

NOV 2020-FEB 2021 - ISSUE 7

Dreamers

Creative Writing

THE CATS

2021 PEN PARENTIS
FELLOWSHIP WINNER

REVIEW

PONDERING BEAUTY
DURING A PANDEMIC

FLASH

CONTEST WINNERS

INTERVIEW

WITH NICOLE CRIMI
PATTY AND THE PANDEMIC

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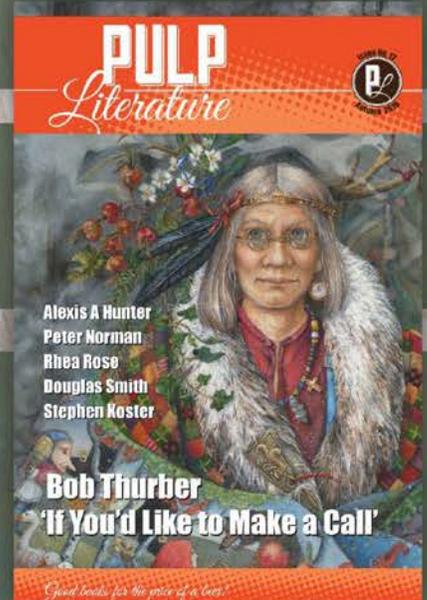
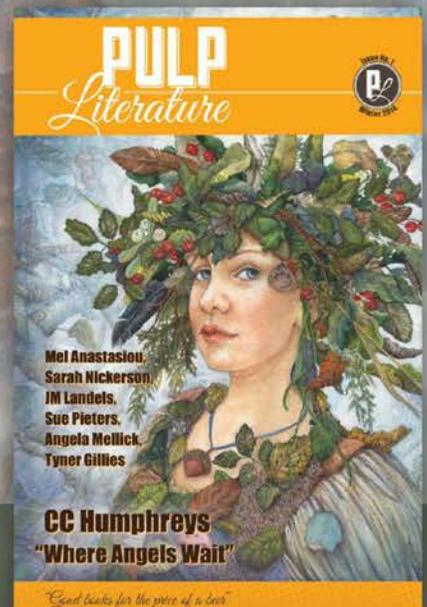
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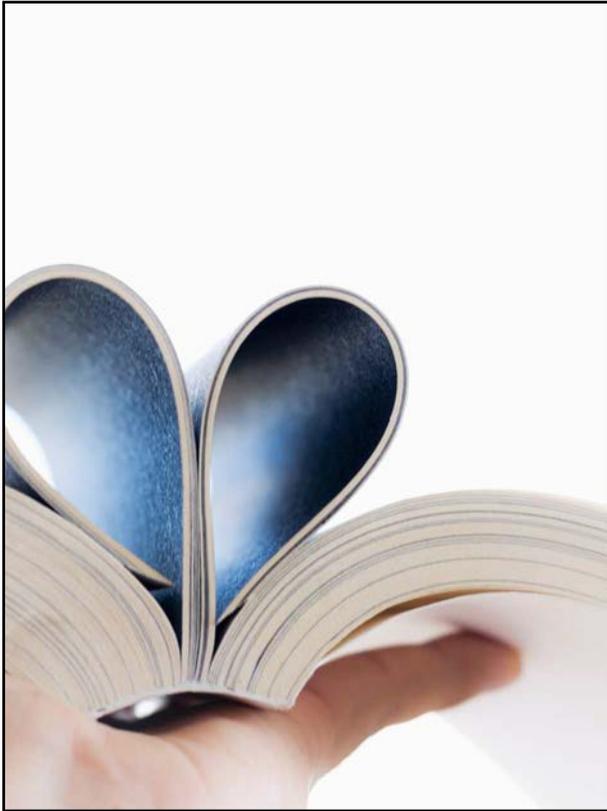
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So tired...

I'm tired. And I'm not the only one. When I ask, "how are you?" the answer I get from most people these days is, "I'm tired."

It's October as I write this and I can't believe how much has happened and is still happening this year. If someone had written a fictional story about the events of 2020, I'd never have believed it. Truth is definitely stranger than fiction in this case!

Actually, I don't really want to think about 2020 anymore... Let me tell you about flash stories instead. They're much more fun!

This issue of the Dreamers Magazine has 4 winning flash stories inside. From our 2020 Flash Contest, we've selected a first, second and third place story. Leanne Schneider wins first place for her nonfiction story, "Count," Gordon MacLean wins second place for his fiction story, "Beneath the Ice," and Alan MacLeod wins third place for his autofiction story, "The Girl Who Didn't Know What She Knew." Congratulations!

We are also so proud to present the flash fiction story, "The Cats," by Dawn Ryan. Dawn has won the 2021 Pen Parentis Writing Fellowship for New Parents. Each year, Pen Parentis awards this fellowship to a talented writer who is also the parent of at least one child under 10 years old. Congratulations, Dawn! This story is all kinds of eerie. I love it!

In addition to these winning stories, make sure you read the interview with Nicole Crimi, medical student at McMaster University, and author and illustrator of the children's book, *Patty and the Pandemic*. In this interview, Nicole talks about the powerful combination of art and medicine, anxiety in children, and what motivates her to write and create. *100% of the profits from the sale of *Patty and the Pandemic* will be donated to the *Face the Future Foundation*.

Inside these pages you'll also find a book review that reads as lyrically as the book under review, multiple poems, a short essay, and even more heartfelt (and heartbreaking) stories.

As always, thanks for reading. In an exhausting world, it's the Dreamers out there that give me hope.

Kat McNichol
Editor-in-Chief

2020 Flash Contest

Congratulations to the winners!

First Place Winner

Count

Nonfiction Story by **Leanne Schneider**

Count backwards from 100.

I reach 97, then I'm gone. Off to dreamland, where sometimes dreams become nightmares that become reality. Doctors give people special drugs now, that erase the bad memories of traumatic events, such as the butchering of a body. But nothing can truly be erased from the human mind. All those "erased memories" will come back to haunt me in the depths of sleep. So no more sleeping. If I ever wake up from this ...

I wake up. I'm in recovery. I look around at blurred faces, blurred walls, bright lights, soft voices asking me questions I don't remember. I want to ask questions too. How long was I out? Did everything go well? Am I okay? But I can't speak. I go back to sleep.

I'm being wheeled down a long corridor. Turning corners, this way, that way, fluorescent lighting following me, warm blankets on top of me, thick fog inside my head. Are we there yet? Where are we going? To my room. Yes, to my room. My mom will be there waiting for me. My pregnant daughter, due to give birth to my grandson any minute now, will be there too. I can't wait to see them. I can't wait to tell them I'm alive. But of course they already know that. They've been here the entire time.

People are moving my sliced and bandaged body from a stretcher to a bed. Deadweight. I feel like deadweight. I can't move myself. They have to do all the work. I see my mom's face. Blurred relief upon it. I go back to sleep.

I wake up. The pain, oh sweet Jesus, the pain. I wasn't prepared for this. My surgeon told me what he was going to do. Like, hey, I'm going to cut off a piece of your body and this is how I'm going to do it and this is what will happen. Ok, well great. So have you had your breast cut off, right down to the bone? Carved out from your clavicle to the bottom of your rib cage, under your armpit and halfway to your back? No. I didn't think so MISTER surgeon. So you can tell me what you're going to do, but you can't tell me what it's going to feel like. No one can. Especially not the ladies who have had lumps removed or a simple mastectomy. They told me it

was an easy surgery, quick recovery, pain controlled with Tylenol. Obviously they didn't read the message about my particular surgery.

Modified Radical Mastectomy with Axillary Lymph Node Dissection.

People assume everything is cut and dried. I've never had a major surgery before. I had no idea what to expect. I assumed it would be cut, cut, dry, dry, two days later I would say bye-bye, and go home. Take some Tylenol and get back to work. What a lie, lie.

The painkillers and anesthesia drugs wear off. I've never felt anything like this. It's excruciating. Not even a childbirth gone wrong compares to this. The nurse comes in. Shoots me full of morphine. Instant relief. I'm flying. I'm in space. I'm laughing. My mom and my daughter are laughing too. Everyone is so *happy, happy, happy*. The opulent opiate wears off quickly. I crash to earth. I'm going to throw up. The nurse comes back with more needles and pills. This is hell. I've died and gone to hell.

Wednesday, a new nurse appears. It's time to change my bandages. I refuse to look at it. I turn my head away and tears leak out of my eyes. The nurse is kind. She says my incision is clean and healing well. No signs of infection or complications. She says it's beautiful, like a rose vine. I turn my head to look at her. I see the honesty and truth in her eyes. But I know I will never see roses bloom there.

Thursday, a different day, a different nurse. She changes the bandages and helps me shower. I still refuse to look at it. I rub the soap over it with my eyes closed. I towel off with my eyes closed. I get dressed with my eyes closed.

Friday, my surgeon shows up. He tells me I have to look at it. I say no I don't. He says yes I do, because when I'm discharged, I will have to take care of it at home. By myself. To prevent infection and make sure I haven't ripped it open. I think I'm going to pass out.

He tells the nurses that I have to look at it before the end of the day. They relay the message to me. I know if I don't cooperate, I will only get them in trouble. I don't want that to happen. They've all been so kind.

The nurse is at my bedside. We take off my nightdress. She asks me if I'm ready. I say yes. She hands me a mirror. Her fingers start peeling off the bandages. Thick, wide layers of compression bandages. I'm crying. I can't breathe. On the count of ten. Let's start.

Count forward from 1.

Second Place Winner

Beneath The Ice

Fiction Story by **Gordon MacLean**

Jimmy was never in a hurry to go home after school, but today was an exception. He raced through the spring melt, flew through the door, kicked off his gumboots and hurried to Dale's side. He arrived just in time to see the last of the pups being born.

The miracle of life is a joy to behold, especially for a twelve-year-old boy witnessing this wonder for the first time. Crouched on the floor, he was soon joined by his two younger brothers, Tommy and Russell. Five little puppies squirmed about as Dale, a shepherd-cross, licked their silken coats clean. With eyes not yet open, they fumbled around pawing over each other in search of nourishment and mother's warmth.

Names raced through Jimmy's mind as he observed the feeding frenzy. The runt of the litter made up for his size with determination. He fought his way through the melee, and latched on to his mother, like a barnacle to a whale.

"Gobbles, that's a good name for that one," he said.

"Yeah," said Russell, "and that one can be Sadie, and that one can be Shep."

"That one looks like Pa when he comes back from the mines," said Tommy, pointing at the dark one. The boys giggled and agreed to name it Soot.

"What should we call the last one?" Russell asked. The boys were pondering when the silence was broken by a growl that came from Tommy's stomach.

"How about Biscuit?" Tommy said, inspired by hunger pangs.

Gobbles, Sadie, Shep, Soot, and Biscuit, the names played back through their minds as they sat there beaming. The boys were so distracted that they hadn't heard their Pa come through the door. They were startled as his dark hand reached past them, plucking the puppies from Dale, and placing them into an empty potato sack.

"Take'em down to the bay and drown'em," he said, handing the sack to Jimmy. Tommy and Russell protested, but Jimmy knew better than to cross the old man. He took hold of the sack and made his way to the door.

"Please John, don't do this to the boys." Ma said, but he wasn't having any of it.

"We can barely afford to feed ourselves, they won't stay pups forever and you can't give'em away, no one will have'em."

"Not now, not like this."

"Christ, Margaret, you can't walk down by the bay without a stick to fend off a stray."

Margaret knew he was right. Stray dogs had become a serious

problem; not only in Glace Bay, but anywhere families fell on hard times. Pets were often abandoned and left to fend for themselves. They became subject to the elements and starvation, some formed packs, outcasts of society.

"It's a harsh life..." He continued, "and the sooner they learn it the better."

"Now off with you, bye."

Jimmy put on his coat and boots and picked up the bundle.

"It's a mercy," his mother said, handing Jimmy his hat. Her words offered him no comfort.

He had a long hike in the bitter cold and did his best to ignore the fuss coming from the musty sack. After a while the bundle didn't move. The ground that had softened under the midday sun was beginning to harden with the evening frost. A warm orange glow broke from the houses scattered along the way as the grey Atlantic sky began to darken. He was alone when he reached the waterfront. It was suppertime, and sensible people were sitting at their tables eating warm cooked meals. Jimmy's stomach was in knots, partly from hunger, but most of all, from the deed he was to carry out.

It was early spring in Cape Breton and the frozen bay had begun to break up, creating floating islands of ice called clampers. Under the sun they were free to move, but now the water between them had frozen, holding them captive. Walking out a short distance Jimmy placed the bundle down and kicked a hole in the ice. Once cleared, he reached for the sack, which lay still. Small spots of frost formed where the puppies' noses had pressed against the burlap.

Are they already dead? He asked himself, hesitating a moment before plunging the bag into the watery grave. The answer came immediately upon contact with the stabbing cold of the water. He could hear the muffled whines as the frenzied puppies climbed over each other fighting against the bag and death's clutch. He cried as he held them under the surface. Not able to let it go, he felt the struggle from within begin to weaken, his fate intertwined, as though each puppy was a fragment of his soul. With his fingers nearly frozen he could barely feel the tug of the current as it claimed the death shroud.

Jimmy felt numbness come over him that had nothing to do with the cold, as though something had died in him. He tucked his hand into the warmth of his coat and wiped the tears from his freckled face with the sleeve. Walking away, the sound of whining puppies echoed through his mind.

"Go away!" He cried, as he covered his ears. The puppies were silenced. The only sound that remained was the crunch of ice beneath his stiff rubber boots, followed by a faint yelp.

Jimmy turned in disbelief, and rushed back to the hole. A tiny, trembling mass was stumbling in the dark. He picked it up. It was the runt.

"Gobbles," he exclaimed, as he held him tight in the crook of his arm and cried.

He placed Gobbles in his coat to keep him warm, and headed home to face his Pa. Feeling the puppy pressed against him, the darkness began to lift. The light that had gone out in his heart was rekindled.

Third Place Winner

The Girl Who Didn't Know What She Knew

Autofiction Story by **Alan MacLeod**

Early in my training I was a great admirer of Sigmund Freud. He was all over my books and magazines, peering out from black and white photographs and renderings. I was impressed with his glaring eyes, and his spade-like beard. His waist-coat fit comfortably over a slight paunch, with a small Havana perched between his fingers. I longed to understand what he was really getting at, and secretly hoped for enlightenment in his ways. His recorded voice seemed to arise from a deep and measured place of wisdom and competence. He eluded me, but I did manage to grab onto the mysterious notion of uncovering unconscious motivations.

I had a new patient arrive in my fourth year of practice, whom we'll call Mary. She had long, curly brown hair, with several bald spots, and wore a modest dress shaded in greys and whites. She was accompanied by her father whose concern was written in his lowered eyebrows and stooped posture. Her mother did not come, despite several invitations.

Mary was only sixteen, but stared right through me in a way that suggested a long and troubled life. I kept reminding myself that she was blind. Little information accompanied Mary. She was referred by her busy and blunt internist. The note, congruent with her appearance, said, "psychogenic blindness and hair-pulling."

During her father's description of her sudden loss of sight, Mary sat rigidly, hands folded tightly in her lap, eyes fixed straight ahead. It was an unnerving presentation in one so young. By this time Mary had been through a number of medical workups, all with no physical findings to explain her blindness. I thought perhaps she was bored and disinterested in yet another one.

Mary's face remained stiff throughout the initial interviews. Nothing penetrated the stillness. The blankness, shrugs, and monotone, communicated an air of indifference. She made no edges visible, and was impossible to read.

The first small crack in the facade came when I commented on her missing chunks of hair, and asked her to tell me about that.

"It's just a bad habit," she blurted in a tone of warning. I wondered if someone had said this to her, maybe admonishing her in some way.

I heeded this caution, but planned to return to it later.

"How are you feeling just before you pull your hair?"

A slight wrinkling of her nose with a crease between her brows suggested confusion.

"What do you mean?" she said.

"How do you feel in your guts?" I said while rubbing my belly. I caught myself; she couldn't see me.

Mary had no idea how she felt. Anxiety resided in her body without her knowledge. She sat tightly with shoulders hunched, and back straight. I asked her how she was feeling in her body right now.

"Fine," she said.

I moved on, but over the next few weeks had her do a series of muscle relaxation exercises that helped her to drop her shoulders, soften her jaw, and deepen her breathing. She began to become conscious of the difference between relaxation and tension. She liked fishing at the family cottage, so we talked about "catching the tension and throwing it back into the water." An almost mischievous smile passed quickly over her face when we talked like this.

At my suggestion she began to track how she was feeling just before and after she pulled on her hair. "It helps me relax," she said with a shrug, and a shy smile. Another little crack in the wall. Without using the word addiction, I asked what might help break this "bad habit."

She scrunched her face, raised her eyes, and shifted in her seat. With a sigh she said, "Catch it and throw it back in." It became sort of a game where she practiced the magic of asking her muscles to relax. And they did. She pulled her hair less often.

We began to talk about her childhood. There were long pauses as she seemed to stare at the floor. I wondered what she was seeing in her mind's eye. She remembered very little. Her voice was mild and childlike, disconnected from the adolescent sitting so still in front of me. It was as if she only had a dim notion of those years, like she knew but didn't know what went on back then. I asked her to draw some things from her childhood, if she could. Art was her favourite subject in school.

She hesitated, pencil poised over the page, grimacing as if in pain. "No..." she said. "I don't want to make it real." I went cold when she said those words. There was such a feeling of sadness and despair in them, especially for this very self-contained, non-expressive youngster. She knew but didn't know, or didn't want to know. I was troubled by this sudden change in her, but I had to respect her wishes and let it go. I began to feel like I knew, but didn't know something, like there were depths here that we both needed to explore.

But, we never got the chance. Her father withdrew her from treatment shortly after, citing lack of progress with the blindness, and the need for yet another opinion. I remember thinking that she left just as we had started therapy. Sometimes this happens. It's intriguing to ponder why a parent might scuttle in and pull their child out just as you start to get close. Sigmund has been silent on the matter. I'm still waiting.

Panacea

Poem by **Devon Gallant**

Although mankind runs, ever fearful, from that pale rider, Death—
scouring the globe for a hidden key to save them from reckoning—
I have no need for secret salvation.

From the dusky plains of the Sonoran desert
to the verdant hills along the river Yangtze:
there is no elixir of life—no poultice or potion—
that can compare to the rejuvenation of your love.

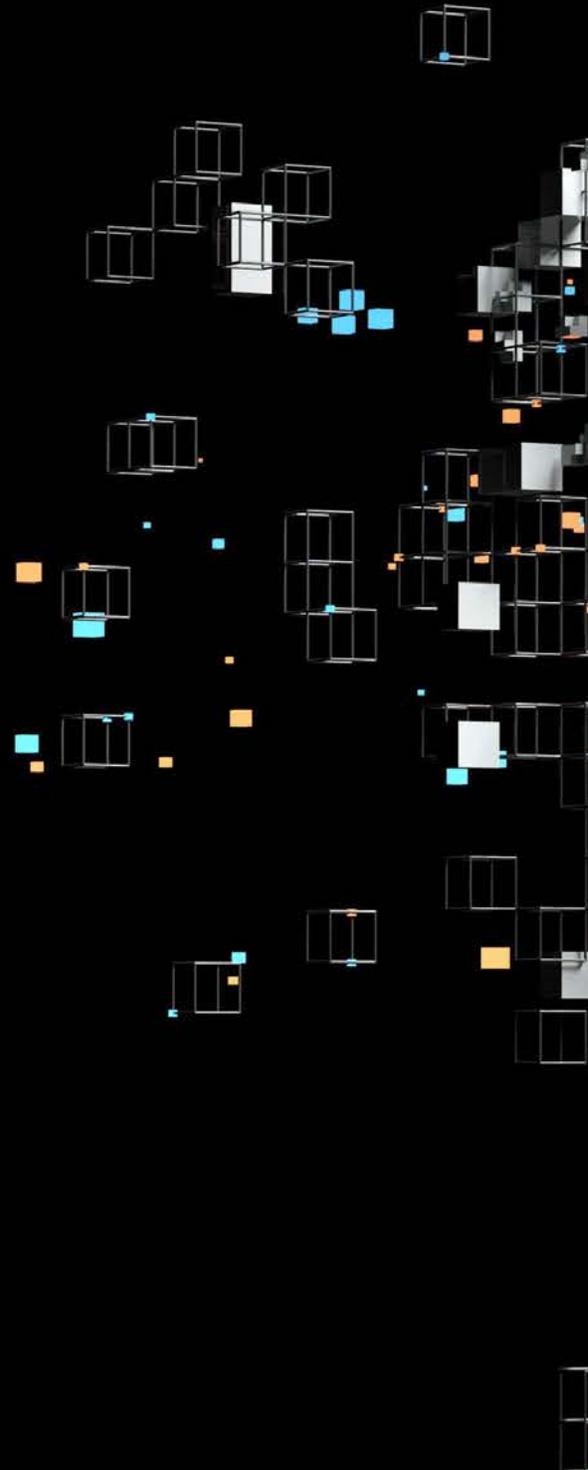
I spent years lost in a mad quest—
searching for the fountain of youth, the philosopher's stone;
drinking gold and eating jade;
trawling the ocean floor
for Amrita...the lost city of Atlantis—
I raced through the night,
chasing the white rabbit for the secrets of the moon;
exchanged tales of adventure and woe
in the back of too many pubs to count,
bleary-eyed and mouth-sour
from whiskey and heart-ache.
I joined the ranks of life extensionists, immortalists, longevists, cyborgs,
all desperate for some agerasia,
some negligible senescence, to fill the void of their broken souls.
Dreamed of an oncoming singularity—
digital ascension—to lose myself in techno-submission;
uploading my brain into a cloud-based Nirvana.
All the while, never realizing:
there was no holy grail
that did not lie between your thighs.

Whoever drinks the water I give him
will never thirst.

Let the world go on in its futile hunt for immortality...
neither Soma nor Somatropin can compare
to the dancing water of your eyes,
the curative cleansing of your kiss, a kiss
which tastes like a peach,

soft and sweet,
eaten in the morning rain.

“**uploading my brain
into a cloud-based Nirvana.**”





Poem Long in the Making

Poem by Neall Calvert

C. G. Jung: "Recollection of the origins is a matter of life and death."

...

Malidoma Somé: "If the ancestors are not healed, their sick energy will haunt the souls and psyches of those who are responsible for helping them."

...

Only an empty heart . . . remembers, sixty years later, that one heard, at age three (but only once), mandolins and Dad's deep voice melding with his older brother's in "Vetsherni Zvon" ("Those Evening Bells"), a song of longing for the bountiful Mennonite homeland in Russia before war's chaos—a holocaust—came;

Only a seeking heart . . . finds, on the Internet in 2017, transit papers bearing one's father's, his siblings' and their parents' names, declaring the refugees' arrival in Canada via *Empress of France* on July 17, 1923—an event never spoken of at home;

Only a universal heart . . . must have balanced the unsteady boy fearing the raging father's next Thou Shalt Not-infected blow; a homegrown holocaust . . . somehow saves the angry teenage son seeking missing power racing other teenage drivers at 90 mph in Dad's potent V-8 Ford on suburban Surrey streets;

Only a sheltering heart . . . at twenty provides prayed-for relief in a position 3,000 miles away, where thinking for oneself can begin; where C. G. Jung, wizard of the psyche, master of the unconscious mind—in a dream—provides a diagnosis, promises a long (and necessary) journey into wholeness . . . uplifts the adult during decades of distance and dislike.

. . . "DO YOU NOT THINK THAT I LOVE YOU—" whispers, on an ordinary spring day at a ferry terminal, a voice within "—AND THAT THIS LOVE CAN BE RENEWED IN EVERY MOMENT?" . . . (Did one's forebears not hear an eternal voice too?) . . .

Only a winged heart . . . can fly via shamanic journey to 'find the last happy ancestors': German great-grandparents who settled Russian farmland granted Mennonite colonists the previous century by Empress Catherine II. Their son (who would prosper and then lose it all), is born on August 12, 1859 in a village where my father would spend the ages seven to ten among war's marauders and murderers experiencing unthinkable things he would, unconsciously, pass on to his vulnerable youngest (which he had been too). "We put pillows in front of the windows to keep the bullets from flying in" went a rare family tale.

Only an emotionally healed heart . . . triggers a spirit-to-spirit visit to a son by a father three years after his passing to say, "I'm sorry" then repeat the words twenty minutes more;

Only an expanding heart . . . one that understands *Those who ignore their history are doomed to repeat it* [Santayana] can rewrite the old victim scripts and pen the poet great/grand/son's epitaph:

Write Only This in Stone:
Over Rage and Revenge,
Over History's Vagaries,
Peace Won Out, Eternity Emerged,
the Love of Christ Triumphed

Only a fatherly heart . . . can whisper meaningfully the day this poem is done: "You got it right."



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emwf.ca

The Cats

Fiction Story by **Dawn Ryan**

“ *Some of the babies can be put in the woods.* ”

Jacob is in charge of the cats at his grandmother's house. They are caged, calico cats and Jacob feels an affinity for them as though he's loved them his entire life.

Jacob's grandmother stays in the attic, and Jacob knows she stays up there to avoid the cats. The cats are having litters, one litter after another, until the cages are full with kittens. They are not kittens, but fist-sized human babies.

Jacob doesn't know what to do. He runs across the house, from one caged-cat to the other, watching with awe the miracle of life; but Jacob wonders about the life in store for these babies. There are way too many to love, and how will society treat them when people learn they've come from cats? Suddenly, Jacob isn't so sure about their value. He goes to his grandmother who is crouched in a dark corner of the attic. *Are there supposed to be so many, Grandma?*

Grandma turns from her hiding place in the corner of the attic. *I don't know.*

Am I to care for every single one, Grandma?

I don't know, Grandma says as she ducks behind a box of old family albums.

Jacob sighs. He looks down at his own sex parts and understands that he too is a cat who will someday have countless litters. He thinks about the Greeks, and the Chinese, and Jacob wonders out loud to his grandmother, if he couldn't just put some of the babies in the woods.

Jacob's grandmother smiles. She holds her grandson's shoulders. *Yes, Jacob, she says. Some of the babies can be put in the woods.*

Jacob is relieved. He goes to the separate cat cages and gathers the babies who are the least desirable. Some babies have too much kitten fur, and some babies were born with only one eye, or with three eyes, or with one human eye and one cat eye. He gathers the babies whose limbs were not fully formed, or whose heads had warped and dented during



childbirth. He gathers the babies who had already been rejected by the other babies, and lay whining in a corner by their lonesome. He collects babies whom he believes to be evil because they sneer and already have sharp, jagged teeth in their mouths. Soon, all that's left in the cages with the cats are a dozen or so perfectly formed babies. Jacob feels the burden of child rearing lift from him. He puts on his shoes and jacket and prepares to leave for the woods.

His grandmother descends from the stairs just as Jacob is about to leave. Jacob sees that she is crying.

What is it, Grandma? Jacob asks.

His grandmother looks toward the babies. Some are already dead inside Jacob's sack. *I wish you'd chosen different babies,* his grandmother says. *But now that you've chosen, those are the babies that must be left in the woods.*

Jacob is confused. He thought he'd made good choices, as these babies would be the most difficult to care for and the hardest to love. *I don't understand, Grandma,* Jacob says. *These babies are unsightly.*

His grandmother places her hands on her chest, over her heart. *These babies are unsightly,* she says. *But, if any of them survive in the woods, you must know that they will surely come back to find you, and when they find you, they will kill you, or worse.*

Then I'll put them back, Jacob says.

It's too late, his grandmother says. *They already know what they are now, and they already hate you.*

Jacob looks to his sack. Some of the babies who were born with talons are clawing at the sack, at him. Jacob gives the sack a shake, loosening the babies' claws, and runs for the woods. He finds a large ditch filled with mud and leaves, and empties his sack of babies. He can't keep from watching them wriggle, struggling for air and earth. He can't keep from vomiting when he sees some babies burrow into the mud. They are stronger than they look. Jacob wipes his chin. He considers apologizing, but instead he runs.

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 will read their winning story at the Pen Parentis Literary Salon in New York City on Tuesday, November 10, 2020. To watch the livestream, just RSVP to [penparentis.org/calendar](https://www.penparentis.org/calendar).

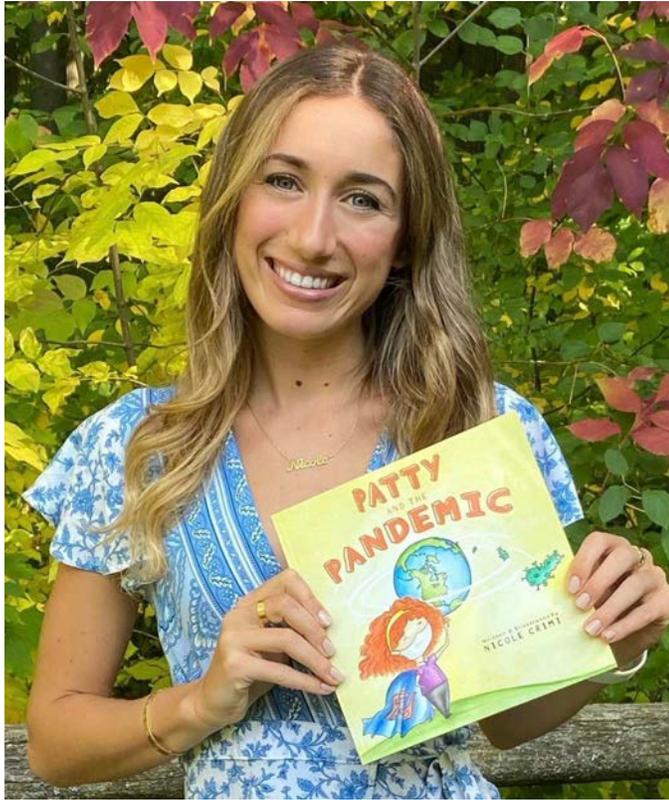
This year, submissions called for a new, never-published fiction story - any genre, on any subject - of up to 710 words. Word count changes each year because the main goal of this Fellowship is to motivate writers to continue to create new high-quality creative work at the very busiest time of the parenting journey.

Pen Parentis is a 501C3 literary nonprofit that helps writers stay on creative track after starting a family. Find out more at www.penparentis.org/we-want-to-help.



Creating a Pandemic Picture Book for Kids

An Interview with Nicole Crimi, author of *Patty and the Pandemic*



Nicole Crimi, a medical student at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, believes that art allows people to connect with each other on a deeper level. She began selling her art on an international platform in 2013, but quickly realized that art meant more to her when she was creating it with a heartfelt purpose. She has since donated many of her paintings to fundraisers and now uses art in advocacy, such as when she was a keynote speaker at a McMaster United Nations conference titled "Art for Change". As a medical student, Nicole is constantly seeking ways to combine her passions for health and art together – co-founding her McMaster HeART (Health and Art) interest group, teaching art workshops on wellness to students and patients, and now, authoring and illustrating creative works such as the children's book, *Patty and the Pandemic*.

Nicole's passion and talent for healthcare, education, art and charity recently garnered her an endorsement from Ontario Premier, Doug Ford. "What a champion," he said in an October 2020 press conference.

In this interview with Ryan Clark, General Manager of Dreamers Creative Writing, Nicole Crimi discusses COVID anxiety in children, her new book, and the powerful combination of art and medicine.

Nicole, welcome to Dreamers!

Thank you so much! It is my pleasure to be able to connect with other people that are passionate about the literary arts!

Where did the idea for *Patty and the Pandemic* come from?

I was just about 6 years old when the SARS pandemic came to Canada, and I recall it being a very frustrating time - despite only having a fraction of the restrictions that kids living through the COVID-19 pandemic currently experience. As such, once COVID-19 came to Canada and children were sent home from school, I immediately empathized with them and wanted to do something to help. As a passionate artist, medical student, and someone who enjoys writing, creating a children's book naturally seemed like a fun initiative for me. It was initially just a fleeting thought, but after discussing the idea with a few people close to me and doing some research about what was available for children in that age range, I realized that it had the potential to fill a very important knowledge gap.

Your @nicolecrimiart instagram bio reads: "I paint what I can't say with words... & draw everything else!" Sounds like you channel a lot of your thoughts and emotions through art. What inspires your writing?

My art is based on my own experiences, emotions, and thoughts. Since it is abstract, it is quite a reflective process for me, and enables me to better understand myself and the world around me. Following the creation of artwork, I always enjoy writing about this process and what I learned - so in a way, my writing is inspired by my art and what I learn from it! In the case of "Patty and the Pandemic", my writing was inspired by something I feel passionately about - bringing positivity, and a sense of unity, comfort and empowerment in a difficult time. During COVID-19, while we were in stage 1 of the lockdown, I was creating a painting for myself, and ended up having very enlightening and empowering conversations with people from around the world throughout this process. It was that artistic process and those empowering conversations that brought upon some inspiration and excitement to step outside of my comfort zone as an artist and take on a literary endeavor.

How did your medical background affect the *Patty* story?

My medical background made me confident in my ability to find the resources necessary to ensure that I had accurate content within my book. The medical school that I attend really emphasizes problem-based learning, so COVID-19 and writing children's books were just more "problems" that I was required to learn more about. Furthermore, while in medical school, I had the privilege of working with some amazing

physicians. Dr. Joanne Kearon was my teacher just before phase 1 began, and she happens to be a senior resident in Public Health. If not for medical school, I would have never met Joanne and she would not have been able to provide me with valuable insight from a Public Health perspective. Furthermore, due to my background in medicine, Dr. Peter Adamson has been a trusted mentor of mine. As a result, I asked him for his input for the story, and was able to receive valuable edits from him as well. Overall, I think that anyone interested in a topic can research it enough to write about it, but my medical background is what fostered my interest, and provided me with the valuable resources and relationships that enabled me to make the book what it is today!

Do you have any interest in pursuing a political career?

My passion lies in medicine, so I do not wish to pursue a career in politics. However, one of the things that I love about medicine is that as a physician, you get to interact with people on a daily basis and have the privilege of potentially making a significant positive impact in their lives. Although I do not wish to pursue a career in politics, I am not afraid to take on leadership positions in medicine or any of my professional endeavors if it means that I can help to improve a current system or situation and make a positive change. I think that it is important to consistently reflect on your own views, and to have an open mind to listen to the views and values of others, and to use that awareness to advocate for what you know is right - regardless of what your chosen career is.

With lockdowns now restricting traditional childhood activities, how might we use technology to better care for our children, without resorting to more screen time?

I think that if you are using technology to care for children, then you will by nature be exposing them to more screen time. Part of why I chose to print *Patty and the Pandemic* is because I hope that kids can find things to do that do not involve technology. You really do not need a lot to find joy and have fun as a child - you just need imagination! My hope is that if there is a silver lining in any of this, it may be that - regardless of age - we can all start to appreciate the little things in life a bit more. Yes, we may need technology in order to communicate and work, but in our time off, we can hold a hard copy book, appreciate simply being in the company of those in our homes (or our neighbours if we live alone) or even just appreciate quiet time for introspection. "Traditional childhood activities" - or any activity for that matter, does not need to include things that are unsafe!

Do you have any tips for trick-or-treating etiquette during a pandemic? Should we expect to see Patty costumes?

I haven't made a Patty costume myself, but if any child wears a curly orange wig and a purple T-shirt, I will most definitely become their biggest fan! With respect to trick or treating etiquette, I hope that children simply continue to be respectful of each other and wait their turn in order to give everybody space. I saw one parent designed a "treat tube" where they send treats down a tube so that children can take candy without having to go close to the person giving it to

them. I know some people who are also using extendable "arms" to grab and drop candy into kids' bags, and people who are setting up marks on their lawns to facilitate social distancing for the children. I think that this is really going to be the responsibility of the parents and the people arranging treat distribution, given that the kids will naturally just want to have a fun evening and really should not be actively thinking about how to social distance - we should just have it set up where it is a natural process!

Will you be writing another volume of *Patty and the Pandemic* or do you have another story in mind?

You will have to stay tuned to see!

How do you feel about copyright law, intellectual property and brand merchandising? For instance, if someone wanted to write "fanfiction" about Patty?

There is no better feeling than knowing that you accomplished something for yourself. Patty truly is so close to my heart because she is a creation of my own imagination, so there is not a single person in the world who could take the character and get the same level of gratitude that I get by seeing it become successful or be appreciated by others. Given that Patty is raising money to enable children in developing countries to receive life changing surgeries, I would not feel comfortable with someone else profiting off of this character or this book. Copyright law and intellectual property is obviously there to protect someone's legal rights, and I would most definitely practice my own legal rights if someone tried to take my intellectual property. However, I'd like to think that people would naturally respect my intellectual property and reach out to me and propose a collaboration instead of breaking a law.

Can you tell us about your McMaster HeART (Health and Art) interest group?

One thing that I love about McMaster Medical school is that it accepts students from diverse backgrounds (as opposed to strictly accepting students who are proficient in the sciences). As a result, I've had the pleasure of working with very passionate and talented colleagues. I wanted to create a space where medical students who were also passionate about the arts could gather, share ideas, create and collaborate - not only to better my own ability to combine art and medicine, but to also share the message of the power that art has to enhance medical experiences, education, and physician well-being. In McMaster HeART, we run art workshops with students. Regardless of artistic experience or materials available, the feedback has been positive in that students find it to be incredibly therapeutic and relaxing. This is especially valuable considering how stressful and demanding medical education can be! Furthermore, we meet regularly to discuss what artwork we are creating, and potential opportunities for collaboration or initiatives for our school. This group is still in its early stages, but so far, it has been incredibly empowering and inspiring, and my hope is that it starts a trend to continue getting medical students to explore the arts further throughout their careers.

Pondering Beauty During a Pandemic

Book Review by **Carole Mertz**

Reading Orang's meditations on beauty in *Where Things Touch*, I encountered a great deal of inner resistance. Beauty for me is an *experience*. I don't want to be told why an object is beautiful, so I thought.

To ponder beauty during this pandemic, is difficult, when so much of what's happening is ugly. People are turned inside out wondering how to cope. Friends are dying within hospitals and senior facilities without seeing their loved ones and without understanding their beloveds' absences.

Yet just in these times, we may have greater urgency to consider how and where things touch. We may need to think harder about how we share ourselves or, of necessity, isolate ourselves, and consider where beauty can provide solace.

**“I acknowledge
beauty as a kind
of shattering...”**

Orang wrote her meditations during a period of budding love for a romantic figure in her life and during her intensive medical training. Perhaps she committed to considerations of beauty as a way to foster personal health during the stresses she experienced. Beside sick beds, she surely witnessed blood, fear, and death.

"Sometimes beauty is restraint," Orang writes. "Other times, beauty is the fruit of that restraint: releasing to sensation after the wait, celebrating freely and without shame, all the sensual details of our daily lives" (p.75).

I read those lines and receive them as a call to experience more fully the moments in my days, moment by moment. These lines may also require that I acknowledge beauty, as a kind of shattering, as Louise Glück did, in her poem "The Red Poppy." "*Did you permit yourself to open?*" the poet asked.

Evoking an expansive experience, Orang invites us to view her city, presumably Toronto, as she is, "standing on the balcony, the tiniest balcony in the whole city, a balcony that feels nonetheless like a castle...the outside air has a new texture now, something balmy, something falling away, and I'm granted meaning, or is it pleasure, a distance and a closeness at once, I'm both lover and beloved..." (p. 45-46).

Reading these lines, my own resistance falls away. Perhaps beauty is encountered in spite of pain. I see the Covid-19 image itself, painted in cranberry reds. Perhaps beauty resides even within the ugly.



“ in *all* the wounds, deep in *all* the wounded

1915 Rewound

Poem by **Samuel Armen**

Dedicated to Vahe Mkrtchyan.

Pools of pinks condense in darkened red
Snakes which swim upstream, searching for their Homes.
They burrow in the broken-bodied bones,
in *all* the wounds, deep in *all* the wounded

Bodies - one by one - which flail out the rivers
like salmon, already caught by haunting men.

Children, the old, and women of varied years
begin to exist, gasp for life, and then,

what else could happen next? struggling, searching,
shaking, seeing sounds like wet fabric slashed
swallowed by screams, silenced by laughs slicing.
A mother, quick, spits the water back.

Is that really water that I see?
Her mouth begins to pray for life again...

The Man Outside My Door

Poem by **Neall Calvert**

When at night my solitary rooms became still
I sensed lurking outside my dwelling's door
a mysterious silent man; sometimes I feared
he would break in with a great smashing
and splintering sound;

For weeks I strained to hear thumps of approaching
or leaving footsteps, especially after midnight
when corridor light streamed around my entry's edges
into the murk; in daylight I puzzled this perilous
male power;

WHO ARE YOU? I finally thought to challenge
and then startling facts began trickling in:
I'm handsome, with a ready smile;
I'm healthy and walk with a confident step! . . .

The noiseless knocking had been announcing
a *shimmering* shadow brother—Man of Light—
who's everything that I, in dark, self-hating hours,
think that I am not.

Paddling Toward Peace

Nonfiction Story by **Miriam Edelson**

Wild waves crash across my kayak as I try to paddle forward, to stay on course. Wind whips up the waves as water drips from behind my head down my back, seeping under my life jacket. I feel the wet sensation against my skin. In no time, I am drenched to the bone as I continue sloggling, paddling toward the bay ahead which will be more sheltered from the wind. It still looks far away.

We are eight boats against the elements, a community of strangers including two very experienced young guides. One of them brings up the rear, tossing me encouraging messages across the waves. His cries "Great going," and "You've got this," help me to persist. It's a bit of a marathon performance to cross this channel on our very first day out. The sky is dark now, having shifted quickly from the warm haze that shone when we left shore. We have five days to explore the North Channel together, a part of Lake Huron north of Manitoulin Island in Ontario.

I am making some progress against the blustery wind, should be able to reach the bay in about 20 minutes. I just have to keep moving. Always keep the paddle in the water in waves, in order to steady the kayak. My muscles are flagging, but I keep going. Trying to keep my hands from sliding down the shaft of the paddle, I dip and swing to the other side. It is a constant, rhythmic motion that slowly propels me against the wind and waves toward the opposite shore where the stronger paddlers are already beginning to gather.

I read somewhere that a wave you face is not an obstacle but an opportunity. An opportunity to learn about yourself and prove your strength. An opportunity to develop new skills and come out wiser. Fine words that seem rather high and mighty right now. In the trenches of this journey, I am too focussed on moving forward inch by inch to contemplate their deeper meaning.

I am sweaty but I cannot smell my fear. Rather I rise to the challenge, feel exhilarated and persist. With the guide's encouragement I give a final push and we move out of the wind and into the bay. What a relief! I am soaked and full of wonder at the waves and wind that challenged us right off the bat. A robust feeling of accomplishment accompanies me as I munch on a power bar, hoping to glean more energy for the paddling still ahead.

As I look around I realize that I am treading on ground that in years gone by was interpreted gloriously by members of the Group of Seven, landscape painters in the 1920's. They captured in their paintings the undulating pink granite rock that characterizes the land surrounding the North Channel. I sense their presence in my soul as we prepare again to set out. This time our plan is to hug the shore, avoiding the worst of the wind, and to search for a campsite for the night. Our hope is to paddle only for another hour before setting up camp. I feel weary but determined to complete this day's

challenging journey. I have business to attend to.

Looking up, I notice the sunset has begun. Multiple shades of orange and pink brush the western sky. I clamber down the warm, pink granite rocks to a scraggy point at the shoreline. The rock was a little bit slippery and I'm glad to make it down to the water safely. It is relatively calm in the early evening's light when we slip away to complete our task, the main reason for this trip to the North Channel.

Thirty-one years ago, almost to the day, my son, Jake, was conceived on the Benjamin Islands which I can see far across the bay. He would have been thirty years old this year and it feels like an important milestone. Today I will lay him to rest, scattering his ashes in this extraordinarily beautiful setting. He died fifteen years ago and only now am I ready to let him go.

Jake was a beautiful boy with soulful blue eyes that erupted into smiles at the flicker of light in his face. He was unable to sit, stand or speak and received nourishment through a feeding tube to bypass his raspy breathing. And yet, with a voice that sounded like the cooing of a pigeon, he communicated his pleasure and discomfort. Sadly, he was destined to die young.

His short life bestowed untold richness upon mine. While he was alive and for some time after, I wrote and advocated on behalf of children like him. My life was full as his younger sister joined me in pickets and panels to advance the needs of kids with disabilities. Jake's passing was not unexpected, but it was still jarring, leaving an indescribable emptiness.

This evening, in this spectacular place, I am carrying a medium size yogurt container filled with his remains. I lean over the water perched precariously on a rock. The ashes sparkle in the light as I take a small handful and toss them into the still water. Some ash clings to the rock below while the rest creates a translucent, milky soup just below me. Gradually I scatter the contents of the container and watch the water as it flows. A good rain, such as we expect that very night, will fully disperse the ash into the Channel.

I am wrenched by sadness — it is the ultimate letting go. And yet, I also experience a certain feeling of peace. "Swim strong little man," I think to myself. "You're free now." When Jake died, a First Nations friend told me that Jake was now 'free to run, the wind in his hair'. This evening I remember those words and they again bring me some solace.

And yet, in the tent at night I am restless. In that ethereal state between dreamscape and wakefulness, I envisage that milky water again. As I watch, a young spirit boy miraculously emerges and swims away. I can see his strawberry blond hair and lanky frame. It is my Jakey. Again, I am filled with that strange combination of sadness and peace as he swims from me away into the near distance. Quietly, I again say goodbye to my sweet firstborn.



Long Sleeves

Fiction Story by **Cathy Hird**

I glance at my watch. You're fifteen minutes late even though it was your idea to beat the noon rush. We've been friends for long enough that I didn't expect anything else. I tug my sleeve back down over my wrist.

"More coffee?" the waitress asks.

"Please." When I came in, I told her I'd wait for you to arrive before I ordered. Now I give you a deadline. Ten more minutes. I look up, and there you are dancing between the restaurant tables with a smile so bright it hurts.

"Sorry. My manager popped in, and I couldn't put him off. I knew you wouldn't mind." You open your arms inviting me to stand. When I get up, you wrap me in a bear hug.

"Ouch." The sound is out of my mouth before I can stop it.

You step back and tilt your head the way you do. "Did I hurt you?"

"It's nothing you did." I slide back into my place.

You hang your coat on the chair. "You shouldn't do things that hurt your back. That's what Jack is for."

"Some things you don't see coming. Jack wanted to move his desk, but what happened..."

The waitress appears. You look up at her, intent on hearing the specials. "I'll have a mint tea. By the time you're back, we'll be ready to order." You run your finger down the menu. "I've tried most of these. You'd like the spinach quiche."

"I was thinking of the special, the lentil soup." I hesitate for a moment. "I've been wanting to see you. Thanks for suggesting lunch. Just the two of us for a change."

Frown lines crease your forehead. "You sound tired. That job is running you ragged."

"I suppose. This was one of those days when no one could make a decision without me."

You touch my hand lightly. "You give that hospital way too much of yourself. You need to be more like me. Always remember, it's just a job."

"Today I don't have to rush back. I took this afternoon off so we can talk."

"I wish I could take time off." You sigh. "I've so much wedding planning to get done."

"You still have nine months."

You tilt your water glass toward me. "I want to follow your example and have everything done a week ahead so I can enjoy the event."

"Don't make me your model. I missed some important pieces." I twist my mug in my hands. I look up and meet your eyes, just as the waitress arrives with your tea.

You announce your order, then flash a smile at me. "The spinach quiche?"

"I'll have the soup special." I smile at you to make up for the correction.

"You remember that I spent the weekend in the city to work on The Event?"

"Of course I remember. Your mom and sister went along. How did it go?"

"Thank you for asking." You give a quick laugh. "I admit I am rather obsessed with the topic."

"It happens. The wedding pushes everything else aside."

"I'd have taken you along if Jack had set you free. In fact, I could have used your help to choose the centre pieces. I want them to be exactly like yours."

"Thanks for the compliment, I guess."

You list off the things you managed to find and how many of each you picked up. You pause when the waitress brings our lunch, then dive right back in. "I got the beads to go in the glass bowls on sale. Candle colour was harder." You give a mock frown. "They won't be exactly like yours. I couldn't go with aqua for a fall wedding."

"So you chose...?"

"Gold. A better fit for October. They'll match the bridesmaids' flowers, too."

My cell phone rings. I glance at who is calling and flip it over.

"You can answer that. I don't mind."



"I didn't want to interrupt your train of thought."

"An important call is not an interruption. Besides, this is a line of thinking I can't lose track of."

"It was just Jack. He'll be home when I get there. You, I want to talk with.... about Jack."

You take a bite of your lasagna. "It's so sweet he calls you in the middle of the day."

Because you don't look up, you don't see me shake my head.

"Richard never calls me," you complain.

"He's a teacher, on duty from first bell to last."

"Even on Saturday, he didn't pick up when I called." You wave your hand at me. "He's leaving all the decisions up to me."

"You had the right people with you."

"I sent him two pictures to help me chose the boxes for the guests' favours."

"You really expected him to have an opinion on that?"

You point your fork at me. "Don't take his side."

"He knows you have a plan, and he's giving you space to carry it out. He's a gem."

"Do you still have some of the bowls you used for your centre pieces?"

"A couple I think, in a box covered with a year and a half of dust. They'll be in my parents' closet."

"I think I got enough, but they weren't cheap, so I didn't get extra. And our guest list keeps expanding. Richard has such a big family, and I have to invite all my friends. If I end up short, I'll know where I can get some to fill in."

"You are welcome to have them. They are no use to me."

"Oh, I'd make sure they got back to you."

"Please don't."

You place your hand on your heart. "I will not carry away even one of your treasured keepsakes."

"Well, it would be silly to say, 'The woman with the nearest birthday to today can take the centre piece, except at tables 4 and 5. Those have to go back to my matron of honour.' I won't miss them."

You shake your head. "Come on. You know I'd arrange things better than that."

"I mean it. You end up with so much useless stuff after the wedding."

"You sound like an old married woman." You put your hand on mine. "Don't get jaded, or I'll have to choose a different matron of honour. And I don't want to do that. I'm working hard to live up to the standard you and Jack set."

"I'm not sure I am a good model. The event itself was a bit of a blur. And since then.... There are just so many things you can't control, and some you miss."

"That's what lists are for," you say.

"Some things you don't think of putting on the list."

"Well, you are next on my list. Your appointment with the dress maker. This Saturday would be perfect."

"I have to work Saturday. That's how I got this afternoon off. And...you know Jack. He needs to know three weeks



in advance what my plans are."

"In three weeks then."

I hesitate. "I might be able to manage that. I'll have to check."

You put your hands on the table and try to look apologetic. "I hate to mention it, but is the style of dress going to work? Will it still fit in nine months?"

"What?" I am confused.

"You know, the plan for a baby."

"There's no such plan. We can't afford a child. And I don't think it would sit well with Jack."

"But he told me he is longing for a baby. I saw the sparkle in

his eye when he said it."

"He'd say whatever he thought you wanted to hear." I shake my head. "Getting pregnant is not on the agenda, so don't worry about the dress."

The waitress lays down separate bills, and you flash her a smile. "I hate to run off on you, but I have to put the finishing touches on a presentation for this afternoon." You notice my eyes are glistening. You sigh. "Weddings are so romantic even talking about one can bring a tear to the eye." You stand up, then lean over to give me a peck on the cheek. "Take care of that back. Tell Jack I told him to get one of his buddies to help move stuff next time."

"I'll try." After you turn away, I wipe away the tears that escape from my eyes. If you had had just a little more time, I might have pulled up my sleeve to show the bruises.





Out of Kilter

Essay by Elizabeth Templeman

The universe is screwing with me. It's conspired to compromise that elusive sense of control, toying with my dignity, distorting perception, fogging my brain, churning my gut. It's thrown me out of kilter, as the expression goes.

Vertigo: originating from somewhere in the looping alcoves of the inner ear, an affliction typically considered to be benign. Vertigo has been my affliction for five weeks, and I have to say, it hardly *seems* benign.

Vertigo is seasickness on dry land. It's ground that's slipped its mental mooring. Walking down the hall beside a colleague, I turn left to speak to him, only to reel into the wall to my right. I do a quick deliberation: can I make that stagger seem normal, faking an intention to veer abruptly right? The added mental processing distracts me so that I forget what we were talking about. Nothing left but to resign all semblance of self-possession and to confess to the vertigo, which I don't really want to acknowledge. Or to have.

Even after I face the damn condition, I can't get used to it, because it keeps morphing into a different version of disorientation. It spins me along its axes. At first it confounded me as I'd turn to my left, especially on a sudden turn. And so I'd positioned myself to the left of others, leaving me able to track things from a rightward perspective. I slowed down my movement (aiming for the kind of fluidity of a dancer); a friend asked if I'd hurt my back (neatly dispelling any delusion of balletic grace). Despite the awkwardness, and occasional lapse—each resulting in a surprising spin of my own private axis—I was becoming accustomed to this curious new condition.

And then, a shift to a vertical version of vertigo. Stepping up or down, or simply *looking* up and down, would send me reeling. Stairways became treacherous and I pitched headlong a few times before adapting to a new level of carefulness. Although safe from the twin risks of shame or pain of plunging down a busy stairway, the worst version of up-and-down vertigo was reeling through space at my desk, having looked too suddenly down from my computer screen. Having to clutch the edge of one's desk until the world rights itself is an eerie experience. One generally presumes desk work to be mundane, and stillness, a boringly safe state. But then, my first encounter with vertigo had been from what should be the safe confines of bed.

That would've been that one restless rotation, mid-insomnia, to look at my clock. Being myopic, that involves grabbing hold of the damned thing and drawing its glowing face to my face. At precisely 1:58 AM, in the third week of August, as I held my clock, our bedroom began to spin around me with all the force of a carnival ride in a horror film. Squeezing my eyes shut, I thought; this could not possibly happen again. But alas, it could. I gripped the headboard with one hand, and stared into the gloom until it ceased spinning. Then I

curled to the right and willed myself back to sleep, praying like only a lapsed Catholic can, that when morning came, I wouldn't even remember whatever this was. For a few days, there was no trace of anything recalling of that unnerving memory. No more nocturnal spin cycles.

And then, suddenly, those shocking episodes set off by a sudden turn to the left; later, when looking or moving up and down at desk or dinner table or dishwasher; and finally (or so I hoped), on a right-ward turn. Which seemed so wrong. Six weeks later, and far wiser in the distinctly peculiar ways of vertigo, it vanished. The crystals in the canals of my inner ears had either repositioned themselves, or maybe dissolved. Or temporarily jammed themselves into some cranny. I felt fully in sync with others moving through the hallways of the university where I work. Desks no longer veered suddenly out of kilter, throwing a corner into my thigh as I move past. Doorways remained static as I manoeuvred through them. I could forget worrying about possibly resembling a drunk staggering past her too sober colleagues.

However, even in its departure vertigo was annoyingly remarkable. For an entire day, not even the slightest threat of the floor dropping, or unmooring. And then, the following night, the oddest sensation: a muffled sound from the right—of some mild compression in the chambers of my inner ear. It was a sound my dishwasher might make as dishes shift and settle, propelled by the forces of streams of water. And then, a wooziness, a wash of mild distortion bringing an oh-so-subtle insinuation of nausea. I navigated with care through my own house, each foot hovering mid-stride to avert the sensation that the kitchen floor was falling from beneath me.

Out of kilter; or *off* kilter, are both ways of experiencing the world: *kilter* being a term of unknown origin, but used in modern vernacular only in the negative.

Never mind that it's all a matter of perception, that even as my brain and eyes roved and my feet sought the ground, I experienced only some rogue sensation brought about by minuscule crystals free-falling in some spiralling canal in my head. Perhaps kilter, or *kelter* in its ancient alternate spelling, is a quality of alignment, of working order or ship-shapeness. Perhaps we notice only when we have left it—or it's left us—behind. Maybe, like normality (or *eptitude*), it's most irksomely apparent as an absence.

This night, though, I am approaching kilter again, and happily so. I have a new appreciation for how mechanical a creature I am, and a renewed sense of humility to accompany that awareness. Yet I long for that boring state of alignment that I can rely on sharing with those around me. Boring, perhaps, but a blessing nonetheless.

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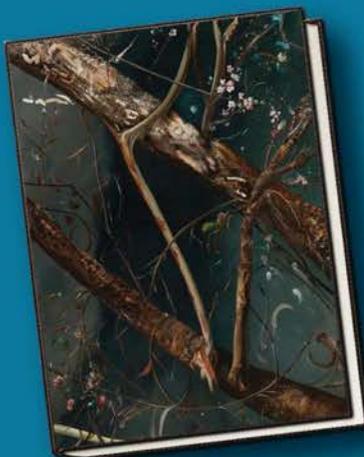
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