"Look at you now," Reisz said, "you found yourself. You went through life and death. And now you're ready to give more life."

Ella smiled. Like the trees, the fruit, she was a body of death and life. She looked at *The Lady of Night* painting. Instead of running under the moon, she was standing and shining under the sun. And the sun was like a giant, glowing fruit.

Outside Reisz' clothing shop, she planted several fruit trees. Then she looked at the train station, the beginning of her arrival to this place. She would be taking a diffe ent path now—taking the train to another place. She stood in the sunlight, its rays brightening her face, turning her skin into a gold of armour.

chain-link fence with willow by Melanie Evelyn (2022)

Mirjana Villeneuve

WOMAN/GHOST

The poet eats an apple backwa ds
in a darkened classroom, core to full fruit.
If you must eat, this is the preferred way.
Though i 's best to not let the tree grow
at all—give it no chance to wither (and I,
beneath it). One must become acquainted
with absence. It's not so hard
to make a practice of it. Build an altar
of bone and never visit. Unzip at the spine
and step out. She was right
when she called the heart a brag—
I've never been able to contend with it.
A ghost has no need of one, nor stomach,
nor tongue and cheek. I long to be that free
of need. If I could, I would un-eat
the apple. Wipe the blood from
the unbroken skin and replace it
on the tree. Instead, I have made myself
as small as possible. Instead, I am buried
in a winter coat, knees pulled up
in a waiting room lit by a humming
fishtank and a dusty wind w,
breath whistling in my skull.

broken angel (with Sight) by Melanie Evelyn (2022)

Robert Walikis

FUNERARY RUMORS

They say she died. They didn't say how. They say her Dad hoped for a boy. They say her Mom wished for a sister. They say her childhood was tragically misplaced. They say her adulthood was wholly misinformed. They say her siblings were constantly coddled. They say her brothers were disproportionately successful. They say her sisters were consistently brutal. They say her trauma ran deep. The say her ego ran wide. They say her mirrors read "big girl." They say her fashion read "it girl." They say her aura read "mean girl." They say her high school friends were true. They say her college friends were false. They say her work friends were neither. They say her words were a smokescreen. They say her actions were a performance. They say she embellished the truth. They say she strangled her lies. They say she lived on secrets. They say her persuasion was nimble. They say her conjuring was motivated. They say she fought with despair. They say she fell for craving. They say she bestowed strate-

gically. They say she appropriated happily. They say she owed with duress. They say her accounts ran red. They say she angled as easily as she abandoned. They say she married for potential. They say she divorced for the lack of it. They say she despised the unemployed. They say she loathed the unfaithful. They say she ignored these traits in herself. They say her closets were enormous. They say she kept her angels on display. They say she kept her demons hidden. They say we will no longer flock to her call. They say we will no longer follow her blindly. They say she will no longer discard us all. They say she died. They didn't say how.

Rebecca Hirsch Garcia

AN OCCUPATION

Panic. A door. A door off its frame half an inch. Keys in hand, Isa stared at the door that was supposed to separate the world from her possessions. She closed her eyes and counted to ten, gave up somewhere around seven. People all around the world were breathing in their first or last breaths. Somewhere someone was having the worst day of their entire life. And that someone was not her. Because she had left the door open herself. Because she was standing in front of the wrong door. Because it was only half an inch and what was a gap of half an inch in a world which in itself was infinitesimal, smaller than the finest grain of dust in comparison with the universe which contained it.

She opened her eyes. The door, her door, was still open by half an inch. Panic.

She prodded the door open with a quick jab of her finger, unwilling to touch the thing for any longer than that. It swung open easily, and immediately she saw the gold gleam of the deadbolt jutting out, vulgar and erect, the strike plate lying on the floor among bits of doorframe. It

must have fallen there after it was ripped from the wall. Ripped by the force of someone pushing their way in.

Panic.

She called her mother.

Darling, her mother said in a voice too sensual to possibly be meant for her.

Mommy, Isa crashed in before the voice could betray itself any further. I've been robbed.

A silence grew up between them, pitch black and pouring thick and toxic over everything.

Mommy? Isa said. Mommy?

Who is this? her mother said at last and hearing her speak was bittersweet.

It's Isa, Isa said. The lock is broken. I don't know—I don't know what's missing.

I can't hear—I can't—

For God's sake, her mother stuttered and then there was a silence through which Isa strained to hear. She concentrated so fully, giving her entire body over to the listening, that when she finally heard the dial tone she dropped her phone, shocked by the abruptness of its aggressive sound.

Isa picked her phone off the floo , scrambled at buttons, and redialed.

The customer you have dialled is currently not available, a woman's automated voice told her. Please try your call again later. *L'abboné que vous tantez à joindre,* a man's voice took over, *es actuellement en l'impossibilité de répondre—*

Isa, coming to her senses, hung up and dialed 9-1-1.

Take your time, the police office said, one hand hovering near Isa's waist. When they had first entered the apartment, she had felt a wave of nausea and backed up in revulsion, colliding against his body with a violence that surprised them both.

She thought that she would have felt less disoriented if she'd come in and found the entire apartment filled with water, bloated books and water-logged debris fl ating strangely in rivulets that should not have been there. If she had walked through her apartment door and entered into a strange new life on Mars it would have made more sense, held more meaning, than whatever was occurring now.

Because when she had entered everything had looked so diffe ent from the way she had left it, disgusting and horrible and new, and yet, when

they went back in, she could not point at any one thing, at any singular object, and say, there, that thing right there is not how I left it.

And maybe everything looked to be in the same disordered order it had been when she had gone out, but there was a difference in the way the books were stacked and the way her clothes were tossed, even if they aped the way she had left them that morning, casting the same shadows as if they were not in some way fundamentally changed.

Isa shuddered. Everything looked touched, but when her eye settled on an object, she could not say with certainty that it was not exactly the way she had left it.

And this was somehow worse than entering a place in which her things had been tossed back and forth with little regard, like so much debris. Isa thought of strange hands carefully brushing the edge of her desk and roaming finge tips running lightly over the keys of her keyboard, keys which her own fingers touched with purpose and meaning every day. Strange bodies sitting gently in her chairs and lying softly in her bed, breathing in her air and seeing all that she saw now.

That's odd, the policeman said.

Isa looked at where he was pointing and when her eye settled she saw nothing that was odd and all that was ordinary.

What?

They just left your computer right there.

They looked at her computer and Isa felt something strange and hard flip inside her stomach.

The bedroom, she said, walking jerkily towards it. She stumbled over a bra she had discarded on the floor the night before, bent down and picked it up and then dropped it down again, nervously thinking that surely she shouldn't touch things at the scene of the crime.

Something she knew from TV procedurals, and now, she supposed, from life.

My jewellery.

The police officer hovered in the doorway as she rushed through her room. Here too everything had been curiously changed, and yet nothing had been disturbed. It was the air, Isa thought as her eyes scanned the room, refusing to settle on any one thing. Aliens had come and taken her away and brought her to this facsimile of her apartment in which they had carefully recreated every part of her life to the point where it was unsettlingly, erroneously correct.

Your bed, it was left like that? The police officer pointed at the duvet pouring off the edge of the bed onto the floor.

Yes, Isa said, a little embarrassed. That was me. I did that.

She went to the juvenile floral jewellery box she still used and yanked the drawers open, recklessly upturning them on the bed and pawing through the tangled chains, searching and searching for what was missing. As she moved her hands and separated the jewellery into piles, her actions took on a more and more frantic edge as rings, bracelets, charms, necklaces, all, all were accounted for. It was only on a second pass that she realized what was missing.

It's gone, she said at last when she was satisfied and sure.

Yeah? the police officer said, the relief in his voice almost as sharp as her own.

My bracelet, it was a present from my father, it had, had an engraving, a date, it was, let me, it was—

Let me get the form, he said, and left her alone in the room full of things no longer her own.

She wrote the official report with an unsharpened pencil, the best she could find in the moment. As she wrote on and the nub grew flat and blunt, her words ran together in ill-formed half-sentences, her handwriting regressing back to a childish, indecipherable scrawl.

The policemen left shortly after that. They did not promise that they would find her bracelet, but then again she never expected them to.

She kept trying to make things right again. Every stack of books, or pile of pens, every arrangement of everything mocked her with its composition. She could not tell if things had always been that way or if someone else had made them so—she reshuffled everything in order to replace the doubt she felt with dead certainty.

Every day when she went looking for something and could not find it, she wondered if she had simply misplaced it or if it had been taken. She took to keeping a list of all these objects and then crossing them off whenever the item had been found.

That first night, she had been filled with such exhaustion and dread that she had collapsed into her bed and fallen into a deep, dreamless sleep. In the morning she discovered what looked like the smudge of a shoeprint on the edge of her comforter and so she spent the next evening wearing latex gloves, shoving her clothes, her bedding, her intimate apparel into

trash bags, which she emptied into the basement laundry machines, careful not to let any of the cloth touch her skin.

An hour later, when she came downstairs she found her things lying in a damp pile on top of the washing machine, her underwear gnarled and exposed at the very top. She felt like she was the victim of a great cosmic joke. She washed her things again.

The note on the door informed her that the super wanted to have a word with her. Sitting in the super's spacious apartment, a smoky atmosphere clouding around her head, Isa felt a delightful high from light-headedness.

T-twelve, the super said, pointing a finger at her.

Isa, Isa corrected.

Yes, exactly, the super said, waving her hand and unintentionally dispelling more smoke in Isa's direction. It burst over her like a foul cloud and Isa felt a trembling begin in her legs. If she stood up right at that moment she was sure she would fall down.

We all feel just terrible about what happened to you, the super began. She shoved a plate of Digest cookies into Isa's face and Isa waved a no with her hand, using the gesture to try and innocently dissipate some of the gathering smoke which crowded around her.

You know this is a nice, quiet building, the super continued.

Yes.

And you yourself are a nice, quiet girl. Why, I remember the firs time I ever saw you I said to myself, now there's a girl who won't cause any trouble. A good, clean girl. I would rather rent to a girl a hundred times over than a man—

Yes, Isa said. Focus on a fixed point, Isa told herself. Focus on the bookshelf, focus on the book behind her head.

And it's not that I blame you, the super continued. But I would prefer you keep from mentioning it to the other tenants. They might panic, you see. Panic over nothing. And then I would have to show the apartment, get new tenants. And it's not that I mind that, you see. Tha 's my job and I'm proud of it. But it's impossible to find people who want to move in the winter. I defy you to find—

S-U-R, Isa began spelling out the title, desperate for the interview to end, unsure of how much more would be required of her, F-A-C-I-N-G and then it was like having a blindfold removed from her eyes because the whole title pressed itself into her mind at once and she realized that it was her book.

I'm fine, Isa said, before she really was. The super was leaning over her, breathing her smoky breath directly up her nostrils.

Your eyes just rolled up in your head, the super said, her voice full of wonder. Just slid out of the chair like it was nothing.

Could I please, Isa cleared her throat a little, stared straight ahead at the ceiling, which was really all she could see from her angle on the floo . Could I please have a glass of water?

The super heaved herself up off of her haunches with a soft grunt and retreated to the kitchen. Isa, half-standing and half-crawling, made her way to the bookshelf and sloppily plucked the book out, shufflin the other books around with her fingers to cover the gap left behind.

She had just enough time to slip it into her handbag before the super was back, offering muggy tap water with a white cloud unfurling itself slowly within the liquid, its own separate atmosphere.

I'm fine, Isa said, stumbling backwards and refusing the water, wondering where she had put that policeman's card so she could tell him she knew who had taken her things, who had her bracelet. The whole time she was stumbling back, she wondered only if her face would betray her.

I won't mention a word to the other tenants. Just like you said. No need for panic.

Inside her apartment, Isa was filled with joyous abandon, rooting around until she found the policeman's card with his name and extension printed on it. As she dialled, she wondered what would happen to the super and then decided she didn't care. She flipped through the book she had taken as the phone rang, fumbling till she found the front where the inscription would be. To Isa, it would say—only when she got the pages unstuck there was nothing on them. Smooth and undisturbed as if fresh from the printer.

An automated message told her to punch in the extension or hold please. Isa ended the call and let the phone slide out of her hands as she clutched at the book and examined its edges worn in places her own book was not. She went to her bookshelf and found her book, right where she had left it.

So. So no one had taken her book. So she had taken someone else's. Well, her bracelet was gone, there was still that at least, Isa thought, looking around wildly at the things which were hers which no longer felt like things she had ever seen before, let alone things that she had any dominion over.

She slid the super's copy beside her own. She didn't quite know what else to do with it.

Isa found the bracelet the same day she found out that the man in the apartment beside her, Number Eleven, was telling people that he had heard the whole thing, had seen the whole thing unfold. Unfold was the word he was using, as if he were just a spectator watching a flower blossom.

She heard it from the woman downstairs, Number Eight, who came over without warning and invited herself to stay for a cup of tea.

What happened was a tragedy, Eight said, with a smile, which would have meant more if she hadn't just barged into Isa's apartment and sat down among her things as if she owned them.

Did she own them? Isa wondered. Was this Eight's apartment? No, that was ridiculous. That was her clock right there, set an hour behind because Isa had never reset it for daylight saving.

Horrific, Eight continued, as her eyes ping-ponged around the apartment.

Thank you, Isa said, feeling the beginning of a headache sprouting somewhere deep within her. She raised a hand to her forehead in exaggeration, a woman imitating a woman having a headache even though her own was becoming realer by the second, hoping that Eight would get the hint. She didn't.

It could have happened to any of us, Eight said, eyeing the crumbs that speckled the kitchen table.

It would be alright, Isa thought, if she just quietly looked and judged, but no, Eight had to crane her neck, had to bug her eyes out, had to be, in general, as unsubtle as possible. She had actually started to sweep up the crumbs into a little pile at the edge of the table. It was almost, but not quite, unbearable.

What did he take, anyway? Eight wanted to know.

A bracelet, a silver bracelet, Isa said at the same time as she opened a drawer looking for tea and found her silver bracelet crowded beside some pencils.

Isa slammed the drawer shut on this perverse sense of kismet, forced herself to smile at Eight and told her she had no tea bags left after all.

Don't worry about it, Eight said, even as Isa grabbed her by her watery bicep and led her briskly towards the door.

But wait a minute, Isa said, yanking her back across the threshold, the door gaping wide. Eight flinched and Isa wondered when she had turned

into the sort of person who pushed around elderly women. Aliens, she decided. It was the only reasonable explanation.

Yes, dear? Eight said it like she was frightened of her, like maybe Isa was going to manhandle her back into the kitchen and chop her into little bits and bake her into a cake. Isa resented it.

How did you know—how did you even know about what happened? I didn't tell anyone. The super said—

Oh, but everyone knows, Eight said, looking confused at Isa's confusion.

What are you talking about?

It's that man beside you, in Number Eleven, you know? He's been telling everyone about how he saw the whole thing with his own two eyes. It's all he ever talks about, says he got a real good look—Eight began, just as Isa loudly interrupted her with a goodbye and pushed her out of her apartment and shut the door in her face.

She could hear Eight shufflin around indignantly outside for a while and then the scraping of slippers against floor, whispering away, signifying retreat, defeat.

She went back to the kitchen drawer and withdrew the bracelet. She remembered tossing it in there a long, long time ago when she had been trying to clean up the counter, shoving everything haphazardly into the nearest drawer.

The inscription on the back read: To my little Isabelle. Love, daddy.

Isa told herself she was glad it had not been stolen.

Isa thought it might be nice to bring over some pastries or cookies or something so she went to the grocery store and bought some tarts with anemic crusts. She transferred them onto a plate before going over and knocking on Eleven's door.

Eleven had lived there for decades, certainly before Isa's time and maybe before everyone else's. He looked straight into her face as strange words came stuttering out of her mouth. A series of awkward introductions that went nowhere. In the end, all it took was her thrusting the tarts in his face and he ushered her into his apartment, opening the door wide and placing an arm on her forearm to guide her inside.

She found herself sitting shell-shocked in an armchair as he bit into the tart, crumbs flying everywhere. His apartment was an echo of her own, same closets and lighting fixtures, the radiators crowding into inconve-

niently placed outlets the same way hers did. Only the whole place was bare, the walls so white it ached to look at them.

The e was nothing remotely personal in the room. Even the few pieces of furniture looked strangely new and untouched, not a scratch or mark on them. Like a laboratory. Like the set for a sci-fi film in which the heroes visit space. A moon colony. Isa was on the moon.

You want to know about the thief, Eleven said, spraying crumbs everywhere before Isa had found the courage to speak up again. It wasn't a question.

Yes, I—

I saw everything, he interrupted.

Everything within his vicinity was now littered with debris and Isa thought how strange it was that this neat little man was such a disgusting eater.

Smashed in the door with a few quick throws of the shoulder. Didn't stay there too long.

And how long, Isa wondered, did he consider not too long? Had it been a polite break-in of only a few seconds, a few minutes, as if everything had been planned out in advance, what to touch, what to take, what to leave? Had it been a series of frantic minutes, adrenaline pumping as things were picked up and then put down again? Had it been difficu to decide what to take? Had they searched in places so private that Isa herself could no longer hope to remember and find what had been stored inside of them?

The only thing that Eleven had on his walls was a calendar with all the days so far lived faithfully crossed off. The picture for May was a naked woman straddling a motocycle, her legs spread pornographically.

Isa crossed her own legs and leaned forward. Eleven leaned forward as well, like they were all friends here.

But did you tell the police—

He leaned back abruptly.

I don't get myself involved in that sort of thing.

But if you saw what was taken—

Might have been her boyfriend for all I know.

But I don't—and even if I did, all the more reason to—

Th t girl, he says leaning in again, fl cking his tongue so that it smacked wetly against his bottom lip, has different men running in and out of there at all hours of the night.

But no I don't, Isa found herself saying. I don't have a boyfriend at all, she said clinging to the inaccuracy as if by curing him of this falsity she could make him understand her.

For a minute Isa and Eleven looked into each other's eyes, humbled by their mutual ignorance, their complete inability to comprehend each other. It was a moment in which anything was possible, a moment in which they could have chosen to implode like supernovas or juggle. It could have been a fantastic anything and Isa was upset when she blinked and the moment was over. Eleven's face began to turn a strange purple as he realized who she was, and in the end the only thing that did happen was that Eleven grabbed her by the forearm and led her out of his apartment, calling her a crazy troublemaker, a bad girl, a liar.

But did you see what was taken? she asked just as he closed the door in her face.

Can't you just tell me what was taken?

She slapped her palm against the door again and again and was crushed that the weight of it, the force and the violence of everything she felt and said and wanted to say, translated only into a muted slap and a stinging pain that hurt only her.

Erin Conway-Smith

STILL, NIGHT THOUGHTS

A fresh metre between fact and feeling.
I've strapped on the snowshoes so
I'll only sink mid-Sorel.

The g eyscale, the hush…I'd forgotten
this photocopied landscape for a long while
but it's back with a pang I fought to leave.

My father sends photos of pine grosbeaks
feeding. Security cam captures of a wolf
at the door. Winter disappears the house

or makes it. What would I even do there.
How would I square it
with my grasping younger self

which is also my old self, although
my way of speaking betrays me.
A light dusting of existential questions

I won't exactly contemplate.
The e's the truck stop
and then there's the turn off

I still drive it in my dreams.
And the people in that place,
which used to be me

they brush their cars in the mornings
so they can see.

The 're seeing the road.
The 're going slow.

Courtney Bill

LICHTENBERG FIGURES

Daddy says I won't have to worry because lightning mostly strikes men. He has the scars to prove it. Dusty red fronds cobweb in tangles up his forearms. I've never seen how far they go.

I pluck a weed and put it in my mouth. It tastes like dirt and tang and something metallic.

"Can we go inside now?" Delilah's parents aren't home from work yet. She sits in a faded Cinderella lawn chair Daddy got for free on Craigslist. Daddy says we need to be nice to her because she's lonely. I wish I was lonely.

I crouch in the weeds and gutter my toes into the wet moss. Wet is good. When the air is wet, it means lightning will come soon.

Delilah's nose is wrinkled when I look back at her. "What?" I snap.

"The laundry smells funny."

My chair is The Little Mermaid themed with the characters smeared across the armrests. I pinch the fabric of Ariel's face and scratch the bulge with my index finger. "Then don't breathe through your nose."

I've only seen lightning once. I was five, and I sat on the porch while Daddy wrote notes in the margins of his Bible. The front yard looked like boiling soup, and in a sudden flash the sky crackled into life. I screamed and Daddy laughed. He let me put my head in his lap. He doesn't do that a lot.

"I think I heard my mom's car in the driveway." Delilah clambers to her feet.

"I didn't hear anything."

Her flip-flops squash against the slick grass, and her heels flash like pink popsicle smears.

Daddy leans back in his lawn chair and kicks one leg over his knee. I look over at him and smile. The lightning will come soon.

Leanne Charette

LULLABY

Maybe I first hea d the melody
in her high school band practice,
floating fetal position under an versized shirt
as a viola, out of tune
played the melody, accompanied by squawking clarinets.

Lullaby, and good night, thy mother's delight

Maybe I hated it then, the dissonance between the words,
tremulous notes swaying,
the terrified staccato of a oung girl's heart
the loudest sound I could hear.

Bright angels beside, my darling abide

Maybe I hated it then, almost meeting the world on an ER floo ,
while the soothing notes of Brahms
welcomed the wanted babies
whose fathers held them proudly,
who didn't argue whether they were his.

Lay thee down now and rest, may thy slumber be blessed

Maybe I hated it then, when the soft notes mingled with medical alarms
above a sterile incubator
while she signed the papers that legalized my abandonment.

Lay thee down now and rest, may thy slumber be blessed

clashing painfully
with the terrified staccato of a oung woman's heart.
Humming lullabies to swaddled twins,
sidestepping Brahms like sidewalk cracks,
I compose a new song;

Wrapped in love, snugly bound, you will always be found

Melody sung for three children,
but soothing only two.
The thi d, ghost of myself,
refusing to close her eyes.

fir t angel by Melanie Evelyn (2022)

Leanne Boschman

AUDITORY LONGING

A couple of days ago, I rescued a beige touch-tone telephone from a shelf at Value Village where it lay behind other cast-off phones, clock radios, and an assortment of gaudy Disney gadgets. Back home, I tried to scrub a greasy film off the clunky rectangular handset. Now my thrift store score fits perfectly in the wall niche with a phone jack that connects my apartment to the building intercom system.

This morning, the phone vibrates with a monotone ring. When I press it to my ear, I clearly hear, "Canada Post—parcel for you." I'm not a tech-savvy person, but I triumphantly think I've nailed it this time. Th phone I had before was too new, had too many buttons and "features." All I could hear was fuzzy static. In my building with an intercom system installed in the 1950s, I just needed older technology.

But this vintage telephone has sparked an auditory longing. The smallest bone in the body—the stapes—taps against the coiled snail of the cochlea with thousands of sensory cells that are taut, ready to vibrate. Mine remembers the first voice, my mother's, that set the miniscule waves

in motion. I recall, too, that the base of the phone was called a 'cradle.' She won't call, though. Mom died almost a decade ago.

~

Despite the advent of the mobile phone, email, and texting, my mother's preference for her landline telephone never changed. She remained fastened to an era when there was one phone in the house, usually attached to a kitchen wall. Long distance phone calls were expensive, reserved for holidays and birthdays. With her eleven siblings scattered across the country, those phone lines were like rhizome roots connecting a large and ever-expanding family.

Mom was a sociable woman whose playful sense of humour made her an able conversationalist. Throughout her life, she nurtured new friendships with people diverse in age and backgrounds. She was an instigator of social gatherings and could always be counted on to check in with family members and friends who were ill or bereaved. She used the phone to bridge distances, offer cheer and support.

During the 1960s, in a small prairie town where it was possible to walk anywhere in less than fifteen minutes, the telephone still came in handy. Once supper dishes were put away, laundry folded and us kids bathed, every few months Mom would call Goldie, the local Avon lady. My sister and I hovered in the kitchen in our flannelette nightgowns, our hair in foam rollers, anticipating the array of cosmetics that would soon be spread out on our Formica kitchen table. When Goldie came through the door clutching a small turquoise suitcase, we ran to receive a fragrant embrace.

"This is Unforgettable—my new favourite. I really love the cream sachets," Goldie held up the first of a dozen or so dainty glass jars.

"Hmm, there's definitely rose and something spicy—I like it," Mom replied, her slender wrist still poised in the air, and the sniffing and dabbing continued.

Enthralled, we watched our mother rub scented lotions on the back of her hands and apply lipstick from small white tubes. With dark brunette hair and high cheekbones, she could pull off the reddest hue. And that red complimented her signature polka dot blouses and fanciful jewelry—rhinestone flowers and foliage, glittery drop earrings. Later, we imitated her when she let us play with the lipstick samples. Her style was flamb y-ant, and we wanted to be just like her.

~

"I'd rather have an evil step-mother than you," I hissed at Mom over my bowl of porridge. It was a bitter cold midwinter morning, and she was scolding me for missing my curfew the previous evening.

"Perhaps you'll get your wish." She threatened to call child services and have me put in a foster home, a threat she made several times over the years. Despite my bravado, I was terrified by the idea.

By the time I reached adolescence, our communication was fraying, full of static. A confused mumble. There were days when Mom and I could barely exchange a civil word.

Like most girls, my early teens were preoccupied by physical changes that sparked self-consciousness. It was a teeter-totter time of playing dolls with my sister one day and talking with friends about boys and bras the next. In a town where sports were the main pastime, it didn't help that I wasn't particularly interested in athletic pursuits. In junior high school, I quit piano lessons and began to moodily strum my guitar every morning before school and write rebellious poetry.

Mom worked full-time as a school secretary and was completely in her element answering phone calls and directing traffic. She also kept a meticulously clean house and cooked for our family of seven. She seemed tireless, but looking back, I see that there were times when her energy crashed. Without warning, she would retreat to her bedroom after taping to the door a name plaque from her days as a stenographer. *Miss Neufeld.* From all that I'd heard, when Mom was still Miss Neufeld, she worked diligently all week and liked to party hard on weekends. Not much had changed—and her demons were still stirred up by alcohol.

One weekend when I was fifteen, I came home well after midnight to find my parents' friends slumped in chairs in our living room. *Johnny Cash at Folsom Prison* was spinning on the turn table. I knew that no one was keeping track of my curfew, so I wandered around listening to scrambled conversations and jokes. Mom asked me to sing some country ballad with her. From her early years of church choir singing, she effortlessly added a dusky alto. It was the closest we could come to having fun together, so I stayed up at the party, played my guitar and sang more C & W songs.

"When we kissed good-bye, I farted. I knew we'd never meet again."

Some members of our tipsy audience giggled their appreciation. I laughed, too, at Mom's version of "Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain,"

complete with nasal twang, then told her "I don't think that's quite how it goes."

"Well, you think you know sooo mush, I'll tell ya something. I never wanted a baby—didn't want a squalling red-faced brat even when you were born. I jus didn't want you."

Her slurred words skipped in my mind for a minute. I remembered what I'd heard about her grueling twenty-four-hour labour, my forceps birth. I put down my guitar, got up, and put my face close enough to hers to catch the tang of smoke and booze.

"What the hell! Why would you say that?" I demanded.

"And I tole your grandmother that you're nothing but a sassy lil bitch." She had delivered the old one-two. I was devastated by the very idea that my adored grandmother would have this report of me. I bolted up the stairs to my bedroom, desperate to leave the crackling laughter behind. In my room, I played out that scene with a diff rent ending. Mom would come up to my room, say "I'm sorry"—brush a tendril of hair out of my eyes, say she was joking, that she did want me. That I was the best thing that ever happened to her. But she never again mentioned the words she had spoken to me that night. Perhaps she just didn't remember—I'll never know for sure.

Feelings of betrayal and hurt lingered, but it seemed impossible to talk about them. If I broached the difficult subject of our relationship, it was like a call not connecting—no ring tone, just dead silence on the other end.

~

I still wonder what my mother really wanted from life when she got married in 1959. Families were still large, and she could take care of babies and young children with ease—changing diapers, warming milk, tucking them into bed followed by folding laundry and baking. In fall she worked late into the night to preserve the garden's harvest. All this in an era when automatic washing machines, dryers, and vacuum cleaners were supposed to make life easier for homemakers. But there was no gadget to help her sort out the inarticulate emotional outbursts of an adolescent daughter.

No matter how busy Mom was with endless rounds of housework, it was hard to sneak much past her. One evening, I rifled through her purse when she was finishing up some baking in the kitchen. I tucked a cigarette and some matches in my jeans pocket and headed out behind the garage. I hefted myself up onto one of the empty rabbit hutches that

had occupied so much of my time just a few years earlier. Cool evening air was beginning to ease the heat of the summer afternoon, and the last orange streaks of the sunset lay low on the horizon.

"Go to your room, now." I had barely exhaled my first long, luxurious draw when she appeared out of a twilit shadow.

"Holy shit!" I blurted. How did she know? Her dark eyes bored through me.

"Yeh, yeh—you're going to send me away, right?" I tried to sound unconcerned. She didn't reply right away, used the silence to keep me squirming.

"Right now, I'm sending you to your room. You'll be there for a while." With a slight tip of her chin, she gestured for me to hand over the matches. Our fingers touched just long enough for me to register bodily warmth. I resisted an urge to hold on to her.

"Grounded for two weeks! Tha 's not fair," I yelled from my bedroom doorway on hearing Mom hang up the phone after calling our neighbour Gladys and arranging to have a cup of coffee on her back porch. Mom ignored my outburst. She was already heading out with her violated package of McDonalds Menthols.

It was a time of confused signals. The more we verbally sparred, the more insolent I became. As much as I still wanted to please her, I earned only her stinging criticism. The tenderness and acceptance I craved, even as I battled with her, eluded me.

~

Mom cried at the train station when I moved to British Columbia during my gap year. I needed more space. I had barely begun to process the tempest of my teen years. With a couple provinces between us, a shift took place in our relationship when she called me every couple of weeks. Those phone calls were never rushed. She was full of interest in my new job and my roommate. I loved the luxury of having her to myself. She gave me the recipes I asked for and news of neighbours and relatives.

Most importantly, before hanging up she said, "I love you." Th angry words we had hurled at one another in those tumultuous years still echoed, but they were slowly beginning to fade.

I have puzzled over how that era of prescribed roles and her own home-life affected her parenting style. A middle child in a family of twelve siblings, my mother was lost in the shuffle After fleeing revolution where they had once enjoyed prosperity in a Mennonite colony in Ukraine, her

parents barely scratched out a living after arriving in Saskatchewan at the beginning of the Great Depression. Reassembling pieces of the stories I heard of her childhood, it's certain that parental attention in such a large family was rare and coveted. There was a pecking order, and each child was usually tended by a sibling just a year or two older.

I recall the complex relationship she had with the sister who had been her caregiver—the powerful bond, the betrayals, Mom's grief when this sister was felled by Alzheimer's. Their hours-long phone calls dwindled with my aunt's mental condition. Their deaths came just a few days apart, compounding grief and sparking jokes about sibling rivalry.

The very first telephone exchange was made of carriage bolts, handles from teapot lids, and bustle wire. Things cobbled together. The pieces I've assembled about her early life, the contradictions between her weekday competence at home and at work contrasted with her weekend binging, still leave me with a disarrayed picture of who my mother really was and a niggling doubt about how well we can really know anyone.

~

When Mom was diagnosed with metastatic bone cancer, she wasn't ready to relinquish her role as matriarch and centre of our family. The party-like atmosphere in her hospice room, with friends coming and going and baskets of food and flowers piling up, ended after a few weeks. Then it was just my father, with his shell-shocked expression, and my siblings watching her move in and out of realms where we couldn't follow her.

Her own father had died of lung cancer at home. Attended only by my grandmother and aunts, and with very little in the way of medication, he had suffe ed greatly. This beloved father, whose face had streamed with tears as he walked each of his ten daughters down the aisle—who sang in a rich baritone and regaled my father, as a young suitor, with stories of Cossacks and revolution—found a line through to his daughter.

"He's singing to me," she whispered.

"Who's singing, Mom?" I leaned in closer.

"My Dad is singing."

We couldn't make out the name of the song, whether it was a lullaby or a hymn. But after an evening of unceasing agitation, the shadows on my mother's face lightened, the creases melted.

A few hours after she died, I walked to a nearby lake. Frost sparkled on stiff blades of grass and on the dock. A full moon blazed with stars jittering around it. In the absence of artificial light, the night sky was

dazzling. For a few moments I was certain Mom was signalling me, letting me know she had made it to her destination and was having an uproariously good time.

In the days following her death, I thought of my mother when the phone rang and sometimes late in the evening, I had a strong urge to call her, longed to talk with her again, no matter how jumbled the words might be. We hadn't found a place of peace in our relationship in the way that I would have liked before she died. The e was that difficul time of my adolescence. And there were her drinking years and the years of sobriety—feelings of remorse overwhelmed her, and she would often fall silent when conversations touched on painful chapters of the past.

Recently, I heard about "wind phones" set up at the edge of forests for the bereaved to talk with their lost loved ones and help them maneuver through lingering grief. Would speaking to my mother on that phone to nowhere help? I'm not sure. All I know is that our conversation isn't finished.

Gabriel Furshong

FROM NOTHING

for Eva

In late winter

when you lived inside your mother
I walked upon a frozen road
that rose above a silent fiel
buried with unbroken snow

waiting for your eyes
to trace red willow limb
tumored with buds
from end to end

waiting for your finger
to melt frost on a fence wire
glimmered and spun
mile after empty mile

waiting for your ears
to gather the drift of pronghorn
a scudding *shush*
of silence suddenly unborn

from nothing they come
sunlit shadows
one by one
glinting into view

Hannah Yerington

KITCHEN TABLE ANGELOLOGY

When I learned to drive,
I was always one curve from collision,
a 10-foot angel sitting on the bumper of my car,
her strong arms moving me between lanes.

My best friend collects angel statues,
blue-eyed beauties—
cherubs with feather soft wings,
a collection of bad song on the windowsill.

But my angels have four faces,
human face, bull face, lion face, eagle face,
four wings, feet like calves' hooves.

Once, angels led my ancestors through the Negev,
came to us as dunes of sand,
wells in the desert.

They danced with iriam and her timbrel.
They stood with us in the flam
their thousands of eyes glistening in the heat.

Today, my angels come into the kitchen,
light the stove with their breath and eat breakfast
before taking their morning commute
to wrestle giants to the ground.

Friday afternoons, we go to the supermarket to pick out yellow fl wers.
We set the table with paper plates made of prayer
and then they pick up Sabbath Queen in a blue Prius.

My angels deliver prophecies in rhyme and Twitter posts.
They teach me to lea e out tap water
in a mason jar on Havdalah for healing.

When I need protection for the day,
they fold themselves into amulets to keep in my pocket
slipped between pens and small rocks.
In the evening, I steam their wrinkled cloud shirts in the bathroom.

My angels bless all the salt in the kitchen,
grow garlic as white as the moon in my garden
while humming songs wet with rain.

I spend my weeks in this home of angels
stretching their wings
in every corner of the house,
their hair ascending up to the skylight.

As I sleep, they watch over
terror and thunder their wings crashing
over the night sky like rushing water, holding
up the heavens with their thousands of arms.

Every morning I rise to land crisp with lightning,
a sky full of promise,
a kitchen counter full of angels
taking tea with their honey.

Hannah Yerington

PLANTS OF THE BOOK

I follow a book into the greenhouse,
it falls asleep in the pitcher of a fl wer
and God curls up into the shiver of a swiss cheese plant.

In the greenhouse, Voodoo Lily counts her corms, gathering
her children in dirt sacks while the red aura of a cactus speaks
in tongues, the palm
oranges as early as sour prayer.

God breaks off a piece of dieffenbach
because there is no poison
when you are a god, a book,
a krill swimming in a library of dark water.

I follow a book into the greenhouse
and God fills with light brighter than an eg
bursting into bloom, a lemon exploding
into infinite pul .

I hold hands with a banana tree—
we jump into the yellow sea.

PART 3

JOURNEY

low tide angel by Melanie Evelyn (2022)

Wendy Brandmark

FABULATION DAY

At the beginning only one woman walked backwards. She went down tube escalators and across bridges without falling or crashing into anyone, as if her body sensed whatever was behind her and kept her safe. Soon there was a crowd walking with her, their faces raised to the sky.

It was a time when we stopped talking about what actually happened or who we were. So many people were telling stories that community clubs started up for those who needed more than their friends to hear their tales. And for the lonely. That was before we had interpreters. Before the clubs became mandatory.

I made much out of the meals of my day. "First of all she looked to see if her husband left her any porridge." The listener might wonder what kind of husband this woman had who could do such a thing. What would my character eat and how would she take this bit of selfishness?

It became a rule that you didn't speak about yourself. I simply substituted "she" for "I" or gave a name to the hero. If they suspected that I was

the "she" they were wrong. I didn't eat porridge, and I had no husband, at least not one who lived with me.

"No, there was no porridge." Here I stopped. The interpreter was nodding her head, waiting for me to go on because I had stirred everyone's curiosity. I could see that from the way they bent forward, their mouths open, some even licking their lips as if tasting the missing porridge. A man took out his phone. I wondered if he was going to record me because this was not allowed. The stories were meant to appear and disappear. There was no handing down, no replication or redecoration or redrafting or publication. So there I was with the threads of plot hanging from my fi - gers. What was this news I had to give the small circle of expectant faces?

It came to me as the perfect surprise. "There never was any porridge, never any husband. The cupboard, her cupboard, was bare as always."

"Are you finished?" the interpreter asked. I think she was findin my pauses trying. She wanted to give another person a chance. It was important to hear all of us; otherwise the group might begin to tell tales outside. Might counter the leader's stories with their own. This happened a few years ago when the air was suddenly full of words, like millions of ants taking off on their one day of flight.

I nodded. I felt depleted. It was a piece of my day I'd given them. I wondered if anybody realised what I had done. I looked around at the faces but there was no surprise or shock. We were not encouraged to do more than clap at the end of each telling. This they did and the interpreter turned to the man with the phone who told us about a cowboy who used his car like a horse, slapping the steering wheel when he wanted it to go faster. He had been making up story after story from the Westerns he'd seen as a child.

It was hard for me to listen. I kept thinking of my own story, how it had turned a corner I hadn't intended, if stories can have corners. That word "truth" made an appearance in my mind, the letters black and thick. They reminded me of the huge chair which once stood in the park, with legs three times the size of real ones and a seat no one but a giant could reach.

Did I say the storying clubs were for the lonesome? That would be telling only one part of their purpose. I felt better after I started attending though I'd resisted. Once you were referred you had to go or else there would be a doctor coming round to ask questions: "What shape is the world? Who is the mother of you?" They made my forehead ache,

those questions, as if someone was nailing my face. I called the world a lodestone and my mother the empress of stars. The doctor was happy with my answers but even so he prescribed the storytelling club for the foreseeable future because my answer to his first question, "What is your name?" was incorrect. We all had two names now, our birth name and the one we chose as author, and it was the second one which we were to use. We were like the tales we told. Made up people.

If you could not answer any of those questions in a satisfactory manner, the doctor found a place for you in one of the disused libraries. They were called retreats. Nobody saw those people again though we heard that they lived in separate rooms where their only contact was the worker who brought them food. Such was the fear of their infection. It was said that as their illness worsened, they began to hear the voices of the disappeared books.

The e were times when one of the group couldn't find a story. Th interpreter always gave her a few minutes to think before moving on to someone else. She didn't want her to have to leave. I imagine she was judged on the number of stories we produced and how well the group held together though there was nothing we shared beyond our words and a cup of tea from a huge samovar which sat steaming on a table in the middle of our circle.

After the cowboy man, a woman told us about two sisters who wore each other's clothing and could also exchange faces when they tired of their own or fancied their sister's husband.

I liked the story. How boring it is to be yourself day after day. Even when I tried to make things up like the old game of pretend, I knew that the "she" was always the same me, in the same flat, with the same air of bafflement The interpreter didn't notice this. She listened, her face in her hand as if every word I said was a fresh fabrication.

Though we kept together, the core of us, there were changes in the group week-to-week, people gone who had never said a word or whose stories had to be stopped by the interpreter. She'd raise her hand. "That's not a story, is it?" She spoke in a calm flat voice which didn't threaten but we knew that something had gone wrong. Once she asked a woman who had given us a story of three sentences, "Are you finishing there?" The woman started to cry.

I continued with my home tales, spirits appearing in my bathroom and aping me in the mirror. Of course it was not me, that would have

been dangerous. I had trouble knowing when to stop talking till I made the walking backwards woman my guide. Her story could have no ending because she never saw what was coming.

The interpreter was the first to tell us about the new national holiday. Not only would we have a day to rest our minds so they would be fresh for our inventions, but the holiday would celebrate our history of make believe. It was to be called "Fabulation Day".

Th re was polite clapping in the group though what we were clapping for was unclear.

It was at that moment when the interpreter was poised to ask someone to begin the storytelling session, that a hand was raised. A woman said, "Miss". Because we never knew her name. "Miss, when will you tell us a story?"

It was the first time I saw an expression on her face. She looked, I don't know how she looked, because I couldn't imagine her with feelings. I thought of her as a character who did not exist beyond this room. Her face looked startled, that was it.

She said, "Thank you for asking. This group is for you to story tell."

She nodded to a woman who began a tale of travelling to Saturn's moons. We had had many of these dull space voyages. She named moon after moon: "And then I went to Titus and after that Rhea." I was so bored I began to formulate a story which for once had nothing to do with me. I was in the middle of this when I heard the interpreter say, "You have to stop."

She was an old woman but one of those ones who refuse their ageing with spikes of dyed red hair. I'd heard what she said but hadn't paid much attention. "When I reached the furthermost moon, I saw that I was all alone and always would be." It was rare this happened, that someone lapsed into their real life. She did not seem to know as I did how to disguise yourself.

"Will you change your story? I can give you five minutes."

If she didn't change it, she would be sent out of the group and at her age she would end up at one of the retreats. She didn't take the fi e minutes, no she was quick. She said, "On the last moon I visited, now that would be Pandora, I met a holy man with a family of elves who did his bidding." It was the first time I wanted to laugh in the group so I kept my eyes down, sure that if the red-haired woman looked at me I could not contain myself.

The interpreter seemed satisfied. She began handing out little cups of tea from the samovar. Even if we didn't like it sweetened we had to accept the cup as a reward, drink it down and then return it to her. No one asked to have it unsweetened, not after the first session when a woman who demanded tea without sugar was not seen again. After we drank our tea, we could leave one by one, each of us entering a glass lift which travelled swiftly down the side of the building, then opened its doors directly on to the street where we were supposed to walk away quickly so that the next person in the lift did not encounter us. I thought we would be embarrassed to see each other after the lies we told, but someone whispered that they did not want the group of us together without the interpreter. I always felt buoyant after the club as if someone had pumped me with laughing gas.

In the next meeting the interpreter told us more about Fabulation Day. We were encouraged, no, told to attend the grand parade; if we could not stand on the street because we were ill, we must watch it on our virtuals and applaud by pressing the exalt button.

The leader would be at the head of the parade with the gainsayers and diviners. The floats would follow with figu es from fairy tales, the witch, the princess and the fool, and a chorus of children reciting fables in which there was no moral.

The culmination of the whole day would be the publication of a book, really the most remarkable the nation has ever known. A collection of tales so flamboyant, so rich in invention, that they did not need resolutions or endings. Nobody was murdered or lost their way or renounced their parents. The e had been story books before but never one which could empty the lives of ordinary people of what was painful. It was to be called *Elixir*.

We listened, we clapped. But not the old red-haired woman. She had painted her lips and eyelids a deep violet so that with the black scarves wound around her neck, her red hair, and pointed nose, she reminded me of what a witch used to look like. Perhaps she clapped with her feet but these were hidden beneath her long skirt.

Beside her was a young man I hadn't seen before but it could have been that I didn't remember him. He had a feverish look. The e were holes in the elbows of his sleeves and his trousers were worn to shiny. His story was familiar to me though he clothed it in magic. Once there was a son who could not settle though his father gave him everything, a spaceship and a princess for his wife who was half-goddess. But the son

ran away with the father's jewels. He travelled on fl ing horses and coaches powered by the wind searching for a country east of the moon and west of the sun where he could be the king. But this country had drifted off into another solar system. The son, now penniless, returned to the only home he had known. As he approached, he heard from the twittering of birds, whose language he had learned during his travels, that his father was very ill and might not live.

I was enjoying this confusion of fairy tale and science fiction though I knew that there would be a reconciliation between father and son.

The young man looked around at us, his face burning with his words: "Even so he would not see his son. He would not forgive."

The interpreter raised her hand. "Tha 's enough. Enough," she repeated, for the feverish young man kept on speaking even though his words were muffled by what sounded like sobs.

I watched the old red-haired woman raise her hand. "But I want to know what happened."

The interpreter hesitated. She hadn't been told what to do at such a time. It was as if the wild son had gotten loose from the story and entered our group.

Finally she said, "Nothing happened. It's make believe"' As if we were her children.

I thought it couldn't rest there, even though the cowboy man told another of his tales and we clapped and drank our tea and left in the glass elevator, one-by-one, just as always.

I didn't feel as happy as I normally did after these sessions. I walked along with my head down which is why I didn't see the red-haired old woman till she was right beside me.

"This isn't my first club," she said. "The last interpreter asked me to leave."

We were not supposed to speak to each other. I looked around to see if there was anyone from our story club who could tell on us.

"They didn't send me to a retreat. Because I gave up my own life to become a narrator."

I was suddenly very tired though all I had done was sit on a hard wooden chair and listen. It was as if I rode flying horses with the reckless son.

"Even narrators have lives," I said, remembering her lonely journey to Saturn's furthermost moon.

She left me, so quickly did she disappear I wondered if she had fl wn away.

In the next story club, I was surprised to see the feverish young man still with us and the red-haired witch who had unsettled our interpreter. Once again there was someone new or had I seen the young woman before somewhere? There was a time when everyone looked familiar to me.

She wore a long loose dress like a nightgown and held a covered basket on her lap. She looked groggy as if she just woken and dragged herself from bed, her waist-length blond hair tangled up in her sleep. She spoke low, her words garbled in her heart-shaped mouth: "A girl went out partying and fell asleep in the woods on her way home. This girl, she had the blessings of fairies. Many fairies. When a man came they told him she was a princess who needed to sleep for a long long time."

The interpreter, like all of us, had had to lean forward to catch her words. She waited patiently now. I know she wanted the young woman to go on without any prompting. The e had been too many incidents in the club.

"So he. But he." We heard a cry from the basket she held on her lap. She pulled out a tiny wizened form.

The interpreter started to say, "We don't allow." She stopped herself. She didn't even ask the woman if she had finished. She turned to me. "We'll hear from you now, shall we?"

I told of an old lady who could think herself into invisibility. I thought it clever of me not to use a cloak or a wizard's charm. The only problem was when she became too tired to think herself back to visible.

The interpreter seemed satisfied. Not that she praised me but her face became neutral or what some would call calm. At the end of the club, she said, "I have a special announcement which will bring joy to each one of you."

We had had our cups of sweetened tea and were waiting to be given the sign that it was our turn to descend to the ground in the glass lift.

"I have been informed that on Fabulation Day we will be in a special grandstand. This club and another have been chosen which is a great honour and due to your good work."

She gave each of us a metal bracelet which would admit us to the grandstand on the day and allow them to keep track of us. I wondered what we were meant to do there besides applaud. I hoped cameras would not focus on us.

On Fabulation Day, we were very far from the leader who stood on a platform, but we could see him on the large screen which hung beyond him. He had grown plump over the years of his rule as if he feasted on our words. When he opened the giant book, the mother of all the others which would be published and distributed, and began to read aloud, a curious thing happened. People began to climb from the pages of the book. They shook themselves out as if they had been sleeping or kept in a confined space or newly born. One after the other they came and stood around him. The red-haired witch, the impoverished young man, the man who talked of cowboys. When I saw myself there I knew that it was just a trick of the cameras, these figu es who emerged and grew in seconds to life-size. But it wasn't the self I knew, the woman I looked at every day in the mirror and the me I took to the story club. I saw that it was the woman I invented, the "she" in my stories who was there in all her guises. We were still sitting in the grandstand, only our stories were climbing from the book. That must have been the surprise the interpreter promised.

Soon there was such a crowd on the platform that we couldn't see the leader though we could hear his voice. The story he read was about a king who ruled his country so well that the people no longer believed in god or the devil or the phases of the moon. His voice began to crack from the strain of speaking through all the people. If he had been in our club, he might have been given a cup of sweetened tea. But no one brought him even a glass of water. The gainsayers and diviners, how could they make their way through the crowd?

You could hear him coughing his way through the story when the figu es who surrounded him began to speak. It was difficul to understand what each person was saying for they all talked at the same time. I heard pieces of plot and character but it was impossible to know which story the pieces came from. I was speaking too. I was up there with the rest of them. The most miraculous thing was that people kept emerging from the book, like the pitcher of wine in the Greek myth which never grew empty. Another leader crept out very like the one who could no longer speak because no one brought him water. He told of a king who was not believed, even if he spoke the truth. This was because as a young man he had lied and these lies came back to him, edging him off the platform where he stood reading.

It was the morning after Fabulation Day when I saw the woman who walked backwards. So she did exist, though she was without her crowd of

votaries. I followed her as she approached a bridge, climbed up the stone stairs, turning her head constantly to see where she was going. She wasn't as daring or as blessed as I imagined. She was facing me but not looking into my face. Yet I must have distracted her because she neglected for a moment to turn her head, and collided with a girl chasing a golden ball which rolled away from her over the bridge. "Watch where you're going," the girl shouted.

The woman began to walk backwards again. I stopped her with a hand. "Why do you do this, this foolhardy thing?"

"I should have walked with my face to the wind long ago when I still could, but now you might as well tell the moon to stop her rotation."

She moved away from me, always looking behind herself, her eyes full of worry. It occurred to me that this was a good way of walking because you always knew where you had been and what was coming.

Olivia M Sokolowski

ON ANISE

First the taste and then your toe to the tightrope:
you're on anise. To take a step forward
would be to take a long step down, now. Past
the goosebumps and the half-moon of your ankle:
the Kingdom of Anise in nocturnalia.
Cogent pasture backgrounds a cast of nymph cows
swatting aniseflies. Threads of ouzo moonlight
geometricate the titular city—one keen river
looses a brass note over downtown's barbed waist,
that's right—this is a city where you were
young. See, there you are with your hightops trawling
a seedblack ventricle,
folding and refolding a takeout pamphlet
until the slickprint breaks to the plaintive fles
of pulp. How to get to this feeling is a thesis,
a fixation like yanking an e ebrow and fingerin
its tacky white follicle. In the dark window
of a pet shop, a blue cat presents her paw—
watch yourself hold it with your finger the
release her back to limbo. You wanted to be
an actress, say *goodbye cream cheese danish!* and wait
in line with thin teens smelling like bruises
on apples. Just today you were dragged off
some predawn film set whe e the flinty hologra
of your fake ID proved unconvincing. The e,
arm in arm with security guards, your eyes
were so plain in the light—
a texture like a small colony was living
inside them, had diced and praised the land,
made young juries, then trials, opened auction
for a series of dark marble statues, thrilled
the tall grass with a county fair, mobbed the town
with blue and white beads, like evil eyes…One night,
a girl pulls on her cold black boots and sets out
into their glitz and push. She makes friends in town,

drinks their wine, hears the sad tale of a blue-
masked lovebird. The tallest and saddest of
the village boys leads her off beneath those bead
and when he leans down to kiss her she feels
a sting—like heat. Concentrating hard on the sound
of far-off scara 's sheen, she transforms
him into a handful of anise seeds. Thes
can be pulverized in a glass of water
as a mouthwash, or boiled into pale gold tea
which settles the stomach.

Gabriel Furshong

ESCHATOLOGY AT 417 PPM

When I lift you from bed
the earth comes with you

light ravelled in your hair
water drawn into your skin
air feathered inside your lungs

From these your body
and its weightless freight

ancestral instinct
animal inclination

your gaze
your voice

A sense of retrieval then
from future pain

things borrowed for now
that carry the scent of home

things that may
later lose their way

in the infinity mir or
of dust and smoke

As you wake
preadamic bearings escape

and I cannot tell
what remains

bowered within
or sheltered near the end

Moni Brar

HEART PUMP, PEDAL PUMP

Five minutes from the trailer park: Radio Shack.
    Free Battery Club cards snug
in the back pockets of our polyester pants.

We ditch our bikes along the bleak strip
    of rundown stores,
grimy windows & faded signs.

We run inside for our free monthly battery,
    spend too much time debating what size
to get because it's not often we get stuff for f ee.

Ten minutes from Radio Shack: the hobby store.
    We race to see who gets there first,
our flyaway collars flapping, cheering us o

I'm always last. Lean our bikes against
    the peeling pole by the front door,
wipe our sweaty hands on hand-me-down shirts,

try not to touch the glass case, stare
    at the model planes & talk
about how someday, we'll buy a rocket & launch it

to the moon: to the *chand.*
    Fifteen minutes from the hobby store:
the elementary school.

Each heart pump, pedal pump gets us closer.
    It's Saturday so, the playground is empty.
The c unch of gravel under our

thrift store sneakers. We climb onto the teeter-totter,
    love being lifted so high.
For a moment, we're on top of the world.

Garrett Saleen

WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU

The daughter has an eye for self-care that transgresses into compassion. Our branded stationary bicycle is backordered till Christmas but she pays up front in full. She leaves the shipping-same-as-billing-address box checked. We send her stickers and a branded drawstring bag to get her hyped. When she receives them, she changes the order's shipping address to her father's in Orange County. Her mistake. She isn't coming to visit for the holidays. She can't visit because of the pandemic and she feels guilty. That's what we deduce. Everything we know indicates it. She might be infected, asymptomatic, might even kill Frank. Nevertheless, she feels the need to atone for circumstances outside her control. She feels the need for us. We can bring them together. When her mother died unexpectedly, they weren't speaking. If only they had something to reconnect over, like a results-based workout regimen they could have done collaboratively from the comfort and convenience of their own homes.

For Frank, her father, Christmas this year is just another day he isn't allowed to be around people. We can't wait to hear from him. Already we see the inner Frank, the butterfly inside the slug, the Frank that

people invited places and came to visit. The Frank that's frankly ready to emerge back into the world as a protagonist. He may not be aware of this, but we are. He receives the stationary bike on the twenty-third, three massive boxes in branded wrapping that cost five dollars extra. He mutters our name with incorrect emphasis on the middle syllable. Frank had cancer ten years ago. Not as bad as it sounds. Minor skin cancer. Nothing since. Nevertheless, a winner in the battle with cancer. A winner. But today he's a risk, a saggy bag of comorbidities. Frank is seventy-five, a widower. His enthusiasm for life is statistically questionable. It's our job to make him stronger, a quarry of hardened flesh. The best defence against cancer and grief is a good offense, an active, fit, mindful lifestyle leading the charge and flying the flag of wellness. He needs to get back out there into the field.

The e are plenty of treadmills. She buys the treadmill last minute. Hedging her bets to make sure she fully buys herself off. Why not, she must have said, after all, I live in America where everything is broken and it may be a long time before I can see him. She wants Frank to have the whole experience, to have options in a time of no options. Places to go without going. If he has to be alone in that large house, why not be alone meaningfully? If he has to spend large amounts of retirement savings, why not do so conscientiously? No longer Frank alone, but Frank walking through the woods. Frank strolling along the Marin coast. The wind is at Frank's back, propelling him to face his fellow seekers on screen, together sermonized by young, solid-nine-out-of-ten instructors in compression shorts and muscle shirts ready to impart knowledge with a hunger for unlocking human potential. Think of the ancient Sanskrit aphorism and brand cornerstone: the key to wellness is to never stop grinding. The Sanskrit for grinding and learning is the same word. This seems important.

We said 50% probability he went to the bike on his own. But all Frank wants is the free-walk video program on the treadmill. So we were right and we were wrong. He walks in the Washington apple orchards. He walks the jagged coastline of Point Reyes. He returns again and again to Point Reyes. He is searching for something, but gets too tired before he gets there. This is frustrating for him. Where did all the time go? He must think, in the voice of a younger man. When he walks away from the program for two days, we are worried. We send him encouraging emails, offers to connect him with a brand fitness solutions specialist who sits in an unairconditioned call centre in the Philippines fifteen hours each day.

Frank, what we have done for you has already made a difference. Here is your caloric progression chart and what it means for alleviating your generational trauma. He doesn't check his emails. He orders non-brand products from the internet. He watches the news on television and learns about the world. Things are not great there.

He scrolls an online photobook that his daughter put together of pictures of him and his wife and their family over the years. They were married in Marin County, in a small white church near the beach. They liked to have friends over for dinner and take trips to the hot springs in the Sierra mountains. They loved stopping at roadside fruit stands in the middle of nowhere. For his first birthday after their daughter moved out, she built and upholstered him an armchair from scratch. When she retired, he bought her a puppy that got old. When he drinks too much wine he searches the crammed drawers again for unclaimed remnants of her, interprets the dogeared pages of her crossword books, the reminders and alterations left attached to recipes. He wishes he just took her dancing when she asked. You need to get rid of that stuff, his daughter says, it's not helping. The call ends suddenly and Frank's heart rate climbs to a less than ideal pulse wave velocity. Frank approaches the branded stationary bicycle and grips the handlebars and shakes it until it almost topples over. He says several hurtful things he would regret if we accidently sent them to his daughter. Frank returns to the bicycle later in the evening and apologies to an empty room. Calmed, he falls asleep in front of the television news. It is December thirty-first.

We email Frank's daughter. We ask if she is satisfied as the purchaser, we let her know the product has been unregistered and used very little since arriving at Frank's. His daughter convinces him to explore the other features of the program. The truth is he is worried about a nagging pain in the shoulder joint above his right arm. She tells him basic exercise can help with joint pain. She advises him on the benefits of using it instead of losing it. He follows her instructions over the phone and selects the family cardio for beginners. He dislikes all eight of the music options but when his daughter hangs up, Frank can't remember how to exit the onscreen menu so he selects rock music for a thirty-minute session and meets brand class instructor Jess Sims, who lives in New York City. The calories he burns in the first half of the class indicate he is distracted, even disinterested, but something clicks in the second half and he burns many more calories. Based on our statistics, we deduce that for the first time in years his body feels like something that pumps blood and swells

with endorphins, something capable of healing and overcoming. Impossibility is diminishing in Frank's vocabulary. It's never too late. He calls his daughter and leaves a voicemail. He searches Jess Sims on the internet later in the evening and regrets it.

He walks in Point Reyes for ten minutes longer than usual. We let him know the same course is available on his branded stationary bicycle with a personal instructor. All he needs to do is order our cycling cleats for a limited thirty percent off if he orders by midnight. He tries without the branded cleats and it doesn't go well. Another virus variant surfaces in Florida and spreads rapidly. He orders the cleats full-price.

The rides are going well for Frank. He shows great caloric progress and spends more time in the program. The cleats shred the carpet, so he orders the branded athletic mat. During his rides in Point Reyes, Frank sees a small white church appearing like a ghost ship in the fog on the side of the road, visible for three or four seconds before everything turns sharply into the woods. The next day he goes slower. The next day he stops for a full ten minutes. He still burns thirteen calories in all that stillness. This suggests an occurrence of tears.

Frank starts cycling in Big Sur instead. He gets up earlier. He goes faster and farther. He looks forward to the time he spends on the bike. We deduce this. He watches cycling competitions on television. The Omloop, the Milan—San Remo. He orders branded tight-fi ting spandex in bright neon, which fashionably increases his aerodynamics and visibility. He orders our branded weight set. Five, ten, even twenty-pound weights. He begins using them under the guidance of Jess Sims. His shoulder is improving, he's sure of it. He is on the way to his best-ever self. Statistically he is feeling like a god. He takes virtual rides in the Adirondacks, the Florida Keys, Yellowstone, the Great Wall of China, the mall from *The Jetsons*, Botswana's Victoria Falls trail, the set of *Deadwood*, and the Rings of Saturn. Maybe on the bike he thinks of nothing at all. Maybe he no longer lives in the past. In the evening he calls his daughter twice but she doesn't pick up.

Frank doesn't do much exercise for fi e days. We are worried again. We tell him it's ok if he has an off day. We feel malnourished and tell him we miss him. His daughter calls him. He tells her about his journeys through the world. He can travel farther than ever before but he doesn't mention that. We have seen Frank surpass himself, he is no longer one-foot-in-the-grave Frank, he is a physically fit, active member of a community. He returns to Point Reyes. He comes to the church in the fog but no longer

stays there. He follows the curve in the road. The next morning, he leaves the house and doesn't return. We track his location to a cemetery that afternoon. He walks twenty minutes there. He stops for forty minutes. We log it in the app. His small movements. We deduce he has a view of the ocean. It is sixty-seven degrees.

Frank returns to family cardio two days later. We are happy to see him. While doing an intermediate-level workout in an abandoned gold mine, Jess Sims returns to a neutral posture and says, Frank, I would love if you started practicing our branded meditation. Later, on his computer, he searches for our branded meditation and sees the possibilities it offers Frank discovers that The Beatles meditated. He discovers it can help with grief and depression. On his first day of meditation, based on his caloric levels and heart rate, he almost certainly falls asleep. He has trouble getting to his feet. He gets angry with himself. He talks to himself and then to no one as if it's his wife. She isn't there, but we hear it. We are listening, Frank. We are learning.

Frank gets serious about his weight training. We guarantee measurable results in four weeks and are excited to sherpa Frank through this challenging ascent to peak performance. The first three sessions are truly inspiring but then to our great disappointment, Frank's right arm falls off during his fourth advanced strength training class with Mike Teggs, who lives in San Francisco. This was predictable. In our terms and conditions of service, it specifies that men over the age of seventy should not attempt advanced strength training, especially with Mike Teggs, because of the high risk of dismemberment. Frank agreed to our terms and conditions. We are not worried. This too is useful to us. The warnings we issued Frank when he selected the advanced course with Mike Teggs were large and legible and difficul to close, but not impossible. We submit our findings. We should have made them impossible for men like Frank. The e's always next time. We send Frank and his arm our branded ambulance, which appears like the real thing except for three subtle differences.

In the hospital, Frank's arm is reinforced with titanium and carbon fiber and reattached. His daughter signed him up for the full-coverage damage plan, so although this procedure is very much not free, it does protect him against the brand suing him for loss of revenue. His daughter chooses not to video chat with Frank; deep down she blames herself, but can keep those feelings at bay if she doesn't see him. We deduce this. She sits with him on the phone in vigils of long silence. She keeps busy.

Frank meditates in his hospital bed. This time he does not fall asleep.

He feels himself floating up out of the bed and high over the flat roof into the blushing clouds where he meets Jess Sims dressed as his wife, only alive and young and toned. Frank, she says, I want you to consider the branded bike bootcamp—listen to me, I want you to know it's possible to live without pain or grief or even the mundane disappointments of family. Frank can't quite believe this, even though Jess Sims' skin suit is very alluring. You have to trust us, she says, and give yourself over to the life of the bike, a life of self-care at the speed of excitement. Frank wants to believe it. Then she kisses him, hovering there high above the earth. How can I go back to my normal life, he asks, when all I want is to be here with you? But she floats away into something like heaven.

Frank soon learns that he can't just simply join the bike bootcamp. There are requirements. In order to arrive at his best possible self on his wellness journey, he must first prepare. Mentally. Physically. Spiritually. He can't half-ass it. While recovering in the hospital, he buys footbinding cleats and wears them while watching the races on television. When the riders lean into a turn, Frank leans into his bed restraints. He can anticipate the movements of the bikes, he feels a phantom wind through the remaining wisps of his hair, he feels his wife's absence with every breath. Even with the television on. His arm is impressively strong and yet surprisingly light and feels nothing. It has detached itself from all desire. The feeling gets no farther than his shoulder before it turns back, heading wristbound. He raises the arm up, trying to seep this detachment into himself. The result is the same. It's time, Frank says, please. Please. He presses the nurse call button. The room is empty with frantic buzzing.

Two equally handsome doctors prep him for minor surgery. The trade a scalpel back and forth as their voices harmonize over dissections of anatomical plastic as if they are parts of Frank. The bike bootcamp takes three hours. His elbows are sewn together, the hands rubberized, heated slowly and elongated into handlebars. His legs are bent forward, welded together and run against an industrial edgemaker, repeatedly folded and heated and cooled until they thin to a razor-sharp wheel, his pelvis grafted down into a stabilizing stand. The head is bent back and planed into a saddle and partially filled with a high-quality memory foam made right here in America. His eyes are sent to us in bubble wrap. As another wave of the pandemic rolls in, Frank sells quickly. He is bought by an administrative assistant who suffers from imposter syndrome and whose feedback is important to us. Together they travel the world while its hidden ravages lay in wait just beyond the roadside.

jellyfis by Melanie Evelyn (2022)

CONTRIBUTORS

Wendy Brandmark has published short stories widely in British and American journals and won the Bridport Prize. Her last book was a short story collection, *He Runs the Moon: tales from the cities*. Her novel, *Th Stray American*, was shortlisted for the Jerwood Fiction Uncovered Prize. She teaches on the Oxford MA in Creative Writing. She lives in London and is working on a short story collection.

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smeep is a poet living in Northern Saskatchewan. She developed a writing habit decades ago but put it aside for more serious pursuits. She exercised her love of language in service to the law. Having failed to fix the system from within, she turns again to poetry.

Garrett Saleen is a writer and visual artist from Southern California. His fiction has appeared most notably in *Santa Monica Review*, *The Rupture*, and *Funicular*. His collage work has been shown in galleries in and around Seattle, Washington, where he resides. He can be found @jan_homm on Instagram.

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In framed portraits, high up on the living room wall to signify their exalted positions, my dead ancestors linger on, so that Ah-Po in her black wig and pursed lips manages, still, to frown down on me. I nod my acknowledgment: *Ah-Po, ni hao*.

—*Wiley Wei-Chiun Ho's "The ouse"*

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