

JULY-OCTOBER 2021 - ISSUE 9

# Dreamers

Creative Writing

## Dein Finger

Nonfiction by Michael Charpentier

## Winners

Haiku Contest

+

Fiction

Poetry

Book Review

Author Interview

Nonfiction

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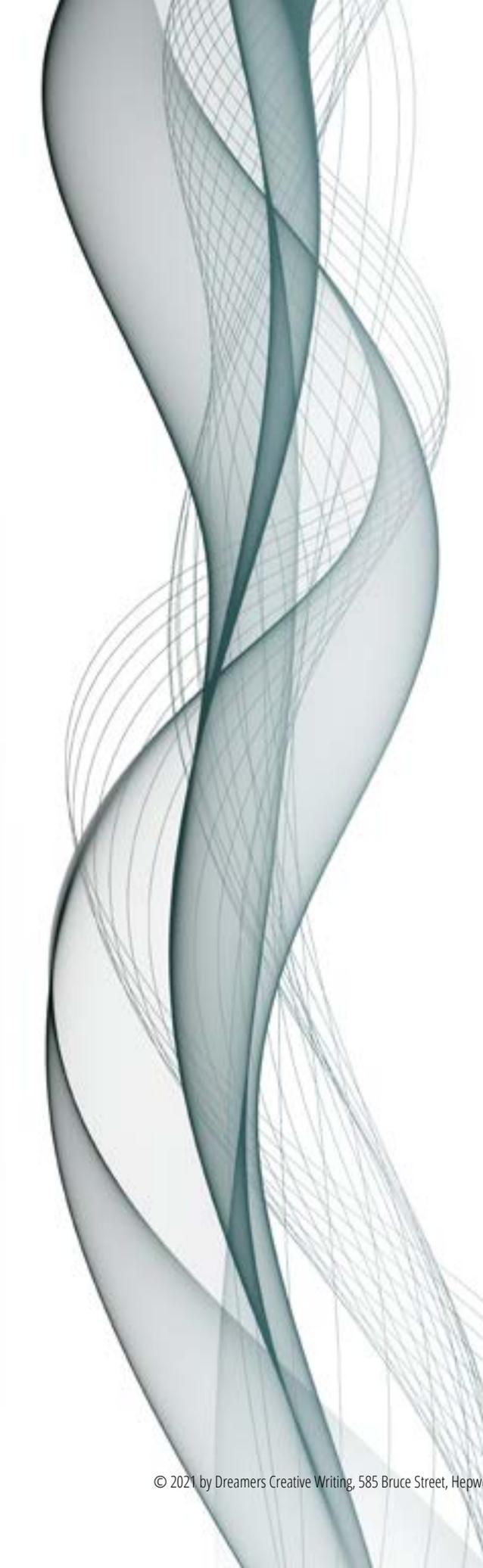
# EDEN MILLS WRITERS' FESTIVAL

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“The house shivers in anger, the wood  
popping and cracking in the shadows  
behind me. It’s shrinking. We all are.

—Noreen Lace

## EDITOR'S LETTER

Issue 9 of the Dreamers Magazine feels eerie to me... moody.

These past few months our submission queue has been filled with poems and stories that carry weight. It's like we're all holding our breathe, waiting to see what's next. Do you feel that? Or is it just me? You be the judge...

Congratulations to Michael Dudley, winner of the 2021 Dreamers Haiku Contest. You can find his haiku along with the rest of the winning line-up on the next page.

We're also pleased to publish Michael Charpentier's creative nonfiction story, "Dein Finger," a powerful account of a moment in time that changed the trajectory of a life. Find it on page 6.

Inside these pages we've got 7 poems, 2 fiction stories, 3 creative nonfiction stories, 1 author interview, and 1 book review lined up for you, each of them heartfelt in their own way.

As always, thank you for reading. Whatever we're waiting for, I'm glad we're waiting together. Keep dreaming.

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Congratulations to the winning poets and thanks  
once again to our judge, Reinekke Lengelle!

# HAIKU CONTEST 2021

FIRST  
PLACE

**Canoe Portage**

by Michael Dudley

canoe portage...  
stalks of empty milkweed pods  
twist in the headwind

Photo by Michael Dudley

SECOND  
PLACE

**Injury**

by Antoinette Kennedy

Wildfires in autumn  
rip forest garments, spray red  
the geese reeling north.

THIRD  
PLACE

**Shoreline Birders**

by Michael Dudley

shoreline birders  
socially distanced ~ the wingspan  
of a tundra swan

HONOURABLE  
MENTION

**Slow Dream**

by Peggy Liuzzi

I slow dream your face  
distant and cold as morning  
blue as shadowed snow

# Dein Finger

Nonfiction by Michael Charpentier

There is a day I often think of in its surreality, annulment and modifications of posture. You have found the beatification of shame; that shattering the skylight with a torrential descent leaves the body cut, that the broken glass shimmers like stars as it falls. Finding, like the ancients knew, that mixing blood with the wide and beautiful world gives spirits a voice.

1.

Breath hung like frost in the air in the cool Austrian steppes as we led a pig from a makeshift wooden enclosure made for the females up to a breeding pen on top of a hill. We led it in the traditional way, with a stick and a rope, jabbing the stick down on whichever side the sow decided to push off, leading her along in a straight line. Christophe told us about a beautiful variety of pigs in Bulgaria, and a funny old man he met once that raised them. He shepherded them, as was their way. Leading the swine in small herds through misty mountain valleys, lambasting them with a staff - a practice as ancient as the Bulgarian people, likely dating back to the Homeric days, ended only recently by the meddling regulations of the EU and the global fear of African Swine Flu. "I cannot think of anything more beautiful," Christophe remarked.

At the breeding pen, Christophe skipped through the fence in order to retrieve a pregnant sow and to offer a new mate to his boar. The boar was a large, temperamental animal with a Razorback mane and a maniacal grin. It frothed and squealed, and seemed to me like a demon from a prehistoric cave etching. The boar was three hundred kilos, and Christophe warned that it had a terrible sex drive. He regaled having to rescue a young sow from the pen earlier in the year, as the boar had left her half dead and traumatized by constant, aggressive mating. Once Christophe stood in the forest enclosure, he placed a rope around the front foot of the pregnant sow. Sensing something, the boar reared up and charged him. Christophe, a man that stood like an ancient hero, an Austrian giant with a flat squished face, wrestled the boar, flailing about the ground, his arm over its head, pulling it to his left arm pit to avoid its bite. He yelled to Sasha for another rope, and instructed her that he would move the boar to another enclosure and once in, she would need to close the door and rope it closed. Christophe would jump the fence to safety, while we lead the new sow into the enclosure, swapping it out for the pregnant one.

The exchange happened with terrifying speeding and a good deal of screaming, and before long, having each played our prescribed part, the battle went according to plan. Christophe pushed the boar in the headlock like a wheelbarrow. The boar in a small enclosure, the new sow in the breeding enclosure, and the pregnant sow out, being led by a rope. Christophe leaped to safety, and untying the rope around the gate united the new lovers.

Swine mate in a loveless raping. Their penis is retractable, pink as an earthworm with the body and head of a garlic scape. It protrudes, when aroused, and floats like a sci-fi tentacle. The boar had been out of its enclosure for 30 seconds before it descended on its new mate, raspy squealing, it's penis having missed the vagina now thrust about in the air like a Tang Dynasty spear dance before shooting a several foot stream of semen across the pen that steamed in the November cold.

"He will have many more attempts," Christophe said as we lead the pregnant sow back down the hill. The ritual had left me with a brooding distaste for the things nature had to offer. The sky was a smokey grey, reminding me of the old Western tin plate photographs.

2.

At the farm we discovered some new ducklings had moved into the horse pen. In shooing them out we discovered a chick that had been stepped on by a horse, still clinging to life in mechanical spasms. The Bavarian intern stepped on the duckling's head, smashing it. He picked it up and tossed it into the manure pile where it sat atop the dung with a yellow pretension, like a single glowing daffodil.

The plan, if the weather held up, was to go about the countryside in the evening once the chores were done. Christophe told us that we would see pinklestein, a stone that was famously once a lavatory for Mozart, and some cute wine cellars that dotted the Steppe in a traditional manner.

Now, in the late morning, I was to cut wood for the furnace. The old farm thirsted for wood, drinking it to heat water for the house and the shop. It was economical to gather scrap wood from a nearby construction site. Breaking apart pallets, and then sectioning them up into two foot lengths on the industrial table saw that sat in the front and middle of



the yard. Hans, the Bavarian, showed me a curious way that he cut the wood when I first arrived. "This machine scares me. There is no guard, and it's set at much too high a speed for a simple farm." He grabbed the boards, and instead of leading it through the teeth with both his hands, one on either side of the blade, he stood to the left of the blade and fed the board to it, keeping his hands a foot back from its teeth.

That morning I cut boards and filled a wheelbarrow with furnace fuel, thinking about the oddity of the whole day. The terrible realities of agricultural life, and of the complicit way we unwittingly live our lives. Call me a modern liberal, but when, over the previous two weeks, we shoved a 9 inch blade over the collar bone and into the heart of many sows, pumping on its leg like a fountain to get the blood out of the body, I felt less than I did with the violent rape of the breeding sow. The smashed head of the duckling... These are what I wanted to know, in order to claw back to an older order. A time before the sanitized West could neatly hide its genocide and slavery of the animal kingdom behind tall walls, and armies of underpaid immigrant workers. Killing didn't bother me at all; to taste the sadness of a life somehow gone from a warm body kept me together, somehow tighter in my spirit than all the nebulousness of product appearing on styrofoam plates. The ledgers and maps of stock in the breeding binder, and what that meant,

then shocked me. It's true: that's what animals do. They breed. They breed violently, without the gentle strum of lutes and a half bottle of good wine.

3.

And, as one large stray raindrop tumbled from the cobalt sky, I felt a wave of dizziness sway my head. I rocked, weaving on my feet, and only for a second juttied my hand out to stabilize myself so I wouldn't fall. Then, in the next second, I heard a sound, so different from the buzz of wood grain - so much quieter - and believed something flew past my arm like the puff of air from a compressed air gun. My hand jumped back. I looked down to see what had happened, and saw my own hand, poking out from my tartan plaid sleeve, beneath the blue ink sunrise that my friend, Tomas, had lovingly adorned to my wrist, blown apart.

Hot viscous blood ran over my hand, and in the seconds I allowed myself to look, I saw a finger - which one I couldn't tell - dangling off a joint by a single tight thread of skin. My chewed up bones in the open air.

I knew that I should probably yell for help. For a second I thought about what the right response was: I was surprised, as I didn't feel a string of out of tune terror. Shock lifted my consciousness, and the matter of factness of sinews

made me think with the methodical brevity of a tax auditor. I should yell, but not scream: I shouldn't betray the authenticity of my pain with drama; I don't want people to think I'm dying. I let out a curt little "Ahhhh!" but I don't think anyone heard me.

Hans was passing through the courtyard and I went over to him, holding my wounded right hand in my left. I prefaced my imposition with a caveat: "I hate to be that guy, but can you tell me if I'm missing any fingers?" He looked at my hand, and all the colour drained from his face. He quickly glanced at all my dangling digits and then looked away.

"They are awl dere. Hanging, yes, but dere."

I wasn't convinced but didn't feel like I could argue. I went into the butcher shop where Christophe and Sasha had commenced work on a swine we killed two days earlier.

"I have cut myself."

"How bad?" Christophe asked.

"Bad, I think."

I noticed anxiety settle onto Sasha's face as Christophe examined my wounds. "Well," he said "we head to the hospital."

Now people were scurrying about, the Bavarian heading into the house to grab Christophe's wife, Isabelle, in order to drive me into the nearest large town, Hollabrunn. I climbed into the back seat of the van, and Sasha climbed in the other door next to me. I became aware that the blood was sticky. Sasha looked like her own hand had been mauled by the blade.

Isabelle sat in the front seat and pulled the seatbelt down over her. "We will go to Hollabrunn. There is a hospital there." She turned the key, and pushed on the gas, and the car started down the driveway towards the narrow road. Suddenly, a loud knock on the window beside my head caused Isabelle to apply the breaks. It was Christophe, and he was holding something in his hand.

"I have, uh, a finger."

We decided to put the finger in a bag with ice. All the while everyone was running around to get things ready, aware that we were working on a strict time limit. Sasha sat beside me, sad and scared. "You're a fucking idiot."

4.

We accelerated down the old European farm roads - down, around and over hills, accompanied by Isabelle's curses at traffic, and Sasha's litany of curses at me. As for my own mental state, I felt calm - a little embarrassed and self-conscious for the amount of attention I'd diverted to myself, but at peace with the bare facts of the situation.

The Hollabrunn hospital was a brown brick building that reminded me of a Waterloo, Ontario high school. I jogged toward the emergency room doors from the car. The doors drew back automatically. There was a desk on the right and a desk on the left. I ran to the right.

"Guten Morgan. Was ist dein Notfall?"

"Uh, I, um, cut my hand."

I was suddenly presented with a wall of frustration, unable to communicate through both trauma and a language barrier. I stood there, and couldn't hear the crowd of voices yelling my name behind me. Sasha grabbed my sleeve.

"Over here! Come on!"

I followed Sasha and Isabelle across the hall to an emergency receiving room that was filled with three women nurses and a male doctor. They laid me across a bed and asked Sasha and Isabelle to wait outside.

A nurse spoke to me German words I didn't understand. I looked hopeless. "I am sorry. Englische, not... Good. Do you have...? I am sorry, I do not know in Englische... Vaccine tetanus?"

"Tetanus?"

"Yes! Tetanus! Do you have vaccine?"

"Maybe? I don't know. Can I get too much tetanus vaccine?"

"Nein."

"Then give it to me."

The doctor crouched and looked at my hand. He was incredibly Austrian. "Hmmm. Das ist not good. What were you doing?"

"Cutting wood with a circular saw."

"Where are you from?"

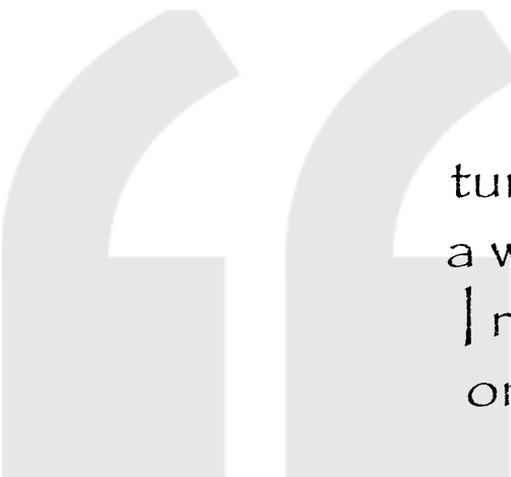
"Canada."

"Hmmm. What is a Canadian doing using a circular saw in Austria? Were you working?"

I realized that a workplace incident could spell trouble for Christophe and Isabelle, who had been exceptional hosts and become good friends over the weeks. Not wanting to bring any official attention their way, I stated: "No, they are friends. I was just helping out while I visited them."

He peered at me and lifted an eyebrow. "Ok. We must get you to the x-ray now."

Two nurses wheeled the bed down a hallway. I was still



...as one large stray raindrop tumbled from the cobalt sky, I felt a wave of dizziness sway my head. I rocked, weaving on my feet, and only for a second jutting my hand out to stabilize myself...

wearing jeans, a plaid shirt, and my leather boots, that I now noticed were covered in blood. I was wheeled through a small waiting room and noticed the faces of the other patients twist as I rolled through. I have been a real inconvenience for everyone.

The x-ray nurse had me stand up, out of the bed and sit by the x-ray machine. She placed a lead blanket down and covered it with medical tissue to soak up the blood. "Can you make an ok sign?"

I looked at her. I looked at my hand - index completely severed, middle finger dangling by a thread, my index cut entirely through the bone. She looked at me.

"I don't think I can."

"Um. Do what you can. It's important that your fingers are spread apart for the photograph."

"I don't think anything is happening."

"No... It's ok. You're doing great!"

"Thank you. And thank you for helping me."

After I was wheeled back to the emergency room I was received at. The nurses and doctor peered at my hand. There was a young nurse that looked as though she weren't seasoned to this. I imagined she was a student. She locked eyes with me. They were large, and blue: they betrayed bedside manner, and in them I saw a quivering fear - something different than sympathy, but similar like identification. It was through her that I knew, without a medical prognosis, that things would be different from here.

My Austrian doctor said: "As I mentioned, das ist not good. We have," in Latin "amputatis, amputatis partialis, and a severe compound fracture." He sighed. "We will be unable to do anything here. We will need transfer of you to Wein."

He walked over to a phone and picked it up. He appeared

to wait an impossibly long time without talking to anyone. I had begun to have different sets of feelings settle inside me. Gratefulness. All of these people, these strangers, from their own stories and various strivings, had come together, each over their own obstacles, to be here for me, and for anyone like me, in a time of need. I was being looked after. If everything was bad, it wasn't for a lack of trying. The doctor began to speak quickly to someone. The young nurse with blue eyes still looked beside herself. The older nurse that gave me the tetanus shot waited with a stoic's demeanor. I wanted to thank them all.

"Thank you," I said to the tetanus nurse.

She gave me a half smile.

"I have good news," the doctor announced. "We have a surgeon in Wein dat will receive you. Herr Mindler is the best hand surgeon in all of Europe. He will be able to do much more for you than we could do here."

And with that proclamation I was being pushed on my bed through the hospital, out to a pair of loading doors. The nurses that pushed the bed asked me to stand up, and switch to another bed. I stood up, and being careful not to in any way stress my right hand, lay back down. A fit paramedic in his 40s wheeled me from there out to a parking lot. The bed was lifted with a hydraulic press and pushed into the back of the ambulance, where it was then strapped into place with some leather straps. An IV was placed in my arm. "This is for pain, yeah? You must tell me when it starts to hurt." I noticed the lights of the ambulance were on. The vehicle took off, tearing down the tarmac. The paramedic in the back looked over a clipboard and exchanged frantic phrases with the driver.

Something wasn't quite right. The ambulance stopped abruptly, and began to tear down the tarmac in reverse, stopping at the receiving doors of the Hollabrun hospital. The paramedic jumped out and ran inside. A moment passed. The doors opened again, and the paramedic briskly walked up and then jumped inside the ambulance. He was

holding a small package, wrapped in blue medical paper with a little piece of bacterial resistant tape. The paramedic blushed, looked at me and laughed: "your finger!"

5.

We wined down the highway toward Vienna. I didn't know if I was feeling any pain, but I didn't want it to begin and cloud my experience. The heightened sense of gratitude, and the outpouring of love. I said to the paramedic: "I don't know if I'm feeling pain or not. Should I be?" He simply pressed the button on my IV.

Sometime in the ride his cell phone rang. He answered, and spoke tenderly to someone. He was pleased with what they had to say.

"My daughter," he said and smiled, obviously a little embarrassed that he had good news in the midst of my crisis.

"What did she say?"

"She is not fond of studying English but it is required for school. She had an important test, and she thinks that she did very well."

"That's great. I understand, I didn't enjoy learning French when I was in school. I didn't enjoy many subjects - I think I was difficult to teach."

"Not everyone takes well to studying."

"I needed to be tricked into learning. My mother realized that I needed to access the things they were teaching through my imagination. She let me play video games that had lots of reading and she made me read the words to her. I think that's what taught me to read and engage with the world. Maybe your daughter should try playing video games in English to improve her language."

"That might be a good idea. Do you feel any pain?"

"I don't know. I am not really sure what pain is right now. I think I may be in a lot of pain, but something is blocking me from feeling it."

6.

In the waiting room in Vienna it struck me that it had been several hours since I'd severed my fingers, and I really had to pee. The body suffers its own internal logic, born from its own sense of time. No crisis absolves the bladder of its duty. Creeping through the hills in a war of inches, soldiers that returned told of defecating inside their own helmets and dumping it out instead of risk being caught prone by a sniper. No amount of theatre resolves the frank realities of shit and piss. They are, in many ways, a new beginning; unfortunately timed renewal.

I motioned to a nurse. "I have to pee."

"Wie bitte?"

With my left hand I pointed toward the crotch of my jeans. "I have to pee."

"Oh! You has to pee!" she said in a bubbly way, like I was an infant. She disappeared for a second and then returned with a large plastic carafe with a narrow neck, and graduated measurements along its side. She went to hand it to me.

"I'm sorry. I'll need help." I nodded toward the mangled appendage, still leaking blood everywhere.

"Of course!" She said, still light with jubilant energy. She unbuttoned my Levi's, and then stopped. "I will hold this, but you should do the rest." I entered the plastic jug, and forcefully released into it for what seemed like an eternity. A certain anxiety came over me that either the nurse would drop the jug, or that I would not stop urinating. The carafe filled quickly to within a few milliliters of the neck. I slowed to drips and felt relief. "Hohoho! You really had to go!" She ferried the glowing orange vase off somewhere behind the scenes.

When she returned, she observed that I lay back, semi reclined with my flannel shirt untucked from my jeans, and my fly still unbuttoned. "We should get you changed now." She picked up a backless blue gown.

Now, coming into the room, Sasha and Isabelle glanced at me with nervous concern.

"How are you doing?" Isabelle asked. Sasha said nothing.

"I'm good," I said. Then I tacked on, "All things considered."

The nurse was unbuttoning my shirt. She slipped it off over my left shoulder and down over the rest of my arm. She continued, peeling it away from my back and as carefully as she could over my hand. Little pellets of shirt lint scraped the inside of my skin and rolled over my exposed bones, and whether taken by pain or just the thought of it I groaned.

"Bitte!" The nurse chirped in response.

For a second, I lay exposed. I had shed my vestigial garment for a new one; I was the embodiment of a normal, healthy Canadian male and would become an Austrian surgery patient, but in between I would exist in liminal nakedness. Strangely, a twitch of shame. I looked at my repulsive flab and felt disgusted at myself. I didn't want anyone to see my waistline. And then, after only a slight struggle, I was wearing a blue gown and my transition was complete.

A separate pair of nurses, a man and a woman, came and began to wheel the bed away from the room. I waved a little finger wave at Sasha and Isabelle, and then I was off. About

ten meters from the room, in the hallway, frantic concerned German speak erupted. The female nurse walked around the bed, checking the edges, looking concerned. She lifted the sheet near my feet and peered under. The male nurse did a sudden about-face and ran back to the room, only to return a moment later with a little package wrapped in blue surgical paper. "Dein Finger," he said and smiled coyly.

7.

I lay back on the hospital bed and ceased more or less with being an active participant in my own crisis. I had shed skins, spilled blood, and was resigned to being a leaf in the stream. What would be would be, and it may be horrible, but maybe it would be alright, Inshallah.

I felt relaxed and felt rushed about, the overhead fluorescent lights clicking by at predictable intervals. I recited the Ave Maria in Latin in my head, as I like the sound of it, but found it brought me no more or less spiritual assurances than I had been experiencing otherwise. How plainly, dumbly Canadian, cutting one's own hand into an unrecognizable mess cutting wood abroad. Ancestral resonance filled me with thoughts of my eight fingered father I didn't know, and how it must have felt being crushed almost to death in a paper mill. Did he feel embarrassed? Was he nearly as elated as me?

Thoughts drifted in and left, turning to the recently deceased Gord Downie (PBUH). Music and poems made sense to me in a way then like they seldom ever had. Gord - sweet Gord - touring the country in ridiculous hats with an alien cellphone in his brain. Sonic frenzy, and the epistolary dedication, leaving droplets of his own life like a dew on every surface - so afraid to leave the world unsure of where he positioned himself in regards to his love. And he was tired, and screaming, and how he kissed the world and those around him.

A hook in the flesh, the barb of colonial prejudice, a rendering pot melted away his beloved Canada and lay bare the bones of the people that lived before it, were still living as bones and whispers and testaments of memory to the hoary cold economic reduction of the land to a pandering fiction, an inert property comprised of fixings and invasive extraction. For Gord to leave, to understand the incommunicable pain of residential school survivors, and the bones and spirits of those tossed aside into unmarked graves, to leave unstated the oppressive boldness of pushing a train into the West and saying you own it; to love, and to be oppressed by the thing you love and to understand it's order in colonial evil, to exist in that space of contradiction, if only for a while, and still cry when you leave...

To exist in that space of contradiction. I looked around at the nurses with their infinite good nature. They lived in a permanent state of horror, plying a spool of string and a needle to those that show up with their guts on the floor. This, I thought, this is making the circle whole.

Sasha with her cursing and quietude had discovered my mortality that day. So had I, and in much greater contrast: it was beatific, somehow overwhelming and jubilant, for now and for the first time I knew what must be done. In my hospital bed I melded minds, and felt the sweat of Gord's dance pour through my own shirt. I felt Nikos Kazantzakis love of each word of the peasant Greek and the stewardship he felt, loading each strange phrase into a book like an Ark. I grabbed each face before me and held it in both hands, streaming blood down their face and adorned their foreheads with a big, wet kiss. A poem! I'd write a poem for all of my great loves before I'd die. I'd name each rock a new name like a newly discovered star. I'd dwell deep into the pain and knowledge of my land and learn its history, and I'd kiss it too like a passionate mad lover. In discovery of my mortality I discovered religion.

8.

I had more x-rays, and was wheeled into a theatre where a large assembly of masked patrons had assembled. A woman introduced herself to me as an anesthesiologist. She asked how heavy I was, and then stuck a short needle with a tube into my right shoulder. She asked where I was from, placed a mask over my face, and told me to breathe in deep and then answer her. Before I could finish my response I was out.

I woke up many hours later, still paralyzed by anaesthesia. I heard beeps and smelled the smells of surgical cleaning agents. "Doktor Er ist wach." Suddenly a pair of fuzzy headphones slipped over my ears, playing somewhere in the middle of a Mozart symphony. I tried to feel what they were doing to me. Pawing tepidly through the blue-orange nerve language, I felt a tiny mechanical movement skipping along my fingers, that felt like when a daddy long legs walks across your skin, and it reminded me of those symbiotic little cleaner shrimp picking mites out of the scales of fish.

9.

When I woke up it was 11pm. The attendant told me that the surgery had been six hours long. A doctor came and talked to me. "Is there anything you want to know?"

"How many fingers do I have?"

"We saved two of three," and then he paused and added "for now."

10.

This isn't my first walk through this memory. There is more, as it has been a long several years. I often retell this as my whoopsie daisy. In truth, this is the first detailed retelling, complete with the presaging elements, and the Gord Downie prayer wheel. It's a story of a day, and it is in many ways the story of every day. If we are to work, I think we must work like this: bloody and sincere.

# Lay It Down

Poem by Karen Kerekes

sometimes I see you  
your tall, slender silhouette  
walking along the street  
your curly hair tucked up  
neat inside your cap,  
and I turn my head  
as my heart pounds  
believing  
it has all been  
a horrible mistake  
until I realize it hasn't  
and I chide myself  
for my own deceitfulness

and sometimes I can't believe  
four years have come and gone  
another May, another Mother's Day  
and that I still exist  
in a world without you  
and that you gave me life  
only to have taken your own

and sometimes I want to scream  
because it wasn't your time  
though you chose it to be  
and unanswered questions  
surround me like fog creeping  
beneath a shadowy moon and  
a howling wolf that stalks me,

and on days like today  
I want to pick up the phone  
and tell you about your grandchildren  
knowing it would make you happy  
because when you were happy,  
I could be happy too

and I want to understand  
how so much pain  
crept into every crevice  
of your being  
and I want to know  
what you told yourself  
in that moment  
when holding on  
finally surrendered  
to letting go

and they say grief  
is just love with  
no place to go  
so I carry it with me  
but it is heavy,  
and I am tired,  
and I just want to lay it down

and then comes a moment  
when I watch a seagull glide,  
its white wings spread wide  
against a crystal blue backdrop  
and I smile,  
knowing you are smiling, too

and I feel the warmth  
from your delicate hand  
cradling mine  
as you lift me up from  
the jagged pavement  
and wipe away the blood that  
still drips from my gaping wound

and in that moment, I am free

“

...and  
in that  
moment,  
I am  
free...



# CAREER WRITING

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# Down to a Tea

Poem by Tristan Marajh

To my exes and estranged,  
yet to budge from a grudge –  
to those who are absent  
to those who resent,  
to those who are distant with distaste:  
I would like to invite you to tea  
forty years from now  
when we are old,  
wrinkled and wringed out by the world  
by those things that separated us:  
money, lust, power,  
status, ambition, a lover.  
Let us sit down to tea  
and put it all behind us  
because forty years later,  
it is all behind us.  
Simply:  
sit, sip, start again  
from when our moments were simple and sweet,  
like the people we chose to become.





## research to America in order to pursue your expansive American ancestry?

On the McKee side, I could only discover ancestors going back six generations. They came from Bridgeton, Scotland, now part of Glasgow. They were poor handloom weavers who left Scotland because the mechanized weaving of imported "slave cotton" from southern US had taken over the industry by the 1840s. They were economic migrants escaping the ill-effects of a process of globalization, one could say. Sound familiar?

However, from the time I was a kid, I marveled at the fact that my maternal grandmother, Effie Jane (Haskins) Neill, who lived with our family for the last decade of her life, was born in Wisconsin in 1876, a time when Jessie James and his gang were still robbing banks and trains. I discovered a Neill cousin had started research on Grandmother's Haskins family, going back to 1630 in Connecticut, as well as marriages of Haskins men to other New Englanders by the family names of Robinson, Steven, Thacher, Conant, and Fuller (Edward Fuller was our ancestor on the Mayflower). My cousin had come up with possibilities but hadn't proved the connections. She had not written it up but fortunately passed a lot of information to me before she died. I carried on with the search and dedicated the book to her. I found that through all the research, following female lines of descent turned up new details and many stories of interesting ancestors. However, I hired professional genealogists at the New England Historical Genealogical Society (NEHGS) in Boston to find some missing links and verify my Mayflower ancestry, which allowed me to join the Mayflower Society.

**As your research carried you back, generation by generation, how did you feel to discover many of your family line had taken part in adventurous early-American struggles, such as confronting and daring life on the frontier, and had participated in important American wars? Did you experience a heightening level of anticipation, the deeper you became involved in your research?**

You have recognized that my research and writing process was not linear. I had small pieces of information about most of my ancestors to begin with, but had to prove their connection with me, and I wanted to discover more about them. That's when I decided I had to travel. In 2017, I drove from Albuquerque to or through 22 states as well as to Ontario, Canada. In 2018, I drove to Nebraska and Wyoming, and in 2019, I flew back to Massachusetts to gather more facts, stories, and photos. In the writing process, I decided to start from the present day and go step-by-step into the past—like peeling an onion—ending up at the Mayflower and the aftermath of Puritan settlements in New England. I also decided to focus on two themes, guns and gods, rather than trying to deal with wider historical and social contexts. By "guns" I mean attitudes toward firearms and their regulation, as well as warfare; by "gods" I mean religiosity and religious beliefs, and how they affected the actions of my ancestors. I also compared the evolution of these themes in the US and Canada, paying particular attention to the impact on Indigenous People.

Did I experience a heightening level of anticipation? I would say I experienced a heightened level of excitement as I traveled and uncovered more stories. For instance, I found stories about the context in which my maternal grandfather Rev. John Addison Neill and my grandmother lived. He came from Ontario in 1899 to become a Methodist minister in Wisconsin, where he met and married my grandmother. They were posted farther and farther west, finally ending up in Newcastle, Wyoming during 1905-06. At the time, the town was run by a sheriff who had 20 notches on his gun and who owned and operated a saloon and dance hall. I was escorted around town by a local historian who pointed out the spot where a two-story brothel once stood across from the church where my grandfather had preached.

In Virginia, I walked along the top of a hill beside still-visible trenches dug by Confederate soldiers on May 5, 1864, during the Civil War's Battle of the Wilderness. I strolled down the hill into the woods to the approximate spot where my great-grandfather, Lafayette Haskins, was hit in the leg by

a Confederate bullet fired from those trenches. An eerie feeling came over me as I stood there alone. That bullet ended his three-year stint of fighting in the Wisconsin 7th Regiment—part of the famous Iron Brigade—but probably saved his life, for if he had to continue fighting in the war, there's a good chance he would have died in battle or in hospital due to pervasive infections. My memoir contains many such serendipitous events and thoughts on the slim chances we all have of ever becoming who we are.

**Was the process of learning so much about your heritage a fulfilling one? Were there disappointing aspects to the research process?**

The only disappointment I had was that some war records on my ancestors had been destroyed in a fire in Albany, New York. But that became part of my story. On the McKee side, as mentioned in Chapter 1, I organized the renovation of my great-great grandparent's tombstone, followed by a dedication service and family reunion cum dinner party, complete with musical performances by family members. Today, I remain the connecting force through email for both sides of the family, sending out announcements on births, marriages, and now more frequently, deaths. I never thought I'd have such a role. Overall, my experience was very fulfilling.

In the process of research and traveling for the book, I also met distant cousins with whom I remain in touch, as well as historians—both amateur and professional—who were so generous with their time and knowledge. The stories of meeting them and learning from them are in my travel memoir as well.

There's a subtheme in *Guns and Gods in My Genes* concerning who I am. Although I married an American who became an American-Canadian dual citizen, and we chose to live in New Mexico during the last decades of our lives, through the process of research and writing, I was trying to decide whether to become a Canadian-American dual citizen. From the time of my youth during the 1960s, I have maintained a distaste for America's endless wars, so the process of writing the book became a late-life self-identity search. Should I become an American citizen so I could vote in the US and do my part in changing things, such as those wars and the lack of gun control laws, leading to America's tragic annual toll of death and injury by gunfire? In the last chapter, I make a decision, but people will have to read my book to find out what it was and my reasoning, if they're interested.

**Are there any parts of the memoir you wish you had omitted? Or further expanded?**

No, I think the book is the right length. I don't believe in writing about history in a way that makes readers exhausted. My book is made up of relatively short chapters with section breaks and a variety of writing methods, such as vivid descriptions, historical analysis, dialog, lyrical prose, old poems I discovered, or new ones I wrote on my ancestors. I believe that this moves the overall narrative forward in a compelling way.

**Do you have advice for other writers who attempt genealogical research? Are there ways to establish goals? Are there pitfalls to avoid?**

Not everyone can do the traveling I did; but with social media, email, and cell phones, I think it's possible to go beyond genealogical data bases. Ancestry.com has a good DNA test that can link you with distant cousins and "hints" for historical materials on your ancestors from census, marriage, military, and death records—even photos, immigration records, and border crossings. This will allow you to build up your family tree on the site. But I think amateur genealogists often make the mistake of using such data without verifying it through other sources. I write about this in my book because I did exactly that in some chapters and had to make revisions before publishing. I included these mistakes and corrections in the story itself as lessons for others.

The other thing I enjoyed about the process of writing my book was reading thousands of pages of North American history to understand the contexts in which my ancestors lived. I highly recommend this as well.

# Shoulder Season

Fiction by Andrew Calderone

I was an outsider within the ropes. The Kru called me white boy. He said true Muay Thai fighters were born in Thailand. I was grateful for the motivation and said as much with ardent kicks to the pads he held. Every dime I earned by way of combat back home afforded me the chance to study at Kru Chaiya's gym. His discouragement let me know he saw my potential.

The belts I won across North America meant nothing compared to victory at Lumpinee Boxing Stadium in Bangkok. Realizing that dream was a few short weeks away. To win on such hallowed ground would give meaning to my many sacrifices. Chaiya was kept in the dark about who I was scheduled to fight. The boxing commission was yet to draw names for the undercard. Kru Chaiya pushed the uncertainty from my mind, saying my greatest opponent lay within.

"Harder," the Kru yelled in thunderous cadence.

My legs were numb from driving flesh and bone into the worn-out equipment my teacher wore. Each kick aimed at Kru Chaiya's ear was met by tired protective gear. Mirrors lined the long gym wall and I watched the dance my teacher led around the ring. Kru Chaiya guided my movements, coaxing out a rhythm in the combination of knees and elbows I threw at his padded targets. The three-minute buzzer sounded to simulate the end of a round. I dropped my guard in exhaustion, only to be hit hard across the head by my teacher's heavy pad. A high-pitched ring filled one ear, a reminder to leave my hands up until long after the bell.

Sound returned on my way back to the corner of the ring. I heard the quick ticking of skipping ropes nicking the floor. Other fighters whined and breathed heavy as they trained all around me. Infamous fights were immortalized on posters hanging from low rafters. Being on the undercard of the main event, there were no advertisements around Bangkok with my face on them. Anonymity waited to play ally or enemy in the ring. The suspense made me sweat all the more.

I rested my gloves on the ropes and dropped my head. Instinct heightened my senses in a state of fight or flight. The odour of a dozen other sweaty pupils hung thick like the shoulder season humidity awaiting outside the gym. Equipment used over decades gave off an acidic smell, not unlike the poorly maintained urinals in the locker room. I retreated within myself until a profound thud made my eyes go wide. The boxers throughout the gym were likewise stunned by the source of reverberating power. On one of the heavy bags suspended from the ceiling, a fighter drove a foot into the stuffed leather with a force to be aspired to. Her form was perfect, delivering a wealth of harnessed energy with a precision to be envied by any martial artist. Her hair was pulled back from her face in a ponytail. She wore a powder-blue sports bra and matching boxer shorts. Her bruised and

bronze legs went on forever.

"Who is that?" I asked my Kru before he removed his pads to pour water into my mouth.

"My daughter," Chaiya replied. My enthusiasm was too unfettered. He dumped the rest of the bottle out on my head and I thought he might give me another cuff on the ear.

Fighting demands an intimate relationship with fear. Some boxers convert their trepidations into fuel. Others find terror too corrosive to let in. I was without doubt whenever I stepped into the ring, but waiting outside Kru Chaiya's gym for his daughter to appear had me jittery.

The wraps we all wore beneath our gloves were still on her hands when she stepped onto the street. There was no locker room for women in the gym. Sweat soaked through her sports bra. My sleeveless shirt was damp too. I touched her moist arm to stop her from walking right past me. She turned as if ready to throw a punch at my jaw.

"Sorry. I'm Nate," I said, wincing in case she followed through with her cocked fist.

"Are you the Canadian?" She dropped her guard and tucked a strand of black hair behind her ear.

"What gave me away?"

"You opened with an apology and none of the Americans talk to me."

"Why not?"

"A few reasons, but mostly they're just afraid of my dad."

"I'd be lying if I said I wasn't." I peeked my head through the open gym door to see if the Kru was coming out. "I had to talk to you though."

"Why?"

"I've never seen someone do that to a heavy bag before, not to mention how you looked doing it. What's your name?"

"Tida," she said. In the heat, I couldn't decipher if her cheeks were flushed from the workout or if I'd managed to make her blush. Tida batted her long eyelashes and glanced over my shoulder into the gym. "My dad's coming. He'll kill me too if he sees us. He doesn't like me talking to his fighters outside the gym."

"How about texting?" I asked, pulling my phone from my duffle bag.

Without a word, Tida snatched the phone, tapped away on the screen, and tossed it back at me. Before I could say one thing more, she shoved me in the chest to send me on my way.

I sent her a message the moment I got back to the dorm where the other international fighters lived. Part of my training fees paid for a bunk in a shitty hostel in the shadow of Lumpinee Stadium. The guys wrestled around, drank, and talked shit until late at night. I laid on my bunk with the blue glow of my phone suspended over my face, anticipating Tida's replies like trying to foresee where another fighter's swing might land.

We exchanged messages every night after training. Boxing was the constant topic of conversation, the strategy, respect, and philosophy behind the blood sport that encompassed our shared nature. I told her the small town I hailed from in rural Ontario never truly felt like home. Tida had to type the name into Google and zoom in repeatedly to find it on a map. I had to do the same with the village where Tida was born. Bangkok welcomed what was undesirable elsewhere, but we both felt most comfortable in the ring, enclosed in protective rope.

The night before my fight, I experienced a peace I'd only known in the endorphin drunk of the later rounds, when pure instinct takes hold. Tida was finally able to escape from beneath her father's thumb when Kru Chaiya left their house to help his brother move to an apartment on the outskirts of the city. Chaiya wouldn't allow his daughter to risk fatigue with her fight coming up. Tida snagged the keys to the gym and told me to meet her there.

We sat opposite each other in the ring. It was the first time I'd seen her with her hair down, wearing something other than fight gear. She wore a tank top, denim shorts, and flipflops. Without the other dank bodies in the gym, I could smell the coconut-lime moisturizer that glistened on her skin in the bright light above us.

"Your mom didn't notice you left?" I said, trying to find a seated position that made me look confident and attractive.

"She teaches night classes at the university." Tida sat cross-legged, her posture perfect, like a painter's depiction of a martial artist. "I can't stay long. My dad will be home soon."

"I had to talk to you in person before my fight."



"Do you know who you drew in the tournament?"

I shook my head, embarrassed that the commission didn't think my fight worth promoting.

"My dad feed you that line about your greatest opponent living within?" Tida smiled, which made me more nervous than the sound of the starting bell.

I nodded, resisting the urge to find humour in the Kru's teachings.

"What do you weigh?"

"One-forty-six and a half. I had my weigh-in today."

"Me too. We're in the same class. We could wind up fighting each other."

"But you'll be fighting another girl."

"Kathoeys have to fight men."

"What's a kathoe?" I tripped over the word as I spoke. Silence followed.

"A trans woman before reassignment surgery." Tida lowered her chin, her eyes focused and steady as if she were meeting me at the middle of the ring to start a bout. "That's what they call us in Thailand."

I was quiet a moment, unsure how to veil my ignorance.

"Just go if you want to." Tida put her hand to the mat, about to stand. I held her wrist to keep her seated.

"We have a little more time before your dad comes back, don't we?" Desperation rose to the surface of my voice. Whatever she was, I wanted to be close to her. Tida nodded and settled back into her warrior's posture. She gazed at the mirror lining the wall, studying her reflection. I kept my eyes on her, trying to read her movements in attempt to memorize her every feature.

"I want to be a fighter like Nong Toom. Most of the men fight for money, or glory, or just because they like hitting people. Nong Toom fought for more." Tida hardly moved, staring into her own eyes as if telling herself a story. Her resolve was infectious, her concentration was intoxicating. "Rajadamnern Stadium is the oldest in Bangkok. They wouldn't even let women touch the ring before her. Then Nong Toom became a champion, with a top and make-up on."

I lunged forward. Tida could see me coming in the reflection of the mirror. She turned, but not fast enough to shirk the kiss I planted with precision on her mouth. Recoiling slightly, caution filled Tida's eyes and hot breaths passed in the narrow space between our lips. She grabbed my shirt and pulled my welterweight frame closer as her back touched the mat.

Years of experience taught me that trying to sleep the night before a fight was futile. Imagine the wakefulness that seized me after the bliss of Tida's kiss. My eyes were

wide open in the dark hostel dorm. The room was full of other fighters tossing and turning with visions of triumph pulsing through their finely tuned bodies. A buzz lingered in the room, my heart, and groin. I listened to the ceiling fan whir. The constant spinning served as a metronome for the combinations I threw at the faceless opponent awaiting behind my slowly closing eyes. I dreamed of fighting. I dreamed of Tida.

The boxers migrated to the stadium together on fight night. We were a herd of young men, lured to the stadium by the invented legends of our own abilities. I was among the few without fear, until I passed through the athlete's entrance and saw Tida warming up with Kru Chaiya in the tunnel leading to the change rooms and arena. That's when the conjured fantasy of my greatness began to dissipate. She humbled me with one look and I savoured the vulnerability I felt under her gaze. We bowed slightly to each other before I joined the other young men to wrap our hands in preparation for the evening of battle ahead. Tida was alone in getting ready, isolated from the rest of us.

Bouts proceeded throughout the night. Winners and losers returned to the same holding room. Doctors examined bloody faces and vacant eyes while the rest of us waited for our names to be called. I remained warm and ready, bouncing on my toes until Kru Chaiya finally approached me. His expression was grave. There was no worse fate than not getting the chance to compete. I was worried that was the news he carried.

"I can't be in your corner," my Kru said. He wouldn't look me in the eye. He ran his fingers through his thinning hair. I'd travelled halfway round the world for his voice to be in my ear while I fought.

"Why not?" I was still bouncing on my toes, shaking out my limbs.

"You drew Tida." His shifty eyes stopped once he spoke his daughter's name. "I'll get another Kru for your corners. I'll be watching though." We shared a knowing glance, an understanding spoken in silence. He searched my stare to find my affection for his daughter. "Will you fight her?"

I stopped bouncing, pounded my gloves together, filled my lungs with air, and nodded.

"Good man." Chaiya put his hand on the back of my neck, pulling our foreheads together. I could smell the tobacco on his breath. "It's her dream."

"Mine too."

We entered the arena at opposite ends. Tida wore a purple top on her walk to the ring. My chest was bare as I approached. The crowd was rowdy, shouting Thai cheers and insults I could only comprehend in tone. I wanted to talk to Tida, but I knew losing focus was the greatest insult I could pay my fellow fighter. She bent down beneath the ropes and stepped on the mat to a chorus of whistles and hollering. I stood in my corner, loosening my shoulders and hips for the dance we were about to perform. Our names were announced over the booming horde hailing the local girl making history. The bell tolled, we stepped to the middle of the ring, touched gloves, and the first round was underway.



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# Nature Flourishes in Sarah Louise Butler's *The Wild Heavens*

Book Review by Aura Clift



*The Wild Heavens* by Sarah Louise Butler is a coming-of-age novel, a love story, a tale of grief and strength, and a celebration of nature. After her mother dies, seven-year-old Sandy Langley goes to live with her grandfather, Aidan, in his little cabin in the interior of British Columbia, Canada. There, she becomes fast friends with Luke, a boy living with his mom in the only cabin close by. Sandy and Luke play in the woods, study, fish, hunt, and eventually partake in Aidan's obsession over a very elusive creature they name Charlie.

When, one winter day, as an adult, Sandy finally sets out in the snow-covered woods to solve the mystery around Charlie, she is not just following its footprints, but she is also fulfilling her grandfather's legacy, giving the story a sense of circularity. With gripping pace, the narrative alternates between the recounting of Sandy's progress as she chases after Charlie and the flashbacks of her past. During these flashbacks, the reader follows Sandy, Luke, and Aidan in their everyday life punctuated with touching moments of tenderness, squabbles, and growth. The author delves deep into the relationship dynamics, showing with beautiful storytelling how they change throughout the different phases of Sandy's life.

Nature is an important theme in *The Wild Heaven*. Set in British Columbia's wilderness, Butler's vivid descriptions bring to life a panoramic setting - two cabins deep in the forest, a trail leading to a lake just a stone's throw away, and mountains framing the picture - while close-ups of individual plants and animals contribute to the richness of the story, marking significant moments in the plot. A self-destructive army of frogs provides insight into Sandy's adolescent vulnerability, a bird tucked in her sweater offers a reflection on motherhood, the death of a deer showcases Sandy's strength. Then there is Charlie's mystery, intrinsically connected to nature and the way the reader perceives it, whether the reader views it through a scientific point of view, a spiritual one, or both.

*The Wild Heavens* stirred in me a humble love for the characters and a profound longing for nature as if I too belonged to the wild heavens and one day "could be returned to the lake, to live among the cedars and hemlocks, the snowshoe hares and squirrels, to slink through the snowy forest on massive furry paws, silent as any ghost." I am looking forward to reading more from author Sarah Louise Butler.

# Shadow

Fiction by Lauryn Mercredi

Jen sat in her favorite cafe listening to the buzz of the coffee grinder, the murmur of human voices and the gurgle and hiss of the espresso machine. Her sketchbook was on the table in front of her. Her therapist had recommended she start drawing again in a comforting and familiar setting. She opened the book to a new blank page and searched her mind for a worthy subject. She looked wistfully at her empty mug, still wafting the scent of mocha.

Her phone chimed, and she grabbed for it.

A text from her younger brother Sam: *Visiting Dad's grave 2pm. Want to come?*

She hesitated. She hadn't been back to the cemetery since the funeral four weeks ago. She was surprised Sam even asked. But she knew what her therapist would say: Closure is important.

*Meet you there.*

She put down her phone and rubbed her eyes. She hadn't been sleeping well since her father's heart attack. Jen had been estranged from him for almost a year, and that fact now haunted her.

She blinked back tears and reached for her pencil case, selecting a 2B pencil for its soft dark line. She turned the sketchbook sideways to landscape view and started to doodle idly. She sketched a tree and some grass.

She remembered how her father had praised her childhood drawings. He was an amateur photographer and thought a good drawing should look like a photograph, an exact replication of its subject. But as Jen grew older, she began to create abstract paintings. She showed one of them to her father, and his lips tightened as he said, "You don't need any talent to paint that kind of thing."

She never showed him her artwork again.

Back in the present, she realized she was drawing her father's prized rose bushes. The flowers he had lavished with love and attention. Her hand felt awkward and the bushes looked crooked. Yet she continued.

When Jen was 13, her mother ran off, moving thousands of miles away to a new city with her new boyfriend. That night Jen sat in their living room with her father and Sam, silently hunched over, wrapped in blankets like refugees because her father had turned off the heating, no doubt because Jen's mother always complained of the cold.

"She's nothing but an adulteress," her father said, gripping his rosary beads. Jen wanted to speak up, to defend her mother, but she didn't dare.

Jen could hardly remember a time her father wasn't angry. He

ranted daily about his ex-wife, his employer, his co-workers, money, and politics. And of course, his teenage children and their defiance. His face hovered in front of Jen like a red balloon as he screamed about her grades, her friends, and her imperfect performance at household chores. Once, after her church youth group, he yelled at her in front of the other teens and their parents outside the church. When her father stormed off to the car, Jen hung back. The priest, Father Ramirez, wandered over, and she tensed waiting for further rebuke. But he said quietly, "Remember, child. God gives us parents so we learn how not to behave." Jen stared at him, not fully realizing what he'd said until he winked at her and walked away.

She smiled at the memory and looked down at her drawing. The drawing had a loose grace, but there was something missing. She drew in a long shadow for each bush, as if near dusk.

Sam had been more rebellious than Jen. He'd skipped classes, shoplifted, and stayed out past curfew drinking and vaping with his friends. In response, their father whipped him. Jen hid in her room, wincing as she heard the crack of the belt and her brother's screams.

Tears ran down her face and she leaned back to stop them from falling on the paper. Sam had forgiven their father for the rages, the whippings, but Jen had not.

She studied her drawing. There was too much darkness, the cross-hatching over the grass rough and jagged. She sighed and turned the sketchbook around so that the spine was on the left again, ready to turn the page. And gaped.

Among the lines of the shadow was her father's face.

Dark slashes formed his eyebrows, drawn together in anger. She froze as if she were once again a child, terrified by Daddy's anger. A message from beyond the grave? The image was rough, yet his features were unmistakable.

She picked up her eraser but hesitated to obliterate the image. Instead, she used the eraser in combination with her pencil to modify her father's face. His frown lines eased and his eyelids relaxed. His lips loosened and curved upwards in the corners. Almost a smile. The way he used to look when she was little. Softer.

She stroked the image with her fingertips.

She would never get to talk to her father again, but he was still with her. Her memories, both fond and painful, were so vivid and numerous it was as if he still lived. But the representation in her mind was malleable. She could choose, at least, which parts of him to cherish, and which parts to use as examples of how not to behave.

She wiped her cheeks, then selected a new pencil and turned the page.

# Recipe for Life (With Butter and Sugar)

Nonfiction by Dana Foley

## Spring - 2006

The room is yellow. The whole apartment is, really. Soft rays of sunlight filter through the yellow curtains and cast shadows on the yellow carpets that stretch to meet each yellow wall. Everything glows in the afternoon sunlight. Yellow flowers - daffodils, I think - sit on the table with a yellow tablecloth.

*Yellow.*

Yellow is her favourite colour. She tells me this as she shows me how to make pie crust from scratch. Her wrinkled and age-spotted hands knead the dough, never breaking from the rhythmic motion.

She tells me we don't want the butter spread all the way through. We don't want it perfect.

That's the key to a flaky crust, she says.

I nod. Now it's my turn.

My hands are small. They are not strong. Not like hers. I press but the butter is still hard and lumpy, and I can't do it.

I won't do it. I don't want to. I want to watch cartoons.

She laughs.

I curl up on the yellow couch as she kneads and kneads and kneads the dough. I feel safe and warm, and I drift to sleep with the smell of apples, sugar, and butter gently filling my nose.

## Winter - 2017

I am visiting. Home again after being gone for too long. Snowflakes cascade past the kitchen window and a sad sounding voice sings about silver bells on the radio.

She ties a yellow apron around my waste and tells me to get the flour from the cupboard. I don't have the heart to tell her that I am tired. First year exams have left my nails bitten to the nub, my heart still palpitating, and my mind fuzzy. My head feels light.

She mixes apple slices, brown sugar, and cinnamon together in a bowl with her bare hands. She picks up half a lemon and effortlessly squeezes out the

juice, letting it run through her opposite fingers so she can catch the seeds.

I ball the dough mixture up under my hands, lock my shoulders, and bring all my weight down again and again. I'm being sloppy. I can't get the butter to spread evenly. I push my fingers into the dough with frustration. My hands are moving but my mind is somewhere else.

Now her hands find mine. Her leathery fingers against my smooth skin.

Don't spread the butter too much, she says. Nothing can be perfect.

I smile weakly. Her hands feel so strong on mine.

You're tired, she says. Why don't you rest?

I nod.

She takes a kitchen knife and cuts the dough down the middle.

She tells me to take one half back to my apartment and put it in the freezer. It will keep for a long time.

That's good. I'm not sure when I'll feel like pie again.

## Winter - 2018

Visiting again. A different kind of visit.

I tuck a thin yellow blanket around her legs and adjust the daffodils on the windowsill.

The harsh light washes everything out and makes her look pale. It must be the light. It has to be.

I am going to stay with her for a week once she gets out of the hospital. When I say this, the corner of her eyes crinkle.

Her feet are cold. In her suitcase I find a pair of yellow knitted socks and pull them over each foot.

Now I have to get going. It's almost time for dinner. I'll be back tomorrow.

I lean over the bed and hug her. Tighter. Before I can leave she closes my hand in hers. Still — so strong.

You are a perfect granddaughter, she says.

I smile. Nothing can be perfect.

I'm cleaning up mom's roast chicken dinner when the phone rings. It's the doctor.

I'm not even sure how we got here, but I am the first one to reach the doorway of her hospital room. Nurses gather around her bed, talking in hushed voices.

All I can see are her yellow socks.

## Spring - 2019

Six months go by. Another year of school finished.

I ride my bike to the store and pass by a garden of yellow flowers. I adjust the yellow scarf around my neck and peddle a little slower.

At the grocery store I fill my basket. Bananas and oranges. Some fresh blueberries. I am about to move onto the vegetables when I spot some green apples that look fresh and ripe. I begin to imagine the air growing thick with the smell of melted butter and sugar.

Back home, I unpack the groceries and place the apples in a fruit bowl on the kitchen table. Late afternoon sunshine pours in through the kitchen window and makes the white walls glow.

Something draws me to the freezer. I am looking for something. Reaching deep inside. It must be all the way at the back. Then I see it, wrapped in wax paper and sealed in a plastic bag.

As the dough defrosts, I peel and slice the apples. I mix the slices with brown sugar and cinnamon. I squeeze a lemon with my bare hands and let the juice run through my fingers.

Then I knead the dough, my hands never breaking from the rhythmic motion. They feel strong.

I knead until the dough becomes smooth under my fingers, but then I stop myself. I won't try to make it perfect.

That's the key to a flaky crust.

# The Ghost in Her Room

Nonfiction by Noreen Lace



I stand in the hall at midnight. The oak floor is cold, even through my socked feet. The night light from the bathroom filters the darkness as I glance toward the pale pink haze at the other end of the corridor. I hear the small creaks on the floor, feel something just on the other side of that door. It's menacing, waiting, daring me to enter. Tonight, though, I decline. I'm not strong enough. I'm tired, and I'm chilled.

It's been raining for days. The house shivers in anger, the wood popping and cracking in the shadows behind me. It's shrinking. We all are. I turn and go to bed, shutter the passage to whatever lies outside my room.

I lie there drifting between alpha and theta; rainbows swirl inside my closed eyes before a child calls my name right next to my bed, next to my ear, and then giggles. I spring awake but remain still. There is no child, so I don't search. If there's anything in here, it's a ghost and looking won't help me see.

Years ago, I heard footsteps on the cheap linoleum of the kitchen. I wrote it off to an old house groaning with age in a succession of weakening boards under the plinth. That stopped when I had the floors redone; ceramic doesn't cede. That was long before I was alone here in the house.

In the bright light of day, I sense nothing behind that door. It's quiet, empty, needs to be cleaned. I have my coffee, toast, and go on.

Sometimes I find myself home in the middle of the day. I've forgotten something or took a wrong turn and ended up in my own driveway; I go in. There's a light on in the kitchen. A picture's fallen from the wall. A forgotten towel slung across the wooden chair.

"Is someone here?"

There's no answer, not even my echo calling back to me.

In the shadowed hall, I stare at the pale pink gate. Pause. I will it to chirr or clack, shimmy slightly in the weight of my presence. The light from the window seeps around the threshold and stretches past strands of dust toward my shoes, but the door doesn't give.

I don't know if there is magic in this world. I don't know if people can see things or if they know things. I used to think I would know if she was in trouble.

Some days I ignore the door completely, disregard the space, discount the whirrs or whines.

I'm sitting at the dining table. Haven't passed or gone in for some time. My house has one less room. But then, suddenly, the hall creaks, a shadow moves; someone, something is standing there watching me, waiting for me, challenging me to look up.

I turn and it's gone.

Later, I glance at the door, not quite closed, an inch or so ajar. Inside I click the

switch. The light is hazy; a bulb burns out.

I stand, fists to my hips, in the center of the room. "Move one thing," I tell myself. "Just pick up one thing and fold it or move it or throw it away." But I back out. There's no menacing figure now, just overwhelming emptiness.

I consider nailing it shut. Losing it. There's nothing I need, not the four corners of square footage, not the admonition of what is not there, and not that ghost reminding me of all I don't have.

Before bed, I stand in the hall; that dark presence has grown and I feel it breathing just beyond her door. A not so gentle sweep of chilled air in, warm air out, hanging on to the sound of my footsteps, egging me on. I back down. Turn to my own fallow room.

When I fall into a deep sleep, my father puts his hands on my shoulders. I haven't seen him in ten years, but he looks good. "You've got to let it go," he implores. It's the nicest thing he's ever said to me. But not today.

The ghost in her room was once small and indelible. It grows greater every day. It fills the gloom, spills into the corners, and bends back upon itself, towering over the entryway.

If I go in there and clean, maybe it'll shrink, go away, fade into nothingness.

Now, at night, I hear it mooring toward my room. A creak in the floor, a rap on the wall, the quiet whisper at my door...

# INSIDE DEMENTIA

Poem by Suzanne S. Eaton

He enters the room so glad to see me  
rushes to look into my eyes,  
happy to talk with me and find me there.  
How kind and excited he is to receive  
my companionship in full awareness.  
Oh yes, everything is going to be ok,  
I'm back and there you are waiting for me.  
What happened? I ask rhetorically.  
I have that disease that takes my being away  
from both of us and leaves me trapped in that  
dark place where I can't engage or go forward.  
But, here and now, I remember everything!  
My life seems abstract and surreal,  
but I am seeing it and hearing your words.  
—I know what they mean! My mind is unclouded  
and I have my bearings — I'm back!  
You hold my hand and touch my face  
and I see your heart reaching out to me.  
I remember our love. I remember our lives.  
Where did all the time go?  
Where did our busy routine go?  
Why are we stopped right here? Stopped cold.  
Are you ok? Are you lonely?  
It is astonishing to look into your eyes—  
I feel our connection right down to my toes.  
It is wonderous to feel so safe,  
to feel that things are as they should be.  
Just for a moment, I am not late, not lacking, not  
struggling to figure out where I am supposed to be  
and what I am supposed to offer.  
Are you taking care of yourself? Feeling well?  
Tell me, how are the kids and grandkids?  
Did Kim get the job at the city office?  
How's school going for Heather?  
I'll bet little Amy is walking now.  
Does she still look just like her mother?  
Did John get engaged to Kristi?  
Did you all get together for the holidays?  
Is Kelly's truck still running?  
Have you talked to Ben? Is he doing ok?

Do you have any pictures?  
Can we call them? Say a prayer?  
Have you seen my light blue sweater?  
Please tell them I love them and miss them.  
Do you think there will be a place  
...after this...after I die?  
I must look a mess, where is my...brush?  
...my purse? What time is it?  
Can you take me out to dinner?  
Oh, I...is there room to...  
I need a...what is this place?  
You are my...husband...right?  
No, you can't be him.  
Is God mad at me?  
There's a...what is it called?  
There...outside the...glassy thing..  
Never mind.  
I feel the lost expression  
over taking my face.  
I'm trying to...I am so sorry.  
Please hold on to me...find my words.  
What? I see tears leave your eyes  
but I feel them roll down my cheeks.  
I'm just so...sorry...sad.

Who knows when I will see you again?



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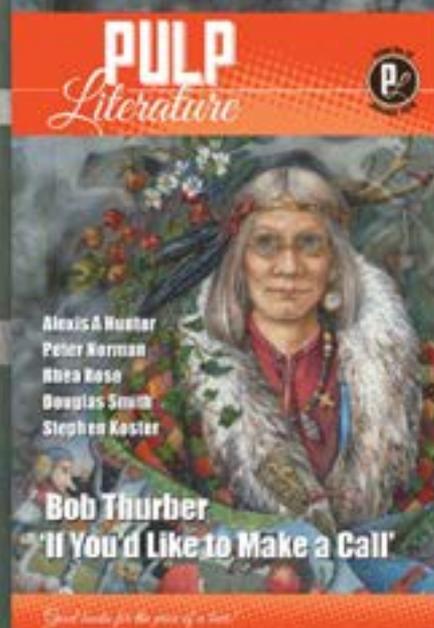
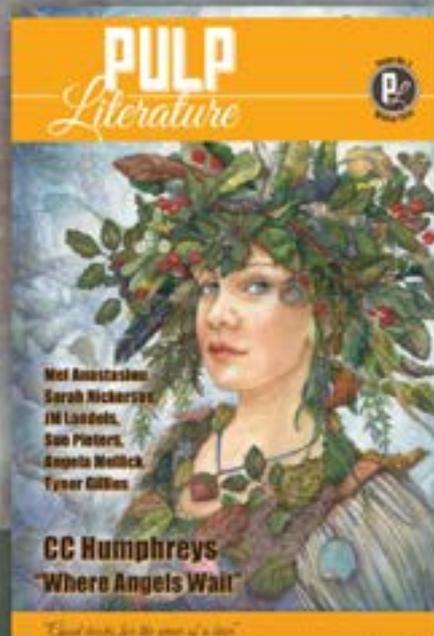
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A quill pen is positioned vertically in a small, clear glass inkwell filled with dark ink. The quill is set on a light-colored wooden surface. A bright, glowing blue lightning bolt strikes the quill from the top left, extending down to the inkwell. The background is a soft, out-of-focus landscape with a light sky and a dark horizon.

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