

NOV 2021-FEB 2022 - ISSUE 10

Dreamers

Creative Writing

Post-Mortem

Story by Belinda McCauley

Winners

2021 Flash Contest

2022

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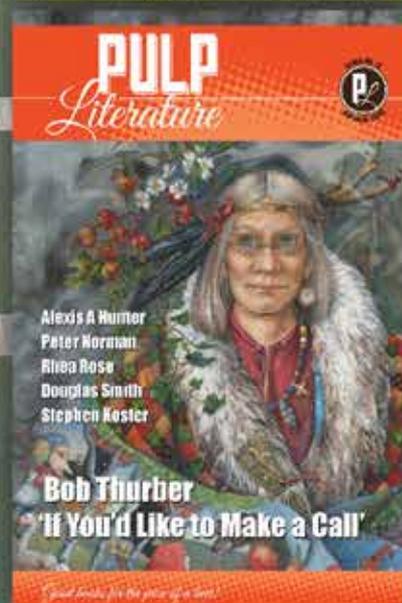
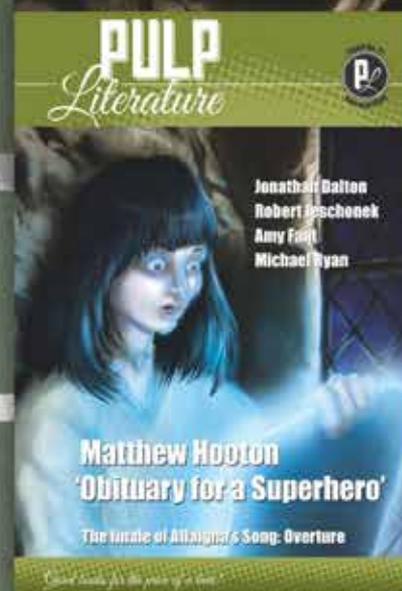
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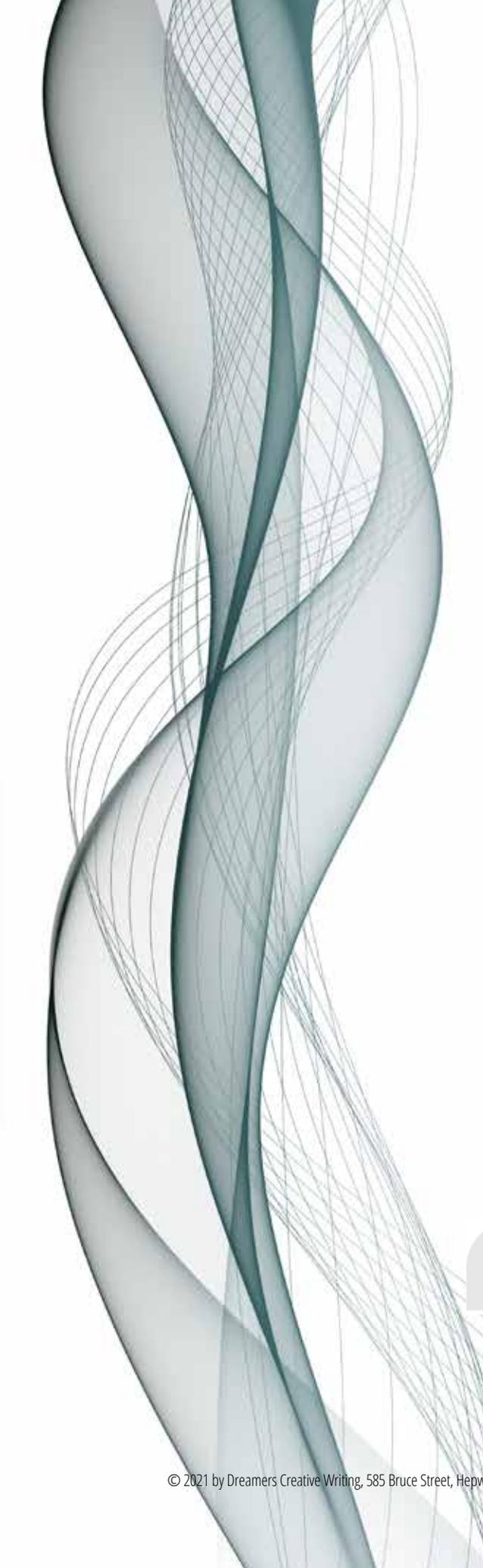
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IN THIS ISSUE

2021 FLASH CONTEST WINNERS <i>Congratulations to Mary Jumbelic, Adam Fout, and Ery Caswell.</i>	03
MEDICINE CHILD, Julia Florek Turcan	06
ON THE NORTH SHORE, Penny L. Ferguson	06
DEAR BARBIE ARM ON THE CORNER OF FIFTH AND MARKET, Kelle Schillaci Clarke	08
LUZAJIC WRITES EKPHRASIS FROM THE INSIDE-OUT IN <i>WINTER IN JUNE</i> , Carole Mertz	09
POETRY FOR SURVIVORS, Kym Nacita	10
INSIDE HER BELLY, Mary Jo Garrido	11
AN INTERVIEW WITH REINEKKE LENGELLE, AUTHOR OF <i>WRITING THE SELF IN BEREAVEMENT</i>	12
POST-MORTEM, Belinda McCauley	16
SNOW DUCKS, Nicholas Schmid	19
BIRD WITHOUT A SONG, Jaclyn Kar Yin McLachlan	22
GLYCERINE, Pauline Shen	25
BECOME AN ISLAND, Abiola Regan	26
ON MY DOORSTEP, Laura Murray	27

“What matters most to me as a writer of the human experience is that people feel free to be who they are...
—Reinekke Lengelle

EDITOR'S LETTER

I have a distinct memory of my 10th birthday. As my mom and I walked around the grocery store, I talked nonstop about how excited I was to be 10. I kept saying, "I'm double digits now!" At the height of my mom's shoulders, I felt grown-up and worldly. I often think of that birthday, my excitement, and the patience my mom showed as I said, "I'm double digits now" about a thousand times. She didn't downplay my joy, didn't give a world weary sigh - the kind of sigh I'm so familiar with now - she smiled and nodded and let me have my moment of grandeur. "Look, Mom, see how tall I am?" I said as I reached for the bread on the top shelf. "You're a giant, honey," she said with pride. If love is the measure of mothers, then my mom is the one who is giant.

Welcome to Issue 10 of the Dreamers magazine. Look, Mom, double digits! We're growing up..

In this issue, you'll find 3 nonfiction stories, 5 fiction stories, 2 autofiction stories, 6 poems, a book review, and an author interview. This issue is also packed with winners! Congratulations to the winners of our 2021 Flash Contest, and congratulations to the winner of the 2022 Pen Parentis Fellowship for New Parents.

On page 16, find our feature story, "Post-Mortem," a tale of love found, lost, found and lost again. This is a story of survival in a wild world. You don't want to miss it!

If you're reading this, thanks for growing with us. With empathy, understanding, and a little pride, let's never stop reaching for the top shelf. Keep dreaming.

Kat McNichol
Editor-In-Chief

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Kat McNichol

GENERAL MANAGER
Ryan Clark

BOOK REVIEW EDITOR
Carole Mertz

REVIEWERS
Rochelle Angyal
Colleen McNichol
Phil McNichol

HOW TO REACH US
info@dreamerswriting.com
www.dreamerswriting.com
585 Bruce St. Hepworth, ON, CA



2021 FLASH Contest

Congratulations to the Winners!

FIRST PLACE WINNER

Collapse

Nonfiction by Mary Jumbelic

Dark hair matted to the little girl's head. Her lips were dried and cracked; her eyes sunken. Despite her olive-toned skin, she was pale. Amina was gaunt, and less than fifth percentile for height and weight as she lay on the morgue table.

I sharpened my pencil, preparing to take notes. Feeling sluggish, I thought about stopping for a cup of coffee. Having not slept well the night before, it might help. My youngest son was the same age as this girl, four years old. In the wee hours, he had crawled into my bed, snuggling against me under the down blanket.

"Mommy?" he whispered, his small hands touching my face. He felt warm like a space heater. His cheeks were wet from crying.

"What's wrong, honey?" I said. The bedside clock read 2:02 AM.

"I had a bad dream," he said, gulping breaths between words.

"Shh, it's not real," I said, wrapping my arms around him. We talked about thoughts and visions until we drifted off to sleep. The alarm woke us at 6 o'clock. For my son, nightmares were imaginary monsters under the bed, made real by two older brothers telling R. L. Stine stories after dinner. For me as chief medical examiner, they were embodied in a child's corpse.

I skipped the coffee and did what I had promised Amina's family - a quick yet thorough examination. They were Muslim and it was customary to bury the dead as soon as possible. The autopsy took under an hour. With a child this small, the dissection was uncomplicated. Without disease, the tissues cooperated with me. Every organ was in its proper place - no scarring, no tumors, no bleeding, no trauma. The only abnormalities were an empty stomach and collapsed bowels from 24 hours of vomiting and diarrhea. The intestines were pencil thin, completely purged. My insides twitched in sympathetic response. The internal findings confirmed what I had seen on the outside of the body - severe dehydration.

Earlier that day, I met with Munir, the father, and extended family in their small two-bedroom apartment. Amina's mother, Nejra, sat on a worn sofa in the living room, head bent down, ready to collapse into herself, Munir by her side. Six other relatives were clustered on kitchen chairs hastily pulled into a semi-circle around the couch.

Munir told me, through an interpreter, about the rapid illness. Amina had gotten sick more than a day before, in the middle of the night. She threw up the homemade broth she'd had for dinner. Throughout the morning and afternoon, she had unrelenting bowel movements, more liquid than solid. Then the fever started and even sips of water made her gag.

In the evening, the parents and sick child made their way to the nearest emergency room, a mile from their home, via the bus. The hospital was unfamiliar territory, as was most of the city. Amina's family was part of the diaspora from the civil war in the Balkans, and recent refugees to Syracuse. There was no translator in the ER; no one understood what was going on with this little Bosniak girl. The nurse practitioner gave her an antibiotic for an ear infection and sent her home.

This family had survived disease, and famine. They escaped ethnic cleansing; their village burned to the ground. Yet Amina died of an illness that modern medicine can cure. A simple intravenous line could have replaced the lost body fluids and essential salts. Without them, the heart stops.

"What did they do at the hospital?" I asked. "Did they give her some saline into her veins? Check her blood pressure and pulse? Give her medicine to stop her vomiting?"

As the representative from the refugee center translated my questions into Bosnian, Munir shook his head with each one. None of those things. I would confirm his story later when reading every word of the one-page medical record.

After the ER visit, at home, Nejra took Amina into her arms and crooned to her. The child's fidgeting slowed, and they fell asleep entwined. The mother was grateful that her daughter had stopped needing the bathroom. In the morning, Amina's face felt cool and Nejra thought the fever had broken. But there was no breath, no heart beating in the thin chest. Then Nejra screamed a primal sound that woke Munir and the entire house of aunts, uncles, and nephews.

After the autopsy, I did two more things for Amina. Carefully turning her body, I pointed her head toward Mecca. Then retiring to my office, I filed a complaint of negligence to the disciplinary board of the hospital and the state.

A Chunk of Ice Tumbling in a Thunderstorm

Nonfiction by Adam Fout

We are in my girlfriend's apartment in Lawrence, a room of white walls and carpet crisscrossed with fresh vacuum trails and neatly stacked books on genetics, anatomy, calculus. The day before, I stole five hundred dollars she saved for her trip to Hawaii.

"You're the only one here!" she shrieks. "Who else could have done it?"

"You're crazy!" I say. "If you really believe that, I'll eat all this oxy right now!"

She stares. I walk out of the apartment, pills like blue pebbles thrown to my gut.

I cannot say if death or life is better.

I do not call it life.

Dopefiends don't have lives.

My new coat turns the Kansas wind and traps snowflakes like coins of foam in pockets my hands cannot warm, the sky a silent, colorless thing. I know the music that will sing me to hell. The momentum is unstoppable. I smile.

Freedom is coming.

My headphones die.

I will listen on my new iPhone's monaural speaker.

It has five percent battery.

It cuts to black in my hand.

I walk past the alley I planned to die in to a staffing agency. I fill out job applications in a town I no longer live in. I hit on a pretty girl.

I must have passed out mid-sentence.

I come to in an ambulance, pain like God carving his symbol in my skull. NARCAN, but I swear to you they injected it into my femur with a sword.

"My fucking leg!" I scream. They shout questions.

I weep when the doctor asks me if I intended myself harm.

In the hospital, a woman sits with me at all times, knitting in silence as I watch TV, dopesickness thick and hard—bones filled with sparks and fire, body an ocean of sweat, heart a drum.

I'm taken in an ambulance to a psych ward.

It is nothing and everything like the movies.

"So how did you try to kill *yourself*," I ask a girl with a face like dreams.

She laughs and says, "Oh, I just went off my meds."

I don't understand.

Why would you come to a place like this if you hadn't tried to escape?

"If you tell the nurse you have anxiety, he gives you Ativan," she says. "If you tell him you're an addict, he gives you Suboxone."

I cling to her certainty.

My roommate is sixty. He sleeps for twenty-three of every twenty-four hours

If I cracked his skull open, would I find hidden stores of heroin?

If I tell the doctors it was an accident, would they release me to the blizzards of Kansas?

If I beg the gods of the people we burned so many centuries ago, would they send someone to cut out my beating heart, tip it with gentle hands, pour out my madness?

I want to return to the snow I tried to die in.

In three days I am out and high again, a chunk of ice tumbling in a thunderstorm.

Dislodging the Hook

Nonfiction by Ery Caswell



My uncle once brought me fishing at his gun club, another family conspiracy to masculinize me. We were deep in what some locals call Swamp Yankee territory: the rural places in New England where you're most likely to see a confederate flag. He'd brought me to a pond on the property of the gun club that was man made and not terribly large--maybe fifty feet across. I suppose the gun club owners must have put the fish into the pond for aficionados of the hunt, like Uncle Les, to catch. Otherwise they would not have been there at all.

Like most of my family's attempts to masculinize me, this one didn't take. Nonetheless, Les made a noble attempt. He showed me how to saddle the bait onto the hook and cast the line out into the deepest part of the shallow pond. We stood at the edge of the water next to a sign post, which named the artificial body of water: Gagnon's Pond. The gun club owners named it after my uncle, Les Gagnon. Even as a child, this struck me as odd. What had Les done to have a pond named after him?

The pole twitched, and my uncle gestured to it, adjusting his baseball cap. "Alright kid," he waved me toward him, away from the wildflowers I was picking. "Let's see ya reel one in."

At first I was excited. As I reeled the crank, tightening the line and dragging the fish through the shallow waters, I would glance over at my uncle. Normally gruff and straight-lipped, I noticed he was smiling. "There you go, little man. Just keep bringin her in." Clearly, I was doing something right.

But that's when I noticed. The closer the fish struggled to shore, hopping up in strained splashes, another color swirled in the murk of the water. A gentle streak of crimson trailed

behind the fish, something like a comet's tail. I gasped and the line went slack.

"Oh, don't pay that no mind," Les said, reaching for the fishing pole. He hoisted it, pulling the wriggling trout out from his pond. "It happens. See?" He held the dripping fish up over the water, pointing to its gills with his free hand. "Damn thing just swallowed the hook."

Held up sideways, the fish's one beady eye glistened over and stared. Les was right. The hook was lodged, one sharp tooth of it jutting out of the fish's throat. I looked from the hook, the red raw gash it left, back to the fish's eye. The way it looked at me made me feel like a criminal. *Why? Why did you do this to me?* I had no good answer.

Les reached down to rip out the hook. I turned to look back at the gun club behind us, refusing to watch. He laughed, rolled his eyes a little. "It ain't every time, kid. You'll get used to it." He wrenched the hook out of the fish's throat, tossing it back into the pond. And that was that. Les tried to wrangle me into reeling in another, but I'd had enough. My refusal made the rest of our fishing trip short lived.

On the drive home, neither of us said much. Les turned up the classic rock station on his radio, and I looked out the passenger's side window of his pickup truck. The cooler full of bait sat wedged between us, a barrier of sorts. I thought of the trout, its eye slick and glistening with what I swore was betrayal. This guilt I swallowed, along with another kind.

A part of me knew this trip was another test I'd somehow failed.



Medicine Child

Poem by Julia Florek Turcan

The warmth of your small body
seeps through cracked exterior
penetrates deep into this caked clay
carelessly discarded to
dry or crumble.
Your sun bakes
better than any oven, and though i
thought neglect had misshaped
this unruly form
had left a half-made golem
unfit for care or crafting
unworthy of an image
i find instead it has created
the perfect vessel
to hold you

On the North Shore

Poem by Penny L. Ferguson

Strolling along the shore
cares are pulled from me by the tide
as it slips out
like silk over earth's bronzed thigh.

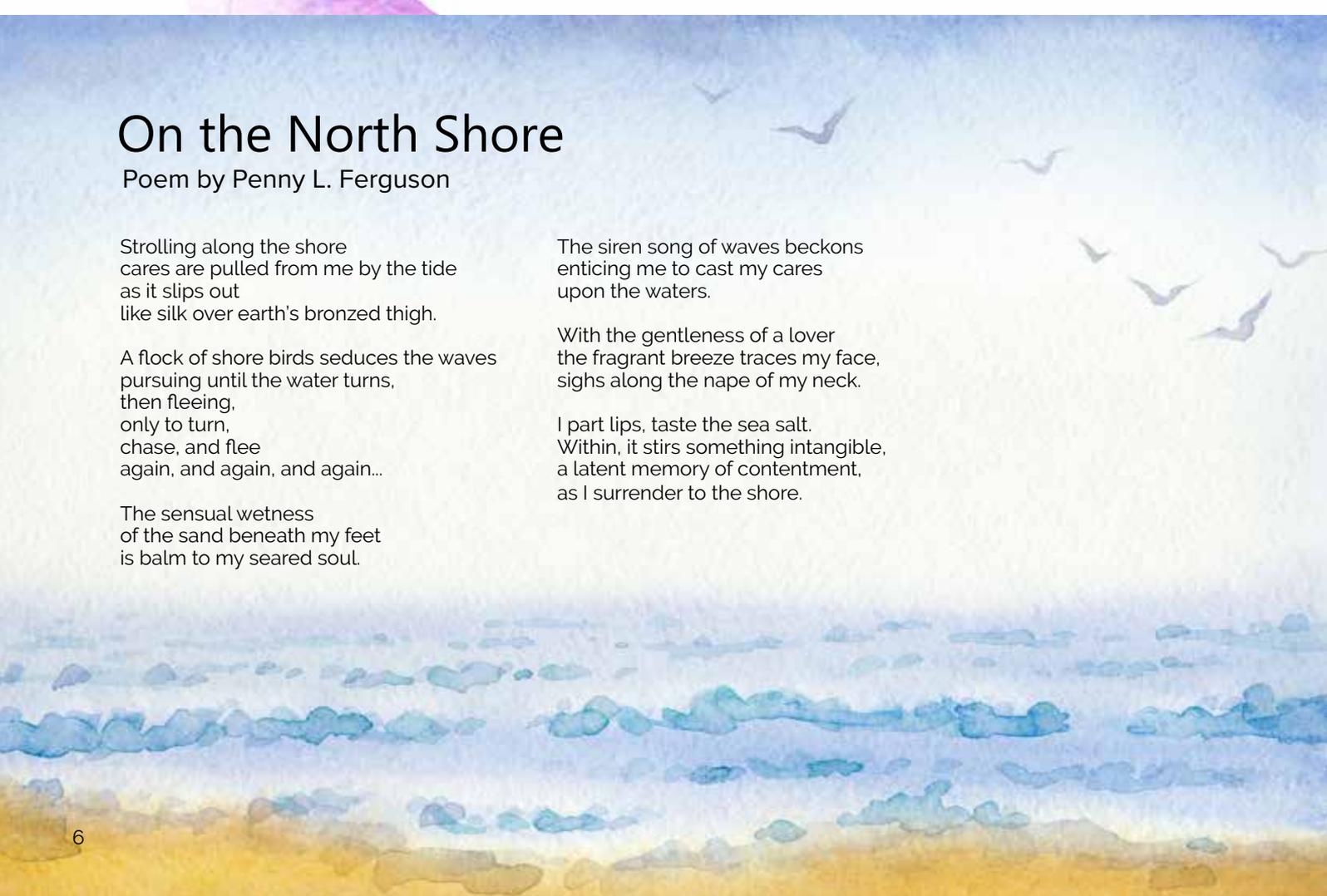
A flock of shore birds seduces the waves
pursuing until the water turns,
then fleeing,
only to turn,
chase, and flee
again, and again, and again...

The sensual wetness
of the sand beneath my feet
is balm to my seared soul.

The siren song of waves beckons
enticing me to cast my cares
upon the waters.

With the gentleness of a lover
the fragrant breeze traces my face,
sighs along the nape of my neck.

I part lips, taste the sea salt.
Within, it stirs something intangible,
a latent memory of contentment,
as I surrender to the shore.



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Dear Barbie Arm on the Corner of Fifth and Market,

Fiction Story by Kelle Schillaci Clarke

This isn't about you. It isn't about the Barbie you once belonged to, or the kid that Barbie might still belong to. It isn't about my own kid's Barbies, their tiny hands and feet chewed into sausage by the dog, or the windows to my kid's school, propped widely open despite the cold, or the angry music screaming through my earbuds as I stomp off anxiety while the kids inside learn math and reading and how to not touch one another, how to scrub their red hands raw, how to adapt. This isn't about those kids. It's about my kid. But you're easier to talk to.

If it weren't for germs I'd pick you up and make you into art, align you in the gutter beside a smashed mask and fast food wrappers, bend you into impossible anatomical angles, snap closeups, make artsy references to dead women everywhere. Because there are so many. You're just an arm. A small, broken part of a much bigger problem.

But this isn't about trash or the patriarchy or how many re-microwaved cups of coffee and calls to my mother, four states away, it takes to get me through the day. It's not about the way your elbow joints are frozen in place, limiting your mobility even on a good, attached day, or how, when Ariel gave away her voice, she gave away *everything*. It's not even about the bedtime conversation we had last night when my daughter said, "Charlie has a real gun at home that he's going to show me," because the good news is that she told me about *that* gun.

This isn't about guns at all, or the positions she leaves Barbies in on the staircase: the tippy-toed girl-doll pinned

beneath anatomically-incorrect Ken, his face so close to hers he's probably whispering something gruesome in her ear. It's not about poor little Skipper, hung upside down from the dream house chandelier by a shoestring she'd pulled out of my Doc Martens, boots I once trekked through Europe in, through ancient ruins, bus terminals and dinner halls. Rooftop parties, street protests, silent art museum wings. This isn't about my shoes, their laces, or even poor Skipper, who is only plastic, felt, and synthetic hair. I'm curious how you ended up here, how we all do.

I don't mean "meaning of life" crap, which we addressed when she was five and declared from beneath a public bathroom stall, "there must be more to life than this!" or even that sliding doors concept of parallel lives: one in which I took the train and never married him, never had her, never taught her how to slurp raw oysters from their shells while searching open water for mermaids, orcas and the Loch Ness Monster—could she even swim this far? Because in our version, the Monster is always a girl.

What I'm asking is, who left you here? And why does my heart ache over your abandonment? Exactly what kind of trigger are you? You're even shaped like one, minus the gun. A comma without a sentence. You make me think there's something I'm missing, something I'm longing for so deeply, that I've forgotten it completely. What am I missing? There's something I'm missing.

But it isn't you.

About Pen Parentis

The Pen Parentis Writing Fellowship for New Parents annually honors a talented writer who is the parent of at least one child under 10 years old. This year's fellow receives \$1000 to further their writing career, a year of mentorship, and read their winning story at the Pen Parentis Literary Salon in New York City on Tuesday, November 9, 2021. To watch the playback of this and other Pen Parentis Literary Salons, visit [youtube.com/penparentis](https://www.youtube.com/penparentis) and subscribe.

This year, submissions called for a new, never-

published fiction story - any genre, on any subject - of up to 550 words. Word count changes each year because the main goal of this Fellowship is to motivate writers to continue to create new high-quality creative work at the very busiest time of the parenting journey.

Pen Parentis is a 501C3 literary nonprofit that helps writers stay on creative track after starting a family. Subscribers enjoy Accountability Meetups, Salons and other perks. Find out more at www.penparentis.org/we-want-to-help.

Luzajic writes ekphrasis from the inside-out in *Winter in June*

Book Review by Carole Mertz

Lorette Luzajic writes with candor and verve. She invests her entire self into her art, which is both prosody and visual art. I call her the "Queen of Ekphrasis," as I'm sure others have done. Her collection *Winter in June* contains over 160 offerings. They seem memoirist, but all are in some way ekphrastic, as well. Some are prose poems of fewer than 40 words, others, little essays that span several pages.

Since Luzajic is an active visual artist, she seems able to write ekphrasis from the inside-out, as it were. Her style is her own and she offers it in an almost devil-may-care attitude.

I became acquainted with her work initially through her online site, The Ekphrastic Review. It's remarkable for the artistry it encompasses, both in the paintings presented, and the ekphrastic poems and stories contributed by authors from around the world.

To make it easy for the reader to connect with the individual artworks she describes in this collection, Luzajic includes a webpage (at www.mixedupmedia.ca/winter-in-june.html) that depicts each painting in the order in which her individual essays appear. This is a useful aid.

On to the essays. I'll cite three here, though I feel I could extoll any number of them. The first line of her "Jalapenos" begins with humor: "You were too hot to handle." "You," she continues, "had this thing for chili peppers." This piece tells of her relationship with a person with whom "she" spent some of the best days of her life. "You once got me drunk enough to kiss you... We both had boyfriends." Now with "boyfriends," we begin to think this might be a female friend, or perhaps it's a male friend who has a boyfriend. The "personal" drama begins to assume a new dimension. "You showed me scars on your wrists, and I thought they were beautiful..." You say you "want to get a grip, find a way to keep your cool, stop hurting people." Then, "I tell you to down a handful of Valium and some wine, our reliable vices. You'll feel better in the morning." In the end, the storyteller asks, "I wonder if I want you to be sick because I am. / That's how I loved you, I want to scream." We may justly ask, is this a story Luzajic imagined for us, or are we witnessing volatile bits of her life, planted onto the page? Her writing, by the way, often seems to invite a degree of titillation.

In a shorter piece, on Chilean Jose Basso's *Tarde de Verano*, the author tells us she has always been a "city-mouse." "I wanted red high heels and Barcelona...I wanted to show you the museums and the world, but you said the whole world was under the dust right where you were." The persona becomes contented. "You cajoled the very earth to ignite on our behalf, to feed us."

When I viewed this Basso painting, I saw only a wide field of golden grain, with a single tree and a farmhouse barely visible in the distance. The painting is divided in half at the horizon, horizontally, with clear sky covering the top half. Luzajic's imagination is melded into the painting, offering us so much more than we think we can see.

"Sunday, Bloody Sunday" delivers Luzajic's reaction to a particular bullfight in Lima, and to Elaine De Kooning's painting, *Bullfight*. It's worth reading for the horror of the confrontation, the tamed beast "dragged around and around the track, trailing blood," and the author's take on the strange power of such a ritualistic fight, a 'game that's not a game.' "More than all the drama and fanfare and the crowds, it was all about going through right to the end. Not the edge of it... but to the intersection of life and death," she writes.

I've read four of Luzajic's books. None has seemed as personally revelatory nor as admirable as this one. She enriches my understanding of the great potential that can be presented and derived from reading and writing ekphrasis.

About the author of *Winter in June*:

Lorette C. Luzajic is a Toronto-based visual artist, editor, educator, and writer. She studied journalism but prefers to write flash fiction and prose poetry. Her words have been widely published, nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net, and translated into Urdu. Her lifelong passion is for art history. She is the founder and editor of The Ekphrastic Review, a journal devoted to literature inspired by visual art.

Poetry for Survivors

Poem Series by Kym Nacita

offerings

I wish I could be more
whole for you
but pieces of me are scattered
across two nations
and sometimes
even standing still
feels like a betrayal
to the constant movement of our people.

breathing

inhale
steady the air between these lips
croon Sinatra songs
in the offkey tone of my father
and smile
sway my body like my mother used to.
I am, after all
the best parts of her
and the lessons from her worst mistakes.
exhale

dating to survive

lying in bed
I kiss his lips
trying to taste the ocean I was born into
but he is not home
not even close
there are others
who dig their hands inside me
some looking for a cure
a treasure
an amnesiac
a forever
and I let them with no promises
there isn't anything for you to find there
I say
but they do not believe
say there is no way
a woman so full
could be so empty



Inside Her Belly

Fiction Story by Mary Jo Garrido

I lay down on the couch ushered by my anguish, my nocturnal terrors, my unending melancholy. His voice pulls me into my head. The clock ticks, backwards. I'm four again.

The twilight inside this wardrobe is the colour of fear. Here's where bad little girls are kept. I curl up beneath the hems of her old dresses, my face damp with tears, with rage, with sweat and terror. It's useless to keep calling her; she won't come. I close my eyes to pretend I'm sleeping, but the smell of mothballs and withered cologne makes me nauseous.

Mommy and Daddy went to the hospital with the new grandpa because my little brother is going to be born. They won't come back until tomorrow. They said this grandma is like Mommy, that she'll take care of me. But Mommy doesn't lock me in a wardrobe. Neither did Gramma-Sue before going away with Grampa-Joe. I liked their house, but Daddy said they moved to a place we can't go visit.

A few days ago, we arrived from Canada to these other grandparents. Daddy was born in this city and he wants to move here. But I don't like this house.

"What are you doing awake? Children talk when hens pee," this grandma said when I asked who her friend was. He's naughty. I saw him bite her mouth when she opened the door to him and this grandma touched him where his pants close. When she saw me looking, the line between her eyes got deeper and then she told me about the hens. She told her friend to wait for her in the living room and put her hand on my head to make me walk. We went into the hallway, and she sank her nails right through my hair into my head. When I complained, she did it even harder and then pushed me into this wardrobe, squeezing my arm.

"Sleep now!" she said.

I told her I wanted Mommy. She laughed and repeated what I said with a face that made me shake. She closed the wardrobe door and bolted it even when I told her I'm afraid of the dark.

The afternoon we arrived at this house, only the new grandpa greeted us; his name is Pocho, but Daddy calls him "Dad" and I call him Belo-Pocho. His eyes look like caramel and he has the best smile even though his teeth are yellow. He said I was even prettier than in the pictures. This grandma was resting in her bedroom because she had a headache. She doesn't like to be called Gramma, or *Abuela*, or *Bela*, or any other name that smells old, she told me. She's beautiful; her eyes are blue but they're scary. She told me to call her by her name, like Mommy and Daddy do, but I can't say it right and it makes her angry: *Blenda*... (her eyes shrank); *Brenda* (she said); *Brrrenda* (I tried hard, but I said it wrong again the next time). Daddy told her that I'm only four, that I'll learn how to say it soon.

This morning when we were having breakfast, this grandma was staring at me. I pretended I was looking at the coloured little balls of fruit cereal that were floating and dyeing the milk in my bowl. Mommy and Daddy had left already for the hospital with Belo-Pocho.

"What big ears you have!" she said and cackled so loud I had to look up at her.

My ears felt heavy.

"And what a terrible big nose you have!" This time she smiled, but a half-smile, lifting only one corner of her lips.

My nose swelled until it turned red and round like a clown's, the type people laugh at because they are ugly and clumsy. I couldn't breathe well.

"And what big eyes you have! You look like a scared owl," she said. "I don't know who you take after that was so ugly." She cackled again and stood up.

My face felt hot. If Belo-Pocho was there, he would have told her I am pretty, prettier than in the pictures.

I don't know how long I've been curled up on the floor of this wardrobe. My fear breathes through this silence that stinks like the other things this grandma locks in here (whatever is useless, she told me.) To scare my fear away, I draw pretty things with the shadows: fluffy kittens, butterflies, Mommy's lips... I think of my little brother sleeping inside her. I close my eyes and go inside her belly too. I hear Mommy singing while I cuddle him and fall sleep, floating.

A punch on the wooden door wakes me up. This grandma unlatches the bolt.

"Come on, girl!" she says and opens the door. Her hair is messy and the red on her lips is smudged. I've never seen her like this; she always looks like she's going to a party. She's wearing a black robe tied loosely at her waist; I can almost see her breasts, rounder than Mommy's. "To your room now!"

She pulls me out of the wardrobe. When I start walking towards the door she yells:

"Dammed, big-nose owl, you peed in here!"

She pushes me back into the wardrobe and says I will sleep here so that I learn, and to clean the urine with whatever, my tongue or my pajamas, but when she's back in the morning she wants it clean. She bolts the door again.

I know crying is useless. I let the wardrobe and its shadows swallow me, and curl up into a ball—or into a snack?—I remember the story. This belly is different; it swallows ugly little girls that come visit this grandma.

Tears drown me as I fall into a bottomless tunnel that stinks of her breath.

The doctor's voice pulls me back to his office; his eyes are gleaming with answers.

I have a children's story crushing my soul. Unpublished. Only for bad little girls.

An Interview with Reinekke Lengelle, Author of *Writing the Self in Bereavement*



PHOTO BY ERIC VISSERS

Dr. Reinekke Lengelle is a Dutch-born Canadian author of poems, scholarly articles, and heartfelt books on writing as a healing art. She is the associate professor of interdisciplinary studies at Athabasca University, Canada and a senior researcher at The Hague University, The Netherlands.

Reinekke has spent the last 25 years making substantial contributions to the field of writing for personal development and teaches the graduate courses she developed called, "Writing the Self" and "Narrative Possibilities". She and her (now deceased) spouse, Frans Meijers, co-created the narrative career counselling method "Career Writing".

Her award-winning book, *Writing the Self in Bereavement: A Story of Love, Spousal Loss, and Resilience*, was published in 2021 with Routledge. In this book, Reinekke teaches us about living with loss using personal narrative, heartbreaking poetry, and reflections on contemporary grief studies.

Welcome to Dreamers, Reinekke! This book had a major impact on me and I am so excited to discuss it with you. Thank you for joining me today!

I'm glad to share more about the loss experience and the writing process with you and your readers.

Your book, *Writing the Self in Bereavement*, is "a rare book [that]

successfully combines a personal story, heart-rending poetry, up-to-date research on grief, and an evocative exploration of taboo topics in the context of widowhood..." Can you tell us about the book and how it came to be?

The impetus for the book was Frans getting sick with cancer and dying within seven months of his diagnosis. I have always used writing to make sense of what happens in my life and as a way to respond to change, so that I would write about becoming a widow was no surprise. Some of the poems in the book were written before his death, but the narrative itself I started two weeks after he died.

I understand the story of this book's publication is a unique one. Can you share the details with us?

When I began writing, I knew it would be a book, though I thought it would be for the regular market and not necessarily an academic text. That said, I am a researcher and I frame what I'm learning within learning theories. I studied grief as I wrote my raw experience and used that research to reflect on my process. For instance, I learned that sadness and tears are not mere expressions of loss, but they actually help us adapt to it. Research shows that we can appraise a situation more realistically when we're sad (who knew!)

When I had completed the first draft of the book, I went to

the autoethnography conference in Florida in January 2020 to present on the topic of "unfinished business in bereavement". There I met autoethnographer, Carolyn Ellis, there as well as her partner in work and life, Arthur Bochner. There was so much I had in common with Carolyn – her book *Final Negotiations* tells the story of her losing her previous partner Gene Weinstein who, like Frans, was a boisterous sociologist and professor; they also had a 20-year-age gap.

The first morning at that conference, when I went up to the registration desk and no one was there yet, I browsed the book tables and saw the "Writing Lives" series that Carolyn and Art edit. I remember thinking, "I think this is where my book belongs". I went to lunch with a group from the conference a day or two later and sat beside Art. I told him about Frans and asked him if he'd be interested in seeing my manuscript and he said yes. He and Carolyn both came to my presentation the next day as well. When I got home to Edmonton, I went over my manuscript again and sent it off to them within two weeks. Carolyn was the one who read it and wanted it for the series. It was a dream come true to work with her and she went through the manuscript in painstaking detail and prompted me to make final edits. She also wrote a foreword for the book that I treasure.

This book took me on a journey, Reinekke. It felt immediate and in the moment, as if you were writing it as I was reading it. Frans was as present in this book as you were, which I think is a true reflection of the close bond that the two of you had in life and in work. I have never felt so immersed in a story, at various times feeling as if I was right there, living through each experience along with you. I admit that this may partly be because I know you and knew Frans, but based on the glowing reviews your book is receiving, I am definitely not the only one who experienced this sense of presence. What do you think makes this story so immersive?

This is not an easy question to answer. Maybe it's immersive because I was immersed in the process myself and could express that in concrete detail. Maybe it's because the story is a reflection of the intense relationship Frans and I had. Or maybe it is because I went to some scary places: I invite the reader into my private life. I talk about our relationship issues, for instance. I believe everyone has such issues, but few people talk about them, especially not in a published book after someone dies. We're not supposed "to speak ill of the dead".

I also write about missing sex and within six months of Frans's death, asking a single friend of mine to hold me and answer my need for intimacy. In grief I was also angry and I went looking for others who dared to write about this. There weren't a lot who did, but fortunately there were some.

I also write about assisted dying, which is conscious dying; that's also an intense experience. Frans literally walked to his own deathbed; he chose the day; he chose the place; I talk about what that's like.

One of the editors and Routledge called the work "unflinchingly honest" and I think if you are willing to read and not flinch, you get immersed. So, thank you for daring to get immersed.

Was that your intention with writing the book?

In hindsight, I'd say I had three intentions, and each became

clear at a different stage of the writing.

First, I wanted to keep myself company. When you live so intensely with a partner who talks a lot, thinks a lot, and is beautifully affectionate like Frans was, the loss creates a big void. I was driven to accompany myself with the same intensity that we had lived our relationship and writing the book made that possible. It also gave me time to pause and be deeply sorrowful with reverence. It has been three years now and I can still well up so completely that I can barely speak; but the grief isn't acute and piercing anymore.

Second, I wanted to learn about myself and grief. It's interesting and worthwhile to learn how we humans grieve and that I have all the feelings that go with loss and many of the symptoms and struggles, for example not sleeping well for months, sighing a lot, suddenly being overcome with sorrow. (Fortunately, I don't view this happening at inopportune times, because truthfully, no time is the wrong time for grief...I even cried with my mouth open at the dentist.)

Third, I wanted to share with others what I experienced and learned. What matters most to me as a writer of the human experience is that people feel free to be who they are, even the socially "unacceptable" bits. When others can sigh with relief and are more themselves, I experience a profound sense of joy. Isn't this what we all want? To live with integrity and share thoughtfully with others what we're really thinking and feeling?

Can you explain how it felt to write this book?

Good, heartbreaking, sorrowful, invigorating, and tough. I have gone through every feeling writing this book. What is perhaps also enlightening is what writing the book didn't feel like: it was NOT exhausting or depressing.

What do you most want people to know about Frans and your relationship with him?

Frans was a very vital person and so am I, so our life throbbed with purpose and energy. We were that artist-scientist power couple you see in the movies. Our love story spans 25 years and included everything you might imagine a passionate couple feels – when I saw the movie *A Star is Born* with Lady Gaga, I bawled so hard. Our writing work and our conversations had that kind of synergy, intensity, and mutual attraction. Our joint work was our music.

I also want readers to know how courageous Frans was in his last months. And in life he was a visionary. He was an exuberant, thoughtful, and hugely generous person. He has a big legacy.

Your book "powerfully demonstrates that writing can be a companion in bereavement." Tell us about writing as a therapeutic process.

As I said before, we humans are meaning-making creatures so when hard things happen in our lives, we tell a story about that. Though we often tell a pretty pathetic and victim-laden story about it first. The essence of therapeutic writing is developing past that first suffering tale to a story that is life-giving and will provide strength again. The story here could have been, I'm crushed; I cannot live without him; let me prove my love by suffering long and hard...but the story instead became, I'm crushed; I'm okay without him; our love continues; even our



PHOTO BY GLENN EILERS

conversations continue on the page and it's okay not to suffer more than naturally offers itself to my heart. In this sense I'm not a Dutch Calvinist and Frans wasn't either and wouldn't have wanted me to suffer more.

You are an Associate Professor at Athabasca University where you teach writing for personal development, among other subjects. What do you like most about teaching this type of writing?

What I like most is seeing students thrive and feel stronger for having written their stories and changed their perspectives. I believe we can reduce our own and others suffering a great deal through the work of awareness. I also think sanity is an underused word and an undervalued concept. When we can write clearly and honestly and grieve what cannot be, we are freer and healthier, and I see students doing this in the courses. I'm a guide for them, a compassionate witness with knowledge, but they are doing the work and they also reap the benefits. I don't want my students to be fans; I want them to be fans of their own rich lives.

What inspires your writing?

Life, problems, the human condition, my anxieties, and my fervent belief that we can all learn, especially when times are tough. We resist the shadows of life too much; if we embraced them sooner, we could learn faster, but that's hard. When you tell your truth on the page, it stares back at you in an undeniable way; that's one of writing's gifts. That's also why I tell my students: don't write if you don't want your life to change.

Have you ever faced writer's block? How do you deal with it?

I don't believe in writer's block. I believe that being blocked in writing means something else is going on. A block of any kind is a symptom of something else; it's not writing-related. It might be ego, or timing, or too much busyness, or not being ripe to speak yet, or fear, or bills, or lack of food, and perhaps even laziness for some, so I'd say examine what is going on, don't assume it's the blank page or some strange force where the muses are punishing you. I don't even like the concept of "writer's block"! By using those words, you may be conjuring it! We don't say

doctor's block or professor's block or career block – so why would we say writer's block?

What writing projects are you working on now?

I just finished a book chapter on Career Writing that I wrote with one of my sisters. In it we've explored what our life themes are and how the way we grew up has affected us and influenced our career choices. It was a really moving project, where we both did the writing exercises and talked about the challenges of our childhood, with an absent father and a strong, inspiring but also critical mother. I'm also co-editing a new book with Routledge called *Writing for Wellbeing* with Katrin Den Elzen, a German-born colleague who lives in Perth, Australia. She's a delight to work with and it's balm for my heart and soul to be able to co-create with others now that Frans is gone.

Do you have any advice for new writers?

As Joseph Campbells said, "Follow your Bliss" and then doors will open; this also means following your pain and preoccupations. We're compelled to make sense of life; we're embodied meaning-making creatures and what we are drawn to write is probably our own medicine. And if it's the stuff that moves us, we may eventually move the reader. I also advise new writers to read about the craft of writing – read people like William Zinsser, Brenda Ueland, Anne Lamott, Stephen King (*On Writing*), and Natalie Goldberg. Don't just read lots and lots, read about writing.

Is there anything else you'd like the Dreamers community to know?

There are two books coming out about grieving by a Canadian writer from Calgary (with roots in India). Her name is Dr. Linita Mathew and she's written beautifully about the loss of her father. I highly recommend *Life: To be given back again to whence it came: A pilgrimage through prolonged grief, confronting grief illiteracy and healing loss using the art of storytelling* and *The revelations of Eapen* both coming out with DIO Press Inc.

You can also get my book at a discount using this link!
<https://bit.ly/3osVkmB>

A wooden desk with a cup of coffee, a pen, and a card. The card has the text "Hello Writer!" in a cursive font, followed by "Get beautiful mail. Write more stuff." and "A monthly subscription service for people who want to reconnect to the joy of writing." and "www.hellowritermail.com" and "Made with love by Firefly Creative Writing".

Hello Writer!

Get beautiful mail.
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Made with love by
Firefly Creative Writing

Trying to balance a writing career with the demands of family?
So are we. **Join us.** We can help.

 **Pen Parentis**
resources for authors who are also parents.

www.penparentis.org
parenting done, write.



Post-Mortem

Fiction Story by Belinda McCauley

The plants grow unnaturally.

Obviously, there are those that say, of course they don't, they're plants; they *are* nature, so nothing they do is unnatural. Even growing to the height of skyscrapers in mere months. Even swallowing highways. Even reclaiming ramshackle towns where everyone knows everyone's business.

Jordan used to say it was their revenge. He was one of those people passionate about the planet, but only passionate enough to toss his Pepsi can into the blue bin. "Maggie," he'd tell me, "the plants are angry. We ruined the world, so now they're ruining ours. They're reclaiming the life they should've had. Against all odds, they're coming back from being dead and overcoming us."

But Jordan didn't know shit, and his passions were always fleeting. His Pepsi can might've gone in the blue bin sometimes, but he threw it into my kitchen trash whenever he stayed over at my place.

"Yeah," I'd tell him, "and recycling your can will save you from their wrath."

I'd laugh, and he'd smile uncomfortably and change the channel.

...

I don't intend to go to the empty mall. I park down the street at my old high school, thinking I'll walk its empty halls, but it's Sunday and my knees aren't up to hopping the fence anymore. So my feet carry me to the mall, even though I can already feel the blisters forming on my heels from the brand new flats I wear. I don't have another pair of shoes with me. That's what happens when you pack last minute.

I clutch my camera closer to my chest as I pick my way across the broken concrete of the parking lot. Weeds aren't the only thing invading through the cracks. The Pacific Northwest's climate makes it so that all sorts of plants have run wild here; my dad can't use his driveway anymore because of the apple tree that sprang up in the middle of it.

I resist the urge to stop and photograph the plants outside. I'm here for something else, right? Not just the vibrantly colored flowers springing up from the sidewalk.

The door to the inside opens after a bit of coaxing. The vine holding it is stubborn, holding the door in place until I tug against it once, twice. Inside, the tiles are broken up by the plants bursting between them. Planters still dot the center of the corridor like a lane divide, and I do finally photograph one of these, because plants burst through it so exquisitely.

I know where I need to go, but I don't look up at the Macy's on the far end of the mall, lodged between the echoes of a Wetzel's Pretzels and a Payless Shoes. I take my time, running my fingers over vines that creep along the walls, poking a

flower that shrinks back at my touch. I stumble on a cracked tile, and the back of my flat cuts more deeply into my heel. I almost leave. I almost decide it's not worth it. But finally I suck in a deep breath, look up at the Macy's, and accept what I need to do.

The grate over the entrance was breached ages ago, by looters and plants alike. I easily step into the store. The cash wraps are exactly where I remember them being, though the registers are long gone. Some signs still hang from the ceiling, crooked and torn. The escalator to the second level stands frozen, and coming up from the broken tile beside it stretches an arm of plant life, reaching for the sunlight flooding into the mall's corridor. There are no windows in the store.

I flip on my phone's flashlight as I pick my way up the escalator, leaping over broken steps. I think this one used to go down. A cashier definitely yelled at me and Jordan once because we dashed up, against the current. She didn't stop us, though.

At the top, I pause. To the right used to be the model beds, now just hollow platforms that have toppled over. To the left was our favorite spot: the towels and bathmats. It was secluded and soft, and Jordan and I could go there to make out during the class periods we ditched.

I weave between the shelves, using my free hand to wipe away the dust in random stripes. My fingers come away gray and disgusting. I almost wipe them on my pants when I remember I'm wearing my good pants: black slacks bought at full price from a Saks Fifth Avenue. I can't wipe on my blouse either, a black silk one I have never worn before today. A funeral outfit just for Jordan.

You always look stunning in black, Maggie.

His mom, Gina, was the one who called me. After fifteen years, she still has a soft spot for me. In high school, she always invited me over for dinner and movie nights. When I visited during college, even though Jordan and I had broken up, she would take me out for coffee. But her call was still unexpected.

I haven't returned to my hometown in almost five years, whisked away to New York City by the false promise of fame and fortune. I like to let people think my job is glamorous; I don't tell them that I never get to take pictures and life in a cubicle withers my soul.

After Gina and I hung up, I realized I understood why Jordan did it. At least, I thought I did. He visited me just two months ago, part of our more recent era of encounters wherein we try to pretend we're still in high school and abandon our adult responsibilities in favor of a few days of laughter and sex. We cuddled up in my cramped Brooklyn apartment, his vanilla skin swirling against my chocolate.

Do you ever just feel... alone? Like, no one else gets it. No one possibly could.

I brushed off his words, rolled my eyes even as I wrapped up my hair for the night. I thought he was being dramatic. I should have taken him seriously. I should have listened.

Jordan believed the plants fight to overcome our world. But he couldn't overcome it.

In the corner of what used to be the bath accessories, the carpet is torn up by weeds at the base of the built-in shelves. The wood underneath smells so strongly of mold that I sneeze. I think I see moss, but it's hard to tell, and I don't want to lean any closer. I'm pretty sure this is the corner where, sophomore year of high school, Jordan and I snuggled up after school, long before sex and truancy became a part of our relationship. He made me laugh with a joke, or maybe he just said something dumb, as he often did. I giggled until it became a guffaw, guffawed until my sides hurt and tears leaked from my eyes. When I finally finished, Jordan lifted my chin with his fingers.

I love you, Maggie.

I loved him, too.

For a while in college, I thought maybe I hadn't. I'd been too young and dumb to understand love. He'd been important, but I hadn't loved him. I didn't talk to him for years, thinking this, sure of it. And then five years ago, I made my way back to Seattle, four hours from our hometown, for our high school reunion. I hadn't thought about him much, too caught up in my own life to spare much energy for his. But when I saw him that night, he came right up to me and reached out for a hug. The pain of our breakup had vanished, our romance favorably colored by nostalgia, and as I hugged him back, a million emotions rushed into me, most distinctly conviction. I had loved him. A part of me had really loved him.

We spent the entire night talking at the reunion party, and then the entire next morning in our hotel room. The sex had been different in all the best ways, and the conversation didn't lapse when we had ten years to fill in. Just like that, we were okay, returned to a normalcy we had forgotten about.

Still, we had obligations and responsibilities we could not ignore. Though we ached for each other's bodies, Jordan could not pull me away from New York, and I could not free him from our hometown. Even as bankruptcy hit, even as the plant life grew out of control and reclaimed the landscape, we could not be moved.

I focus my lens on the moldy corner and snap a few photos. I can make a series of these photos I take today. Maybe I'll call it lovers lost. Maybe something else.

I didn't plan this. I packed my camera without thinking and left it in the trunk of my rental car during the funeral. I embraced Gina at the wake, told her I was so, so sorry. I couldn't stay there. How could I pretend to share in that grief when I didn't feel Jordan there?

Now I'm staring at the place he first told me he loved me, backing away from it, every footstep an echo of my life fifteen years ago.

Echoes. Another possible title. Everything in this Macy's, in this entire mall, is an echo. Nothing here is quite right. The plants are natural but unnatural. The town flails, drowns, reverts to its roots. The people and buildings are swallowed by the greenery, because they do not belong here.

I do not belong here.

I abandon the corner, meandering through the empty aisles, shining my phone light on the shelves. I trip over a thick root that crosses the aisle at an angle, pulsing with life and disappearing under the dilapidated shelves on either side of me. I back out of the aisle to trace the root. On the right, it doesn't emerge, but on the left, it continues into the dark, beyond my sight.

I double check my camera is secure and follow the root.

I didn't mean to bring the camera, but I'm glad I did. It gave me an excuse to come here, to leave the wake once I noticed Jordan's wife across the room, eyeing me strangely. Maybe she recognized me from an old photo. Jordan never told her much about me, but she must have known something. She must have known that first love is hard to outgrow.

I've thought about you for ten years.

Jordan told me he was married shortly after the reunion. He even admitted to stowing his wedding band in his pocket the moment he'd spotted me. His confession didn't surprise me; Jordan was never the loyal type, not to anyone else. Our carnal magnetism could not be helped. In high school, I told myself that was how love worked. Now I know it's only how our love works.

In some sort of twisted way, I think Jordan and I were meant for each other. We grew together, rooted in the same soil of our hometown, and we wrapped around each other until it was impossible to distinguish which thoughts were mine and which were his. It was only a matter of time before we twisted too far, before we strangled each other.

I couldn't look his wife in the eyes. I don't even know her name. If she'd reached out to shake my hand, to ask my name or ask if I'm Jordan's old friend Maggie, I would have burst out sobbing right there. No, it's better that I'm here, where I can grieve in the hollow, dark remnants of my old life with Jordan alone. Where I don't have to worry who will get hurt when I try to say that I miss him, too, because I loved him in a way I hardly understand. I don't get to claim that open grief, surrounded by loving friends and family.

Entitlement. Another title.

I'm yours. I've always been only yours.

The pulsing root twists around the elevator shaft sitting in the middle of the second floor. It might be a trick of the eyes, but I swear the darkness is less dense here. I think I even see a stream of light beyond that. The root gets thicker, too, as thick as my bicep now.

I have nothing to say to Jordan's wife. What we had was separate from her, something that could not be helped. I never wanted to take him away from her.

But apparently I did.

Junior year of high school, I cried next to Jordan's hospital bed. Bandages covered his wrists, the gauze stained with blood. I would trace his scars again and again, with eyes, fingers, lips. I tried to understand why he did it, but I never could. I think Jordan knew that.

This last time, he didn't slice his veins along those scars. He didn't try to hang himself in the closet with a necktie like he did while I was at college, something Gina told me over coffee. No, this time he overdosed on sleeping pills. His most peaceful attempt, and the one that finally worked.

I stop walking. This used to be the juniors' department. We came here before senior prom, pulling every other dress off the rack and making Jordan watch as I tried them all on. Though I'm curious about the weak light not far away now and the roots snaking beneath my feet multiply, I can't resist this spot. I take slow, precise steps around the toppled clothing racks. I take photos here and there, and then, looking up, I realize the light is likely from a hole in the roof over the dressing rooms just beyond this department.

I snap a photo of a lone hanger, already half-distracted. The lone hanger dangles over the roots beneath it. Just hanging on. Not a great title, but it's what Jordan did for a long time.

During the prom dress shopping, I eventually picked a strappy red number that hugged my youthful curves. I knew it was the one the moment I put it on, so I didn't let Jordan see it. I wanted his eyes to pop out of his skull the moment he saw me in it, hair done up, nails manicured, lips painted a startling scarlet to match the dress.

You're gorgeous. I can't believe how beautiful you are.

We had sex in the dressing room after, on top of the pile of discarded dresses. It was the middle of the day, maybe a Wednesday, and he clamped a hand over my mouth so that I wouldn't moan too loudly. (Suppressed bliss, another title.) Can I find that exact dressing room?

The roots get thicker the closer I get to the dim light. They fuse together, doubling in size, twisting around each other to build to something larger than they can be separate and apart. The light grows stronger, and I can see the hole in the ceiling. The sun illuminates something, and I think to myself, I must not be seeing it right.

The last thing I said to Jordan was at the end of his final visit. His bag was packed, his arms around me as we stood in my kitchen. His Lyft waited downstairs, ready to take him away from me again.

Jordan kissed my forehead, my lips. *You know I love you.*

It was something we just said to each other. It rolled off the tongue easily. Against the odds, we still wound around each other, building ourselves into something greater. We had split, and then returned to ourselves. What else can you call that need, that thirst for another person's arms around you?

"I love you, too," I replied. "I'll see you in a couple of months."

It would have been next weekend. I texted Jordan different flights that would work for me to meet him at the airport the day before Gina called me. He never replied. Now I know why.

At least he knew that I loved him, in that strange, strangling way we loved each other. I can live without him, but part of me, deep inside, will always mourn for him. He is dead, and for some reason he loved me. He loved me for damn near twenty years.

I approach the door in front of the beam of light. This is the one. This is a place where Jordan and I laughed and loved as I twirled before him in silly dresses. This is a place where we *lived*.

I nudge open the door and gasp. Before me towers the impossible: a tree. It's taller than me, with leaves sticking up through the hole in the ceiling and branches splayed along the back wall. Though this mall has been abandoned just a few years, this tree stands with the solidity of an ancient redwood. Its trunk is as wide as my hips, and the roots around its base are as thick as my leg, pulsing like veins carrying life back to the tree, scavenging nutrients from somewhere deep in the store.

The tree basks in the light pouring down on it. One day, its trunk will be too wide for this dressing room. It will rip through the walls, forged from its dead brethren, and consume them. Their deaths will feed its life, just as this shell of a mall stabilizes its roots.

At the funeral, I stared down at Jordan's body in the open casket. I tried not to take too much time, tried not to seem like I was as affected by his death as I am. His eyes were closed, but I longed to see their kind green staring down at me. His dark hair was neatly combed, and I had to stop myself from running my fingers through it. His lips were shut, pale, but I remembered perfectly the first time they had pressed to mine, and the last. He wore a suit, not a very nice one, but nicer than anything I'd ever seen him in. The wrinkles between his eyebrows had been smoothed away, like years of stress washed clean. Like he was shiny and new, at last.

Post-mortem, I decide. After death.

I plant my feet among the roots, careful not to step on them. I lift my camera and take dozens of photos, capturing every trick of the light, every dust mote, every impossible root and leaf that shines in the light. Every smile that once existed here, every laugh, every affectionate whisper.

This place should be dead. It should be an echo, a place of lost lovers and livelihoods. I crouch down, finally daring to run my fingers along the roots like I ran them along Jordan's scars and veins. I can feel the tree breathe beneath my touch, so very alive.

I sigh with the tree, releasing the weight of Jordan's death on my heart. The tears sprout from my eyes before I can stop them, blazing trails down my cheeks, dripping onto the tangled roots beneath. Feeding this new life.

Maggie, the plants are angry. We ruined the world, so now they're ruining ours. They're reclaiming the life they should've had. Against all odds, they're coming back from the dead and overcoming us.

He is trying to tell me that he was right.

I spare one last look for the tree, for Jordan, before I take my things and leave.

Snow Ducks

Fiction by Nicholas Schmid

"It really is a bit late for this," Leonard muttered, like the previous times, unsure if he wanted his wife to hear him.

"Late?" replied Jo from where she sat in the bow of the canoe. "It's barely sunrise."

Leonard squinted at the sky. "What sunrise? All I see are clouds."

Jo brought her paddle down in a stroke harder than necessary to crack the thin layer of ice. "It rose," was all she said as she pulled her paddle through the water.

Watching the ice splinter, Leonard breathed deeply to stop his patience from shattering as well. His breath pluming in the early morning like frigid smoke, he looked around the lake as a distraction. The late November grey hung in curtains all around them. On the clouds, on the branches of the barren trees, even on the ice yet to be covered in snow. And of course, greyest of all, on Leonard's mood.

They both knew it was too late for this. The only difference was that he had the courage to admit it. It was too late in many ways, some that could be helped, others that Leonard preferred to avoid thinking about. Watching the miniature icebergs float by their canoe's passage, Leonard shook his head, smothered in his doubled-up hats. Or at least he did his best, the heavy scarf Jo had knitted him last month restricted most movement. It was a rich navy blue that Jo knew was his favourite colour, but he had not expected to have to wear it so soon.

"I didn't mean late in the morning," he said.

"I know what you meant," she said, in between strokes. They were paddling faster now, and the canoe was slicing through the ice more easily. When they had woken earlier in the morning—well, still in the night really as Leonard had pointed out—the first ice of the year had greeted them, stretching out from their campsite as far as they could see in the near-dawn light.

Now that morning was making its best attempt in the grey, Leonard could see that the ice coated the entire lake. Glancing back, the water was an inky ribbon to mark the swath their canoe's passage had cut through the ice.

"So, where are they?" asked Leonard, in part to Jo, in part to the lake.

"Who?"

Leonard watched an ice chunk larger than usual float past, one of the simpler explanations for why they were too late. He poked at the ice with his paddle, and the motion caused the canoe to teeter. Leonard shot a hand towards the gunwale to steady himself. Jo's back just stiffened.

"You know who," answered Leonard once the rocking had stopped, "The whole reason we are out here."

"The snow ducks will be in the middle of the lake," said Jo, "If, as you mentioned, that is why we are out here."

Leonard ignored the second part. "Why in the middle of the lake?" He asked the same question every year.

Jo shrugged. "I'm not sure. They might not be. The ice might change things. We might have better luck once the sun melts the ice this afternoon."

Leonard glanced up at the sky. He did not ask Jo where the sun was, nor did he question why they had gotten up so early if they needed to wait for the ice to melt.

Instead, he offered, "Should we pause for some hot coco?" His bushy grey eyebrows waggled about at the prospect.

He could hear the smile in Jo's voice. "You have the thermos close to you?"

Leonard squirmed his toes in his boots where the thermos was resting on top, keeping them warm. "I heated it over the fire before we left," he said with a nod. Then he realized Jo would not have seen the motion. "Yes, it's right at my feet," he added.

Jo took her paddle out of the water and slid it under her seat. With an agility that Leonard still admired after all these years, she swivelled in her seat and brought her legs around until she faced him. "The snow ducks can wait, I suppose," she said with a soft smile.

Leonard reached for the thermos, causing the canoe to wobble far more than Jo had with her minor gymnastics a moment ago. He unscrewed the lid, making sure his face was directly above the opening so that the warm steam washed over his face. He poured them two cups, spilling a bit on one so he kept that one for himself, and handed Jo the other.

Watching Jo as she sipped, Leonard felt his frown melt into a smile. He looked at the wrinkles around her green eyes crinkle deeper as she smiled back. Her own scarf was a red that matched her hat and their canoe, and a few errant locks of grey hair escaped from where she had covered them when they set out. As she smiled, the lines on her face sparkled with a grace that younger women could never emulate, even with the fanciest jewellery. As his grin widened, Leonard felt the deep pockets fold under his eyes even further, conscious that after all the sleepless nights recently, the creases on his face would look anything but elegant.

They sat there for a moment, just sitting and listening to the quiet. Drinking the coco and each other's company. Realizing his cup was close to empty, Leonard sighed and reached into his coat pocket. When he withdrew his hand, there was a small white pill nestled in the palm of his glove. He tossed the pill in his mouth and took the last draught of his coco.

"How are you?" asked Jo, "Warm enough?"

Rubbing at his doubled-up hats, Leonard shrugged. "So far, so good." He wanted to change the subject. Picking up his paddle, he asked, "Shall we?"

The sun continued to hide as the morning unfolded. Somehow, Leonard felt that the ice was getting thicker. They had to paddle without pause to maintain a speed that would cleave through the ice. Every time he paused to catch his breath, he could see Jo's back stiffen. It might have been that she did not want to suffer any more delays. It might have been that any break would let the

cold seep in. It might have just been Leonard. In case it was him, Leonard never asked for a rest. He did not want to worry her.

He just wanted to find the snow ducks.

"They must be close by now," Leonard said, careful to time his statement between breaths.

"Who?"

"The snow ducks, of course."

Jo laughed and it echoed out from the canoe across the lake, bouncing around the hills on the far shore. "I don't think 'of course' can ever be used in a sentence about snow ducks."

"Why's that?"

"You should never take the snow ducks for granted."

"Who said I was taking them for granted?" Leonard was oversteering to grab a stealthy break from paddling. He wondered if his wife noticed. Probably.

Jo shook her head. It seemed Leonard was safe resting for the moment. "You know why we always come looking for the snow ducks?" She asked the same question every year.

"You mean why you always drag me out here, November after November?"

Jo ignored him. She could tell when Leonard was complaining and when he just felt like complaining. She probably knew the difference better than Leonard, actually. "My grandmother used to bring me out to try and spot the snow ducks. She said their migration was the most special time of the year. We would all gather hoping to catch a glimpse." His wife's voice was far off, and she had stopped paddling, watching the ice float past like memories. Leonard took his paddle out of the water as well and placed it across the canoe. He leaned forward, sucking air as silently as he could.

"And did you ever see them?" Leonard asked after a moment, even though he already knew the answer.

Jo shook her head. "No, they are very rare. Even the luckiest sometimes never see a snow duck."

Well, Leonard could certainly testify to that. He and his wife had yet to see a feather. Each November for what now felt like an impossibly long time, he and Jo had come up to this lake, hoping to see the snow ducks pass by on their migration. Sometimes they came up with others; their parents when they were still around and able, their friends before they had had kids, their kids when they were still young, their friends after their kids had grown up. But more often, it was just Jo and Leonard.

"Maybe luck will be with us today, at last," Leonard said.

"We are due for a bit of that, aren't we?"

Leonard did not respond. Sometimes, replies just get in the way. Especially if you've known a person for most of your life. Especially if that person knows what you would say anyway. Especially if that person knows that you know they already know your response.

A breath of wind swept across the lake, whistling across the icy surface on its way to play with the hairlocks falling out of Jo's hat. Leonard shuffled his toes about so that more of

them were covered by the warm thermos. It was a good thing Jo was still facing forward and did not see him shiver. They sat there for a while longer, each accompanied by their own thoughts even though those thoughts were probably the same. After a moment, once Leonard felt Jo was more waiting for him than waiting with him, he readied himself. "Shall we?"

...

"So, if you never saw the snow ducks, why did you and your grandmother keep coming back?"

"Why do we keep coming back?" Jo countered.

Leonard realized he did not have an answer. He would have thought Jo would know. Was this not her passion, after all? "Because you want to?"

"I want to? I?"

"We! We!" Leonard hastily corrected himself. Without fail, Leonard always managed to say something unhelpful at least once each trip.

Jo did not respond, and Leonard knew she was savouring his discomfort. Which meant she was not really mad of course. So Leonard smiled to himself and waited, counting the little whirlpools from Jo's strokes as she counted their many reasons for being out here in the canoe. Leonard might have counted too, but he felt that by now, all the reasons just melted into one.

"Each year that you don't see them," resumed Jo, "Means you have to come back again the next year."

"You junky," snorted Leonard.

"It isn't the failure to see them that brings you back," said Jo. "It's not a failure to miss the snow ducks at all. It's a failure to miss the chance to see them. That's why we keep coming back."

"And what happens if we finally see them? Do we not come back anymore?" Leonard trailed off at the second question, unsure if he really wanted an answer.

Jo laughed. It was a sharp and brittle laugh, and Leonard wondered if it would crack the way the ice did under their canoe. This was Jo's laugh when she did not know the answer. Or knew the answer, but did not like it.

Leonard paused for a moment and pressed a hand to his coat pocket, feeling those little white pills. Those little white answers that Jo knew and did not like. But maybe those pills were also the answers as to why they had come out this year, and all the years previous.

...

"They say the only thing more beautiful than snow ducks is their migration."

"Who says that?" asked Leonard.

"They do," said Jo, momentarily taking her hand off the paddle to wave it around for emphasis.

"Oh," said Leonard. He was not quite sure what Jo meant, but he had an idea. Sometimes ideas were enough. Better than being told even. If you are told something, then you cannot get rid of it, but if you have an idea, well, that is more in your control. Just look at Leonard's situation—he had been told stuff, stuff he could not change no matter how much he might want.

But he had ideas about what he could do about that stuff, ideas harnessed by hope, not knowledge. Just look at where they were now. Cutting through November's first ice in a canoe.

"What is it that is so beautiful about their migration?" asked Leonard.

"Don't limit it to just one thing," said Jo. Her laugh was coy and chiding, the laugh she might have used when she saw Leonard spoiling their grandkids, but was enjoying it too much to try and stop it.

"I'm not, I'm not. I'm just asking about one beautiful part at a time."

"Who says you can divide them so easily?"

Leonard could hear the smile in the silence drifting back from the bow. "Alright, seriously, tell me about the migration," he said.

Jo straightened a kink in her back, and then took another stroke. "Unlike other birds," said Jo at last, "The snow ducks don't know where they are going."

"They don't?" said Leonard. Jo had never told him that before. And he thought that in all their years questing after the snow ducks, he would have known everything by now. "Never?"

"Well, I suppose we don't really know," shrugged Jo, "Just what my grandmother said. She said it just seemed to be the case, from watching them all those years."

"Watching them all those years? I thought she never saw them either?"

"My grandmother's point exactly."

The ice was melting. Leonard was not sure when the turn had actually happened, but he seemed to sense that it was now getting warmer rather than colder. Or maybe he was just getting hot. He removed one of his hats to decide.

"Too warm?" asked Jo.

"I'm fine," grouched Leonard.

"Too cold?"

"I said I am fine," Leonard bit the words off a lot more sharply than he had intended. They were both quiet for a moment, just listening to the bubbles murmur past as they paddled. Damn it, Leonard had done it again. He took a frustrated stroke and splashed icy water over his pantleg. As the cold leeched down his calf, Leonard coughed a little. On the cold, and on his frustration. He almost stopped himself from saying it. Almost.

"I wish you would stop examining me."

Just from Jo's next stroke, Leonard could tell he should have kept quiet.

"And why is that?" Jo said, her voice so neutral it was anything but.

"I spend enough time with doctors. Is it too much to ask to spend a little time with you?"

Jo was silent for a moment, and Leonard knew she was caught between being mad at him, and mad on his behalf. "Excuse my concern," was all she said.

Leonard might have said more, but something in Jo's voice kept him from speaking. There was something in her voice that silenced him more definitely than if she had screamed.

It was not her words. It was not her tone either. Something in the way Jo spoke sounded small. Small, out here in the middle of the lake. Small, when faced with what awaited them back home. His annoyance dissipating faster than it had surged up, Leonard cursed himself for opening this conversation. "Sorry, I'm just tired of it all," he said.

"So am I," sighed Jo. "So am I. Tiredness is our canoe's third passenger. It keeps us paddling." Jo tried to laugh.

Those words fell heavy on Leonard. Almost as heavy as when he had first gotten the news. Maybe he had been wrong. Maybe he was not the courageous one because he admitted their situation. Maybe Jo was the brave one for refusing it.

"Let's just find the snow ducks," said Leonard. He dipped his paddle into the lake, and as he broke the surface, he felt the tension break as well.

This time Jo did laugh. The laughter seemed to coat everything it touched; the melting ice, the black water, most of all Leonard himself. Of her many laughs, this was Leonard's favourite. "I really would like to see them," she said, and this year, more than any year before, Leonard wanted to just as much. Afterall, he might not get another chance.

The afternoon found them, but they did not find the snow ducks. Even the sun began to peek through. The clouds would treat at one moment and let through a beam of sunlight, and then the next decide they would rather snow. The flurries never lasted much longer than a quarter hour, and with the ice now mostly gone, the flakes fell to dissolve directly into the dark water.

The time was fast approaching when they would have to turn around if they hoped to get back to their campsite before nightfall. But still they kept paddling, determined not to let the inevitable be the inevitable.

Jo looked like she was about to say something. For one of the first times that day, she did not immediately follow her stroke with another.

"Keep going," hissed Leonard before she could speak.

It was a good thing the ice had melted and cleared their path. They were going so fast it was hardly in the straight line they had taken most of the day. After a while, Leonard knew the push had to come to an end. Breath coming in gasps, he pulled his paddle from the water. Jo did the same, and she twisted around to look at him. She did not say anything, just watched him with those green eyes as their canoe glided forward a final stretch.

At last, they came to a stop. All around them, the snow danced its way down to the lake.

The bigger flakes caught the rays of sunlight, glowing as they settled on the water like stars in the night sky. Leonard took off his second hat, letting the snow cool him as flakes fell on the skin on the top of his head, freshly shaven from his latest hospital visit.

"Next year," Jo whispered, letting the hope hang in the air with the snow.

The snow ducks were not there. But Jo was. And Leonard realized that that was enough.

That was always enough.

They sat there in the falling snow and sunshine, sitting together, just a pair of snow ducks in the middle of the lake.

Bird Without a Song

Autofiction by Jaclyn Kar Yin McLachlan

I recently converted some old VHS footage to digital files and, for the first time in decades, watched me and Hana lip-sync to Sinéad O'Connor's "Nothing Compares 2 U." We were tweens unleashed at Canada's Wonderland, spending our allowance on Super Star Live, a karaoke kiosk that recorded video of you playing instruments and singing your chosen song.

It was assumed and unquestioned that Hana would be the lead singer, and I was told to be the drummer. Instruments were arranged on stage, a tall microphone in the centre blocking the drum kit in the back. In the video, Hana is dancing around, crooning the opening line to the song and I'm visible only in the cracks between her arms and her body, beneath her armpits as she cups the mic, drumsticks raised, eagerly anticipating the chorus. I pause the video here, capturing our friendship in a single frame.

We first met in the early hours of high school. Her extended hand was a lifeline, an offer of resuscitation. I reached out, and in the few seconds that we shook hands, I felt her dive into me and poke around and pull out the lonely, pull out the fear, pull out the sad. Because of her, I snapped into myself and breathed air into a body that I remembered.

We followed the same recipe: Hana cooked up a scheme and I ate it all. In the beginning, it was harmless mischief like climbing trees and spying on people below. Then it became setting off fireworks and starting small fires on the school's grounds.

We got driver's licenses, and I found myself an accomplice to her unnerving speed. "We're maniac drivers!" she would yell, laughing hysterically as we bombed down the highway, lifting her foot from the gas only after passing the point where we would certainly die in a crash, like a valve releasing. She had armed herself with a few critical connectors from Home Hardware and the working knowledge of how to hotwire a car, "just in case."

Sometimes I created the drama. Once, at a McDonalds with Hana, I popped out my retainer to eat my burger and forgot to retrieve it from my tray before dumping the contents into the trash. Two steps outside of the restaurant, my tongue cased my naked teeth, and I went pale. My world was not one where retainers were replaced. I tearfully stammered my misfortune to her, who whirled around and stalked inside the establishment, whereupon we learned that every trash bag in the restaurant had just been thrown into the dumpster out back. Grimly, she rolled up her sleeves. Seconds later, we were surfing oily bags of garbage in a monstrous container. Luckily, the bags were see-through. I thought Hana was pulling my leg when she said, "There's your Big Mac wrapper snuggled up to both my Quarter Pounders," but she was right. After rooting around in the bag, she held up my retainer in triumph, and I looked at her like a goddess.

Her mother's death was an invisible shroud. It had happened suddenly when Hana was a child, although the exact circumstances wouldn't be revealed until she turned eighteen. This little girl had learned to grieve in the spaces between what she knew, which was very little, and to let music block out the ticking of the clock that sounded louder as she grew older. She had been gifted with effortless talent and perfect pitch, and as long as she followed the notes, she stayed out of trouble.

I knew her inclinations were unusual. I had never met anyone who needed to feel things as desperately and urgently, and my reciprocation was implicit unconditionality. Each of these schemes revealed a different childlike vulnerability in her that I would die to protect. After every adventure, she would whip out "The Nutbar Book," a tiny chapbook she had stapled together in the early days, and feverishly write down what we had done. As if I would ever forget. Although what I remember most all these years later is her burning need to record us. To write down these truths. Testament that they happened, but far more importantly that my being part of it meant she too had existed.

By our final year, Hana was just coasting along the razor's edge, hoping not to cut herself. Hana's eighteenth birthday loomed, but choosing to spend it at a cabin with our friends, she kicked the peanut down the road a little longer.

When she returned to school after the Christmas holidays, she was unhinged. She'd learned that her mother had struggled with bipolar disorder for decades — which fit some of the strange puzzle pieces of Hana's youth into place — and been found at the bottom of the plunge pool at Niagara Falls that day she didn't come home. As much as I tried to help her, I was woefully unequipped to triage the deep lacerations that had opened in my friend. She pulled away from me.

With a few weeks left in the school year, she surfaced.

"It's almost certain that I have it too," she said. "I know what the disease will do to me, and I don't see how my fate will be any different than my mother's."

Her eyes brimmed, she who never cried. "My brain's going to become like Swiss cheese. I won't remember us."

"Yes, you will," I whispered. "I'll be your memory."

I flew around her, helping her study for finals, distracting her. But the solid ground that we had taken for granted had shifted, and she and I were never on equal footing thereafter.

Hana's personal pied piper enchanted her just enough to keep her out of harm's way, luring her through university to a degree in music composition, cum laude. Reluctant to let go of their superstar, the university awarded her a fellowship in the form of a one-year research placement.

Her eyes brimmed, she who never cried. "My brain's going to become like Swiss cheese. I won't remember us."

"Yes, you will," I whispered. "I'll be your memory."



Taking liberties, Hana chose to spend the year Down Under learning the didgeridoo. I grinned at her funny, newsy emails from the windowless corner of my graduate school office, living vicariously through her as she drank and surfed her way across the country. Nine months in, her emails became sporadic, nonsensical in some places. She was convinced that she was in danger, that someone was trying to kill her. She only had a couple months left and was trying to ride it out, but the paranoia was oppressive. She changed apartments to shake off the ominousness, moving locations four times in a month, and then I got a last email from Australia saying she was coming home. And then she went dark.

Weeks later, I received a cryptic note. Between the lines, I understood that there had been a problem with her return to Canada, that the police had been involved, and she had been in a psychiatric ward ever since. But not to worry, because she had plans to spring the joint.

She found an apartment in the city, and rented a small

rehearsal space at a local college, where she taught music lessons and wrote scores for community orchestras. The story of her Australia to Canada leg was slippery, but I pieced together that she had been hearing voices, one that told her to destroy a Starbucks booth in the arrivals area of the airport and the other to steal a car, so she did both. She was arrested, diagnosed with bipolar disorder, and then sent to a psych ward for electroconvulsive therapy. The airport incident was her first psychotic episode, but it could also be her last, she informed me cheerily, as the doctors had told her that psychosis was treatable.

We mapped an ambitious list of career goals, but she was hampered at the gate. She would land an esteemed position teaching music, which would inevitably stress her out, throw her system out of whack, and cause an episode. Sometimes, unable to shake the numbing dullness and flattened emotion brought on by her medications, she would attempt to manage the disease on her own and stop taking her meds. In either case, she would end up in a psych ward. Months

would pass while she received treatment and recovered, and then start the cycle again. Every reboot set her back emotionally, financially, and psychologically, and distanced her further from her peers. Once unsinkable, she weathered hits constantly when social media showed her friends pairing off, getting promotions, buying houses, tanning on beaches in Spain.

I learned to manage the eerie radio silence that her episodes brought with them. With surgeon-like precision, I spliced together the circumstances of her episodes to create a rubric for our expectations; pushed to the brink by stress and/or chemistry, she would lose control over her thoughts and actions, the melody in her head became a deafening polyphonic fugue, and the only way to release it was to act out extreme and illegal scenarios. After every episode, her silence lasted a little longer, a creeping pattern that watched me from the dark. We were charged by a similar current, the fear of losing her mind buzzing at her and the fear of losing her pulsing through me.

Attempting to outrun the disease, Hana hopscotched around the country and communed with nature but still landed in treatment centres. I visited her at many of them. When she had telephone privileges, she called me often, and I became acquainted with her daily appointments and medications. I never knew when she would be discharged. The calls stopped abruptly and time slowed down.

Once, when she was admitted to a mental health centre in Toronto, I brought her a hot lemon drink from Chinatown. She had never tasted anything more delicious. I got a frantic call from her the next morning, asking for more of it, saying that it was an elixir that would fix her. I brought it to her each day for the next three days, and on the fourth day, unprompted by her call, I showed up with the drink in hand. She was gone, discharged the evening before. I heard weeks later that she had been roaming the streets for days, homeless, so now it's reflexive; when she disappears, I look into the face of each person asking for change or sleeping on the sidewalk to see if it's her.

I promised that I would be her memory, but who do you remember to when that person is not here? I would recycle our stories to her, over and over again, and sometimes she would learn them and remember them at the same time.

Forty marked a new decade for both of us, a threshold for decisions that we never looked back on. I was on fire and moving upward, and Hana was razing her world and charring the earth behind her. Having endured years of lies, ranging from little white ones to whoppers, embarrassing public outbursts, petty crimes, and the odd court trial, those in her inner circle had pulled away one by one. Any who remained were burned even worse. For some reason I was immune, until one day when I wasn't.

We had met for lunch, and it was one of those visits that reminded me of my old best friend; she was funny, engaging, charming with the waitstaff. Those were the precious moments that I lived for because they reminded me of what used to be real. So positive was our hangout, and so intense my nostalgia, that I agreed to meet her again after work for dinner.

I could tell something had sharpened when we rejoined. She

demanded that we shop before dinner and stomped into a nearby gift emporium. By the time I reached her, numerous items were piled onto the counter, things like snow globes and windchimes, overpriced memorabilia that she didn't need. As the charges approached \$500, money that I knew she didn't have, I put my foot down. Suddenly, where my friend stood was a demon spitting the most hateful things I had ever heard: that I was the most despicable person she knew, the biggest fucking loser, and the best thing I could do for humanity was to rot in hell. In shock, I ran out of the store and all the way home.

Months passed. The ice melted, and we continued on. Similar outbursts arose and each time I contemplated ending our friendship but forgave her even quicker. She was influenced by a mental illness and battling the cumulative hostility and bitterness that comes from living a life in chains while everyone else runs free. I learned that the sooner we could get past the bad times, the more space it created for good times to happen. And they did. My precious glimpses through the keyhole at how we used to be still occurred, although the aperture was shrinking and pulling farther away.

Hana rode through the 2020 pandemic as gracefully as she could, but by July she was showing signs of stress. The restrictions were grinding her down and she worried that she might slip, her code for having an episode. We spent time outside, near nature, and I bought her food, as I often did to relieve the pressure on her bank account, but she was noticeably worse by August.

A week later, in early September, she called me from her apartment. The cops were at her door, but she would be damned if they took her alive. I tried to cool her down. The police identified themselves and calmly asked her to open the door, saying she had done nothing wrong, but they had received a worried call and wanted to confirm she was okay.

"Over my dead body!" my friend screamed and then asked me what she should do and didn't listen to my answer. And so it went with them ordering her to come out and Hana shouting obscenities while I tried to be heard through the line of a phone that had long been forgotten. And then as both Hana and the police reached a fever pitch, a thunderous bang sounded and the line went dead.

I replayed the call in my head, haunting myself on a loop, but clinging to the belief that I still felt the current running between us, that she was still with me on this earth. A single photo that she posted to her Instagram account defibrillated my heart into beating again. It was the façade of a mental health centre I knew well.

In the music video, Hana leans into the second verse, singing about the loneliness of a songless bird, and I nod along to the beat, but also because it's true. The music in my life is missing.

We are not so different now. Hana is still centre stage, and I'm visible only in the cracks beside her, my drumsticks raised, eagerly anticipating the chorus. It's been eight hours and 192 days since she took her love away, but I will be right here when she comes back.

Glycerine

Fiction by Pauline Shen

"They do this stuff to cover their ass," was the first thing you whispered to me after the teacher ushered you in to the assembly. "It's called P.R." The projector cast the words, *Be Rail Smart*, onto the gym wall. CN Rail. They were doing school visits. That was your first day in our class. "Call me Kat," you said.

"I'm Milly," I replied. From that day, we hung out at recess. We painted our nails wacky colours and yakked about wicked new bands. Your hair entwined with mine as we shared your headphones—volume cranked. Bush was your favourite. When "Glycerine" came on, you'd play it twice. We both knew the words by heart.

"Gavin's hot," you'd sigh.

I remember the first time I slept over at your house on the edge of town. Your parents set up the camper for us in the yard. When we finally lolled off to sleep after midnight, a thundering clatter jolted me from my dream. "It's just a freight train," you bellowed and rolled back into slumber. Your property touched the tracks—you were used to the roar.

In eighth grade, we pushed our desks together. We wove friendship bracelets and passed notes. Sometimes, after school, we'd linger in the conservation area and gawk at high school seniors necking in the parking lot. Then we'd laugh and run all the way to your house.

One of those times, a heavy pang pulsed in my guts as we clopped along the trail. "Let's take a shortcut," you said while squeezing my elbow and pointing out the crimson blot on the seat of my pants. Aunt Flow was still new to me. We pushed our way up the ravine and followed the rail tracks straight to your place. There, you wasted no time in grabbing a pad and change of clothes. "Cold water," you said, "will take out the blood." We dumped my stuff in a bucket and let it soak while we watched MTV. It worked. The stain was gone.

We hung out so much that, by the time we started high school, our cycles synchronized. "That's our blood bond," you joshed. I coached you in solving for x , and you showed me how to sew a purse from an old pair of jeans. As high school went on, though, we sat together less often.

By eleventh grade, we weren't in any classes together at all. "Different kinds of smart," you'd called it. My evenings filled with books. Yours filled with boys. I'd see you on weekends. Maybe.

...

They say if you burn a note, our departed will get the message. It's supposed to be spiritual. I've never tried it before, but there's a first for everything. I wanted to tell you these things. I want to tell you I'm sorry.

...

"Not *him!*" you thundered when I told you Niall asked me to junior prom. He was hot. You were cold.

"She can't come to the phone," your mom answered after

countless callbacks. Did I hear sobbing in the background?

Niall was so polite at the door with my parents. He said things like, "good evening," and cradled my hand to slip a pink rose corsage around my wrist. He caressed my hair when I leaned-in to clip his boutonniere. We smiled for pictures. He smelled amazing.

I thought you were avoiding me. "She wears too much makeup," he responded when I said I couldn't find you at the dance. Maybe you were running late, then. *Did he just say "rife?"* Oh! How Niall's fingertips tickled my shoulders. How his thumb traced my jaw to meet my lips. "You don't really wanna stay here," he whispered.

It took until now for me to grasp the reason you were pissed. It's the same reason why you knew where to find us that night. I heard your pickup engine barreling down the conservation area's lane. I remember the way you blasted the horn and projected your high beams right into Niall's windshield, lighting up his grubby paws on my bare chest. You caught us halfway there.

"Loser!" you yelled. Niall's reply left spit on your face. *Wait, did he just call me a name?* I felt your grip tighten around my elbow as you hoisted me out of his car.

"It's his M.O." you blurted as your tires rolled into my driveway. I huffed and slammed the door in your face.

...

Niall never talked to me again; I saw that as a tragedy. I never talked to you again; that was the real one. Age brings wisdom. I think it's a different kind of smart. It's what you, my dear friend, would say if you were here.

...

"Glycerine" came on the radio while I was heading home for Thanksgiving as a university student. Just then, I noticed something. That song has no drums and no bass. There's one voice with no backup. Solo. Strange how the absence of a thing made me consider it more. Silence is a reminder of what's missing. Of what's been left behind. Or what's been taken away. I cranked the volume and sang along like we used to do. Together. By the last verse, I'd resolved to give you a call.

It was too late. News of your accident was all around town. How you skid out of the way of a blaring locomotive. How there were two sets of tracks; two trains. The first train was too loud to hear the second. You didn't see it coming, they said. No one could pull you out in time.

...

Our last year of high school, you'd flash me a peace sign from the smoking pit while taking a long drag. I'd flip you the bird with one hand as I cradled textbooks with the other. You'd toss your head back, mouth wide, letting smoke billow up toward the boundless sky.

Become an Island

Poem by Abiola Regan

My
blue
ocean
sadness.
Kept from
you, hidden
from view. So
I keep docking at
the same port of hurt.
Surprised by the power
of each wave, tears readily
spring forth. Maybe it's time to
become an island. Construct some
walls, be impenetrable. Bloodlines do
not grant you the right to admission. Tap
at the entry, but do not knock my self-worth.
Empty words spoken. Emptier promises broken.
Little things, tiny things, are now the anchor of things.
Rocking then capsizing, pushed out to sea. Adrift from the
center of my own story. Treading water, at best. Marooned, at
worst. Hoping to chart a smoother course, but you give me nothing,
not a lifeboat in sight. You remain remote, leaving me unmoored, isolated.
Willing me
to wash
ashore,
distant.
But I am trying to come home, trying to remain
present. Trying to become something stronger.
Maybe what I should become is that island.
Hidden on maps. Make it unreachable,
except by way of personal invitation.
Sorry, yours was lost in the mail.



On My Doorstep

Autofiction by Laura Murray

There are letters from Thom in the mailbox. I smile. *Of course there would be letters from him, I've been thinking about him all day.* I set them aside to sip once I've taken Ribby for a walk.

It's December first, but the temperature's mild and there's no snow on the ground. The sumacs provide a brilliant flash of red amidst brown leaves and grey tree trunks; the only colour that hasn't been shed or peeled away. Looking up I notice empty nests and hives in the branches. The air smells sweet and musky, like rotten apples and river muck. This shift into winter marks a time of introspection and my inner bear's delighted.

As I reunite with Thom, I find myself thinking: *this is what I look like on the outside, on the inside I'm full of hope and joy.* When I was reuniting with Beth, I found myself thinking: *this is what I look like on the outside, on the inside I'm full of grief and uncertainty.* I'm afraid to expose any of it; overly rehearsed at off staging emotion.

Ribby and I follow our hunger back home. I settle in with Thom's letters. They haven't been stamped by the post office. *Sweet, I can use these when I write him back.*

In the first letter he writes about our initial phone conversation, apologizing for having difficulty hearing what I was saying. *Is that why he seemed so...serious?* The sharp tone of his voice so unlike the lyrical meander of his written words.

He asks why I'm cautious about meeting in person.

It's only me, Thom, he writes. You know who I am and you know why you want to meet me.

What do you mean I know who you are?

The next letter is longer. He writes about his understanding of himself - calls himself a misfit and an outsider. He talks about the time he spent studying at McGill:

Mostly I went to class for material and opportunity...to mimic and watch people, to play hangman, to go to the pub and to argue about anything. To laugh and make people laugh till it hurt. So I was entertaining and a bit of an anomaly.

An anomaly? Right...

He writes about meeting Beth:

She told me that she saw me standing once, alone, and thought that I looked very comfortable in my body; solid in the space. (I was never sure if that's why she found me annoying or if it was a compliment).

He writes about the pace of our reunion:

To me it feels like as the momentum of events picks up speed you hit the brakes, it feels to me more like a jerky stop and go ride. After all of these years I just want to hold you and look into your eyes and tell you that I love you. I have not given you much in this life. I'd like to give you this.

I put the letters down. Let out a long slow breath.

"Who is this guy?" I ask Ribby. "I thought he understood that the past six months have been way too intense. Driving back and forth to Massachusettes trying to get to know Beth while she was dying. Taking a sick leave from work and in all kinds of therapy. I thought we talked about me needing to take my time with him, that the letter writing has been a perfect fit, that it's a relief to me we don't need to rush."

Suddenly there's a knock at the door. I get up and open it, but no one's there.

"Hello?"

I step out onto the porch. Look around. At my feet is a small bundle wrapped in red tissue paper.

I pick it up then look left and right before going back inside. Ribby is at my heels.

When I unfold the paper there's what appears to be a bunch of feathers. As I reach for them I discover it's a bird's wing - chestnut brown and richly patterned. The feathers at the base are small and soft, and seem ready to float away. The longer ones are stiff, and seem much more secure. Ribby nudges my knees, nosing in.

"Who would leave me something like this?" I reach to rub behind his ears. *Someone who knows that I'm into this kind of thing.*

Under the wing is a small velvet bag that holds two rocks - smooth and solid and stirring.

As I lift the tissue paper, a note falls out - written in different colours of crayon on small pieces of lined paper.

Bracken, if you want to meet me, I'm waiting at the bench. On the trail.

It's signed, Thom - the "h" backwards, and the "o" above the "m."

Seriously? He thought he would just show up?

"Well, should we go out there and meet Mr. Impulse?"

Ribby looks up at me, tail wagging. He's heard the word "out" and is more than happy to oblige.

Halfway down the backyard I stop. I unzip my coat and take a whiff - *not too skunky.* I check my breath - *very summer sausage.* I root through the garden for a piece of mint to chew on. Run my hand through my hair a couple times. Push up my glasses.

When I reach the trail it occurs to me that I have no idea which bench he's talking about. *The closest benches are to the right.* I turn Ribby that way.

A street light shines toward one of the benches, and I can make out the shape of a stocky man. He's picking up then putting back down a tote bag - taking things out then putting them back in. He's wearing a ballcap, a red windbreaker and tall rain boots. In the most recent photo I have of Thom, he's wearing tall rain boots. Ribby pulls me forward.

"Did you just knock on our door and then run away?" I call out as we get closer.

He turns to the sound of my voice. "Yup." He grins, looking pleased with himself.

"You're pretty fast in those rubber boots."

"Yup," he says, still grinning.

When we're standing in front of each other, we hug. His arms are strong. He smells like fire, mud and goats. My arms loosen, but he hangs on. *Is he shaking?*

"Well," I say when the hug ends. "Shall we head inside?"

"Really?" he asks.

"Um...yeah." *Isn't that what I just said?*

"OK, if you're sure." He gathers his tote bag and follows us up to the house.

What does that even mean, am I sure? Isn't he the one who's just shown up? Isn't this what he expected?

"Bracken, you are so much like your mother." His voice is like water.

"Really?" I turn around. *Ask him.* "How so?"

"Your style. The way you talk. How you move."

His words seep in. It's the first time someone has attributed my personal traits to 'my mother' instead of to 'Beth.' Rather than tense up, my body eases into his observation - Pooh Bear, dipping his hand into the honey pot. *Am I getting used to hearing these comments? Or, is it different because they're coming from him? My birth father, I remind myself.*

"Well, this is actually her coat." I give a

slow twirl. "And these are her boots." I lift my leg and point my foot. We both chuckle.

"Would you like a cup of tea?" I ask, once we're inside.

"If you're having some."

Oh yes, I definitely need tea. Well, not so much that I need the tea but I need something familiar...to anchor to.

"Were you asking me all those questions on the phone yesterday about what my week was like because you were planning to come?"

"Yup," there's that Tom Sawyer grin. "My friend Lynn drives to Ottawa for work. I got a ride from her and then took a bus. I'll stay with my friend Judy while I'm here, so you don't have to worry about that."

Right, he needs somewhere to stay.

"Where does Judy live?"

"I think she's somewhere down the street."

He pulls a small piece of lined paper out of his pocket with Judy's name, telephone number and address. I notice Lynn's name and number there as well.

You've got to be kidding me, I thought I was the only one left keeping these sort of notes. But, of course Thom would do it. He also doesn't have a cellphone.

While I brew the tea, Ribby sniffs Thom like crazy. Even turning over his hands to lick his fingers. Thom shares his scent. Pets Ribby in all the sweet spots.

When Ribby finally looks toward me he's like, *I'm into this guy.*

I wink, *if he's cool with you, he's cool with me.* Shivers set off across my skin.

"So," I set a mug of tea down in front of Thom, "tell me about the things you left at the door."

"OK."

His gaze lingers. It feels like I've unwittingly entered a staring contest.

"What kind of a wing is that?" I blow on my tea.

"It's from a grouse. Did I tell you about the vision I had of a grouse in my last energy session?"

I nod.

"Well, it reminded me that life's about marching to the beat of your own drum. So I thought that fit. Also, I remembered your story about finding a cardinal feather on your doorstep the day you met Jan and learned how to connect with me. So I wanted to bring that in as well."

"Oh, and...what about your note?"

"I wrote the note in crayon because

there's a lack of permanence to them. They help present a choice; an invitation. The right to take it or leave it."

"Hmm."

"There's a running joke about the 'h' in my name that I like to play on, which is why I put it backwards when I signed my name," he adds.

I grin.

"I wondered about going to the library to meet you, dressed as a clown. But Steph didn't think it would be a good idea to surprise you like that at work."

Yeah, no kidding.

"When I got into Peterborough, I walked here and put the letters in your mailbox. After checking back a couple of times, they were gone. That's when I wrote the note."

"And then you knocked on the door and ran?" I raise my eyebrows.

"That was a last minute decision. I wanted you to have the option to meet me and it was time for me to make a move. You reached out to me - you were the first one to write a letter, and you were the first one to call. I needed to be the one who came to you, so you could decide whether or not you wanted to meet me."

"OK." He's got quite the juggling act going on here, keeping the spontaneous and the planned both up in the air together. Making it all seem effortless.

"I brought these along to show you," he pulls two photo albums out from his tote bag. They are those small, spiral bound albums you could get from Blacks in the 90s. Many of my baby pictures are in similar albums at my parents' house.

He flips through photos of himself over the years - performing and building and riding horses. There are family photos too - of Sara (his first daughter), Hannah (his third), his current partner, Steph, and her...no, their...four kids.

I feel like a teenager, asked to sit beside a grandparent who rambles on about their neighbours. It's similar to when Beth showed me her family photos the first time. Somehow, the experience pushes me even further to the fringes. It's like: *great, your other daughters - the ones you've spent your entire life with. And: isn't that wonderful - everyone on your Dad's side of the family has the same smile.* I know it's meant to help welcome me in, but part of me resists. Part of me says, *fuck that.*

I check the time. My dance class is starting soon.

"If I'm going to dance class, I better get ready."

"Oh. Of course, go ahead."

I go upstairs. *Breathe.* I remind myself.

After getting changed, I close my eyes and stand still. Ribby pads around his mat in circles before lying down with a thud. The couch creaks and there's a knock from a mug being put on the table. *That's him.* I open my eyes.

"And here's another one of Beth's outfits," I say coming down the stairs. "Ta-Da!"

It comes out louder than I had intended, and isn't met with any response.

"Can I walk you to your class?" he asks.

"Will you know how to get to Judy's from there?"

"I'm sure I can figure it out"

"OK."

When we're outside, he links his arm in mine. I try not to flinch. This fatherly affection isn't something I'm used to.

He's a rush of narrative as we walk - what it was like for him growing up in his family, as a brother, as the first born son. It's too much to take in. I listen to his voice, but let his words stream by. I watch the cars driving down the street.

"Well, here we are."

He turns toward me.

"Would you like me to wait for you?"

"Oh no, you don't have to do that."

"The thing is, I haven't done any of these things for you. Like take you to dance class or pick you up from school or bake you a birthday cake. And I'd like to. Maybe I could braid your hair."

I let out a wobbly laugh. *He's not going to actually do it, is he?*

"Are you sure you know where you're going?" I ask.

"I did live here for 18 years, remember? I'll be fine."

"Well, I better get in there."

He stays still.

"We'll talk tomorrow, right? Make a plan for the day? I know Ben will want to see you."

"Alright."

We hug again. I figure he'll hold on, and prepare to linger. I can feel the warmth of his chest through his wool sweater. Fresh baked bread.

As I walk away, I sense him watching.

"Love you," he calls out.

I turn back and wave, then hurry inside. A symphony of delight.

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