



MARCH-JUNE 2022 - ISSUE 11

# Dreamers

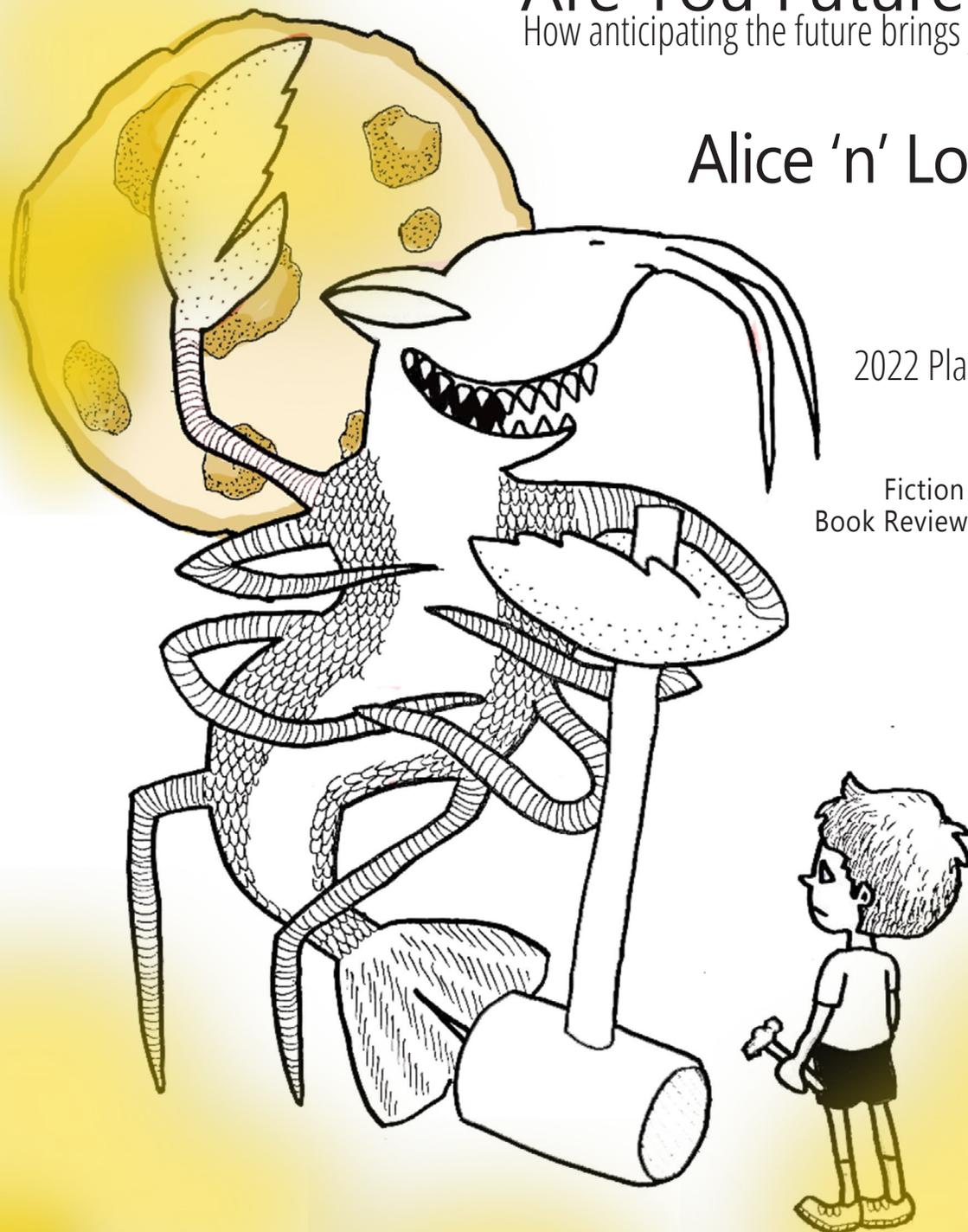
## Creative Writing

### Are You Future Phobic? How anticipating the future brings joy in the present...

### Alice 'n' Lobsterland by Daniel Warriner

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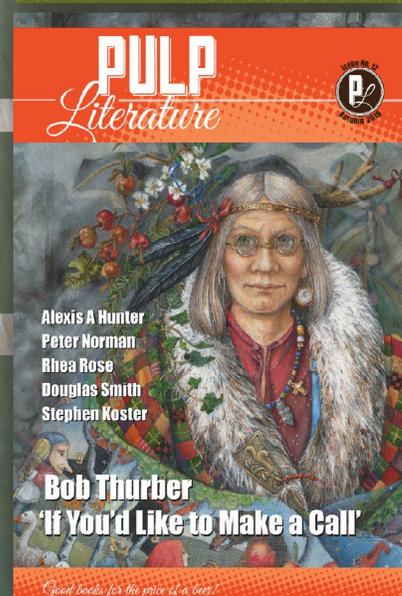
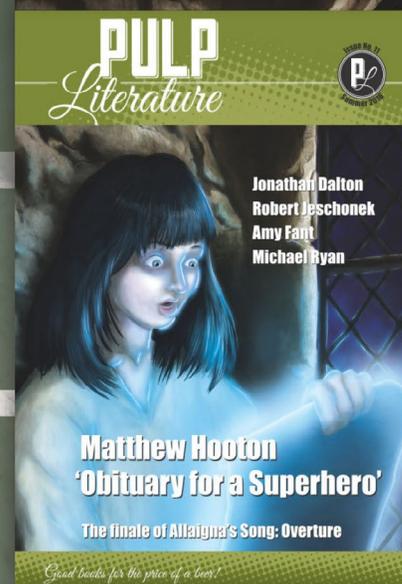
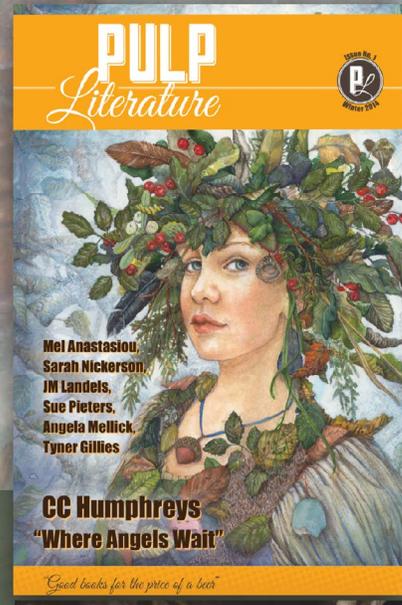
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It glares down at me with a smug crustacean grin, and at once I have no question this is a lobster demon...

—Daniel Warriner

## EDITOR'S LETTER

On February 24th, 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine in what Vladimir Putin called "a special military operation." Despite Putin's attempts to gaslight the world, we know war when we see it. As I write this, we are two weeks into the first major European war in decades. Whole families dead, killed in broad daylight on streets outside their homes. Residential apartment buildings brought to ruins by 21st century missiles. Gaunt eyes of scared children in subway station bomb shelters. Shell-shocked mothers walking for days through the ruins of their country pushing strollers that look identical to the strollers I pushed my own babies in just a few years ago.

Those mothers with their strollers, more than anything, have brought this war home to me. From the safe space that is my office, in my old farmhouse in small town Canada, I watch these images cross my screen and I wonder, how safe am I really? Ukraine is a democratic country, with regular people living their lives like I live my life. The citizens of Ukraine probably felt safe too, until they weren't. A line from the story "Storms Above" by Janice Vis-Gitzel (page 26), keeps running through my thoughts: "How long does it take for the world to break?"

Thankfully, there are signs of hope amongst the horror that has so far been 2022. Those same ordinary Ukrainian citizens have demonstrated profound bravery and resilience as they fight for their families, their country, and their right to live freely and without fear. An interpreter chokes up as he translates Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy's heroic speech to the European Parliament. An elderly Ukrainian stops a Russian tank with nothing but a pointed finger so she can lecture its occupants. A war correspondent pauses her live broadcast to help an exhausted Ukrainian up a flight of crumbling stairs. These are the images that give us hope in the face of this disaster.

Hope. As Ukrainians do everything they can to defend their right to peace, let's send them our hope and support as best we can, however we can. And remember, never stop dreaming. We need our dreams now, more than ever.

Please enjoy Issue 11 of the Dreamers Magazine. Hopefully it brings you a bit of light in a dark time.

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# 2022 STORIES OF MIGRATION, SENSE OF PLACE & HOME CONTEST

CONTEST WINNER

## Letter to My Ghost Kingdom

Nonfiction by Teo Chesney

Dear Brazil,

I hope you and our people are doing well. I write to you from my dining room table in New Orleans. I write because it is that time of year again – summer – when being adopted and the mystery of my lineage are hardest to ignore. My birthday is coming soon, but now the sentiment of celebrating another year older is dwarfed by the fact that I was born.

Occasionally, while overhearing coworkers talking about pregnancy or giving birth, I am rudely reminded that a stork did not drop me on my parents' door. Suddenly, I must reconcile that there are two people I have not met and without whom I would not exist. With a churning in my stomach, I remember that I grew and made a home inside of another person for nine months.

On a brief and unrelated note, would you mind if I refer to you as B. for the remainder of this letter?

Sometimes B., my life exists in my mind like mythology. As if I were conjured into this world: I didn't exist, and then I did. I wish I knew what you know about who I am and how I came to be. My early life is pieced together orally through stories that change and bend and swell with each retelling. I only have a few half-remembered stories my parents recited to me as a child about how I was a strong baby who did a half push-up at a visit to the doctors in Brazil and how I didn't mind napping through a late dinner.

When my birth month begins, a switch flips, and I experience a heightened sense of being human, being born, and having two people who fucked and made me. The June of my last birthday, my 23rd, buzzed with the gravitational pull towards my beginnings. For the first time, I fixated on lineage beyond my biological parents, which I still occasionally forget I have. At the time, I imagined grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, and siblings, and I still thirst for our shared history. I know you know who they are and what they created, but I don't, and so I imagine.

I imagine that perhaps I am related to the famous artist Djanira

da Motta e Silva, who captures the essence of you with the most intricate two-dimensional art I have ever seen. She and I were born under the same stars exactly 82 years apart, and because of that, we share the muses of summer and of nature and creativity.

I am lured to Djanira's art because she was self-taught and because the focus of her art was observing customs and preserving daily rites of passage in rural and agrarian settings. She was devoted to capturing Brazil's essence, which she argued could only be found in the lives of the commons, the celebrations of the people, and in the natural splendor of Brazil. Djanira chronicled the stories of people and culture on canvas, woodcuts, and engravings. I chronicle my stories of being without Brazil's people, culture, and natural splendor on the page. Our art fits together in a crude puzzle of what it means to be Brazilian.

In her effervescent art, color palettes shift from vivid greens and yellows of the landscape into harsh reds and browns and greys. Skies are no longer made with open and continuous strokes; instead, they are broken up into sterile and geometric grids. The dancing is gone. There are no more saints, no traces of Afro-Brazilian spirituality. The pace and passion of our people vanish. Her subjects become demolition cranes, trains, planes, and people working in Brazil's lime mines.

I also trust her with her depictions of your heart B. because of the critical conversations surrounding her work. As a self-taught, poor, woman much of the immediate response from the art world claimed her art was "primitive," "folklorist," and "naive." Her response was, "I may be, but my painting is not." She did not change her art to gain more favor from the artistic elite or even make more money. She knew that most of Brazil's beauty came from Folklore, from the forest, from the Orixás.

Eventually, the tides shifted, and Djanira became posthumously revered. She became known as Brazil's documentalist, the chronicler of rites, and the painter of customs. That is always how it is with those who have a

keen sense of observation and strong critiques of cultural importance. No one will listen while the passion and the talent still beat within. People are so lazy. All the while small, brilliant works, forged in the masses slip like grains of sand through our fingers. Do you ever think about that? I mourn for the words of nobodies who had vital lessons or exceptional stories to tell, but they died, and their words were never found.

\*\*\*

Staying cool in the AC at work, I think about how similar the oppressive New Orleans sun is to your sun. I take joy in the mossy pastel shotgun homes that fill Mid-City and the Marigny because they resemble some of the Favelas in your towns. My memories of you are recycled images from photos – the few I captured when my family visited in 2016. These memories play in my head like a slideshow: cityscapes transition into rolling fields lined with shrubby beige brush and trash; in a zoo, the jaguar gazes, or glares at me from behind grimy fences; thin horses and dogs roam on the outskirts of towns and kicking up small plumes of dust as they wander languidly.

From these severed memories I propagate new—false memories, ones that never were but allow me to wonder and construct new components of a self I have not awakened. On our two connecting flights to visit you, and in sparse moments of privacy, I often daydreamt of running away from my vacationing family once we arrived. In many daydreams—

*I would walk miles on the dusty roads until reaching a small ranch to find an older gentleman with sun baked into the cracks of his skin like rich leather discolored over many years. In broken Portuguese, I ask for work. Pointing to his small herd of horses and ponies, I'd mumble, "Amo cavalos. Eu conheço suas almas." I love horses. I know their souls. He'd smile and lead me behind the little complex of main favelas to even smaller buildings made of clay and wood with metal sheeting for rooves.*

*After settling, his son arrives. I am shocked to see that he is dressed for a desk job. "Dinner is ready in twenty minutes. There is an outdoor shower behind your bunk." I say thank you, take a frigid shower in my briefs, and hang them on a tree branch outside my glassless window. Over the next few days, I am taught the language of the Brazilian horse world. I am nervous because I haven't ridden consistently in a couple years. Other men working on the farm laugh at me as I try to tack up their horse in a cart harness. Over time I learn the ropes, impress them with my emotional connection and bodily communication with the horses. After a year, the old man asks me if I want to stay indefinitely. By now, he is like an uncle or young grandfather figure. I agree, and he presents me with my own horse, a young stallion, just barely four.*

*I act as an older brother to the old man's young son and daughter, drive the cart into town and sell our produce. I blend into their family and the tribe.*

\*\*\*

Another symptom of my summer cravings for you and your culture B. is that I start listening to my playlists of your music and watching movies made about you—even the ones I don't like—just to experience the prosody of Portuguese. Intermittently, I need the language to ring through me, like a tuning fork, even if I understand little. And I fight a palpable and perpetual fear that I will fall out of tune with you—become tone-deaf to your pitch.

My favorite of your songs, "Águas de Março" or "Waters of

March," is sung by the famous artists Elis Regina and Antonio Carlos Jobim. It was composed by Jobim in 1972 after visiting his family ranch, which had been battered by the seasonal storms. This version is my favorite because the grace is mirrored in the duetting voices of Elis and Antonio.

In 2001, the *Folha de S. Paulo*, a São Paulo newspaper, carried out a poll with over 200 participating musicians and voted "Águas de Março" to be the all-time best Brazilian song. Countless musicians have reimagined the song because the lyrics have a universalizing admiration for nature and the nature of life. To me, the "Waters of March" sounds and behaves more like a poem than a song. Each sentence begins with "it's the \_\_\_\_\_" or "A \_\_\_\_\_". I am lulled by how the song moves through disconnected collages of the essence of spring. The song is spring, the song is life, and it structurally mimics the way our brains catalog what we love and how we live:

A truckload of bricks in the soft morning light,  
the shot of a gun, in the dead of night.

A mile, a must, a thrust, a bump.  
It's a girl, it's a rhyme, it's the cold, it's the mumps.

The plan of the house, the body in bed,  
the car that got stuck, it's the mud, it's the mud.

A float, adrift, a flight, a wing,  
a hawk, a quail, the promise of spring.

And the riverbank talks of the waters of march.  
It's the promise of life. It's the joy in your heart.

The song is like a siren inviting me to become part of your literature and art. It would be remarkable, challenging, and deeply satisfying to translate my own work into Portuguese. If only I had that command over your language, had grown up knowing these words. If only I could write with two minds and access two vocabularies.

\*\*\*

As a writer, I have considered applying for a grant or fellowship that will send me to you B., to live for an extended period to learn and write and live. It is truthfully an unlikely dream, at least during my graduate years. I am hoping that someday I will have the opportunity. These fantasies of you surge softly but urgently through my bones when I close my eyes, tugging on the invisible tether between my mother country and me—

*I wake from loud tings of rain droplets on the metal roof above me. The dog has taken to sleeping at my feet. He is not bothered by the racket, but he lifts a lazy head when I slip on my sandals and wanders into the open kitchen with me. The house is pregnant with the petrichor of springtime. Host mother left for the city to see her sister this morning, and I can hear host father rustling in his bedroom. I find myself sitting on the front steps in the earliest hours of morning rain, thinking of Elis Regina. The slightest chill from the rain's breeze slips away as I sip my coffee sweetened with condensed milk. I smile and think of home. My hands wrap firmly around the mug. I would eat condensed milk by the spoonful in my childhood, thinking perhaps it was a remnant of a flavor bridge connecting me to what my birth mother may have eaten while carrying me.*

*Our neighbors wander by and wave at me, smiling. The village is small, and I have met most of our closest neighbors in the evenings at our community feast. These occasions are exactly what I wanted from Brazil, exactly how I wanted to belong. People bring plates and plates of food. There are always many types of smoked meat, rice dishes, and my favorite pao de queijo. Music booms from the doorway; people are laughing*

and spinning and dancing. The host dog slips from one group to the next, stealing from plates and dodging worn-out flip flops hurled in his direction. I drink and eat and drink and receive many laughs as I try to dance like my Brazilian family and friends. By the end, we putter around sluggishly, our bellies full of beer and meat, our feet sore and dusty from dancing. I recline on the doorsteps watching as night takes over the sky and the little yellow lights dim in the windows of other people's homes.

The following afternoon I have taken up a spot under a tall and crooked palm tree. The air is sharp and saccharine, and a thin layer of smog drifts through town from the nearest sugarcane mill. Macuniama, the stray tortoiseshell cat I found stuck under some debris in the abandoned gas station, winds himself around my legs in figure eight. I can feel his hair sticking to my damp skin.

Thiago, my host cousin, has offered to work on my Portuguese and then help translate some of my writing with me today. I am eager to begin since my Portuguese lessons with my host mom have been largely unsuccessful. She speaks quickly, and her accent is thick with the tang from her childhood in Santa Catarina. She quickly becomes frustrated with me as I try to "unmuddle" her words and separate phrases she threads into one.

On the other hand, Thiago grew up in Rio de Janeiro's urban center and spoke English by high school. His accent is minimal and one that would resemble the Brazilians featured in movies. I have also found better luck retaining the language when translating my previous words, syntax and discovering how my speech does or doesn't fit into Portuguese linguistic patterns. Thiago is also the only queer person I have met so far, and though we have talked little about the subject, I have noticed that the unspoken comfortability between us has increased steadily since.

"Oi Boa tarde Téo! Tudo bem? Vejo que você ainda tem aquele gatinho seguindo você. Você está pronto para traduzir um homenzinho português?"

Thiago says, dropping his Portuguese-to- English and English-to Portuguese dictionary in front of me. I like that he calls me little man despite my insecurities about not being validated as a trans man in Brazil, but I also didn't expect to find someone who was unflinchingly accepting. He is also excited to see my work eventually published when I return to the states. He says he can't wait to be in a book.

"Sim Thiago, I am hoping to finish the first draft of--"

"No Português!"

"Ahh sim! Sim Thiago. Espero terminar o primeiro rascunho de Cane Fields até o final desta semana."

By the end of the day, we had revised ten pages with some trouble. There was an argument over some words that lost their connotation when translated into Portuguese. The work was rewarding and as the day came to an end, Skye-Blue-Pink light filtered through the palms above, and warm shadows flickered over the annotated pages before me. I flipped through pages of my work, my thoughts, and marveled that they were finally in the language that my brain was meant to speak. A new door had been unlocked, and I finally and eagerly entered.

\*\*\*

It has been five years and a week since my one and only trip to you, and my physiological alarm has been tripped. I can barely get through a class without googling a way to go back. B., I know that I am not the only adoptee that feels this way about their mother country and their life that never was. But in general, it feels taboo to critique adoption on a larger scale.

About a year ago, I read *All You Can Ever Know*, a memoir by Nicole Chung. She was adopted in America, but her birth family was Korean immigrants. Chung grew up as the shining miracle, god's gift to her parents, who could not conceive. Reading this book was the first moment in literature and life where I watched someone struggle with the impossible burden to have a seraphim-like title placed upon us.

In addition to the typical bullying in early childhood, Chung articulated what it felt to be something special to her parents. She also dared to share how it was impossible to forget that she was other. She expressed how it felt to be stranded from her culture and mother tongue, and wondered about her biological family's lives. It was even more relieving to read her grapple with the moral repercussions of adoption as a concept. I had not known anyone before this moment who openly challenged adoption.

Like Chung, I don't know if I could ever wholeheartedly endorse adoption. Especially transracial adoptions. How do you feel, B. since you see the children who need to be adopted and aren't? You see the poverty, the assault, and other scenarios that lead to the decision to place children up for adoption. How do you feel when your children are taken or saved or spared and assimilated into another culture? How do you feel when we forget you?

Of course, I think that adoptees' lives are often improved in critical ways. But from our side of the equation, there is no way to measure the value of what that child can lose in terms of cultural practices, a sense of belonging, and group identity. I also hate having to justify these losses to people, to readers, occasionally to myself. I always hope that people know that I am intelligent enough to have a nuanced perception of adoption.

But that is what most people want, B. They want to be made to feel good. They want me to clear the cultural conscience before entertaining criticism. Those who agree often express discomfort from the gate and contradict their criticisms with phrases like "But it still saves so many lives" or "it is a beautiful thing though...".

More than anything, B., the rotten tooth of adoption is this idea of the lucky brown child who was saved from certain poverty and starvation and other inconceivable acts of violence. Though my life with you may have boiled down to one or several of those experiences, no child should grow up trying to calculate the debt they owe to save and punish themselves for not being what they should be. For many years I resisted being grateful for my life, even in the specific lavishness that I received from my upper-middle-class upbringing. I felt trapped. I blamed my parents for choosing me because I craved the things that I lost in becoming their child. I was grateful enough, however, that I knew my parents didn't deserve the hurt I inflicted upon them.

My only solutions to this unending and raw dilemma were: causing my parents to suffer, punishing myself, or escapism—the lattermost being the most enjoyable form. From my internal conflict of being adopted, I became a storyteller.

# Poet's Practice in these Times

Poem by Nan Williamson

There was a time when you wrote  
that autumn dazzled struck our maple trees  
and they were rich deep red and golden leaves  
You said that early sunsets left them burning  
hectic just before the night

This year the trees are sick pathetic  
fallacy leaves wrinkled crispy brown  
shrivelled on the branch they break  
from dried-out stems falling into dusty piles  
when weak enough and withered

Now you write of nightmares dark rentals of the soul  
foul play conduct unbecoming top brass  
behaving badly covid's daily deaths  
pandemic poverty more floods and fires  
and here and there a Machiavelli  
who can smile and smile and be a villain

Outside there are sirens someone's been shot

Listen you must still speak of the shadowy  
woman humming silky blue tunes by the night  
window of violets dappling the lawn of lovers  
who somehow survive and once again without irony  
offer to the betrayed world one persistent green  
shoot that springs from a spent maple tree

# 0200 December 1st: Emergency Department

Poem by Michelle Anderson

i have experienced a transformation  
when the witching hour strikes,  
surrounded by limbs on stretchers  
and retching and pus  
and no available beds;  
where the humanity around me  
dissolves into bodies  
dissolves into mind.  
and so, it is a transformation  
of loss  
wherein we all become  
the sum of one of our parts



# The Joy of Anticipation

Are you future phobic? How anticipating the future brings joy in the present...

Nonfiction by Melissa Kuipers

Shortly after I got engaged I became obsessed, not with planning a white wedding or dreams of happily-ever-after, but with a fear of my soon-to-be husband dying. Walking to work I was suddenly overwhelmed with an image of him lying on the side of the road in a pool of blood, his bicycle thrown in the ditch. Sitting at my computer turned into imagining us in the doctor's office holding hands and receiving a terminal diagnosis. Waiting for him to open my apartment door evolved into fear of opening the door to the pitying faces of police.

I've read enough Brene Brown now to be completely qualified to diagnosis my past self with an acute case of Fear of Vulnerability. Dying spouses are a familiar scene in my family. Three of my uncles died when their children were young. My mother's father died when she was 10, leaving my socially isolated immigrant income-less grandmother to raise her seven children on a widow's pension. My own mother died when we children were all in our 20s. The grief of widowhood is not unfamiliar to me.

I had been mostly single until I met my husband at 30. I wasn't sure if I wanted children. But when I met him I suddenly wanted them; I had found a person I not only perpetually enjoyed being around, but also someone I expected I could happily co-parent with.

Still, it took me longer than it took him to know that this was the right decision for me. When I finally committed to a lifetime together, the fear of losing him overpowered me. It just felt so risky to join my life with someone, to share most of our everythings. If I could prepare myself for the possibility of it, some part of my brain told myself, I would be better able to deal with tragedy when it happened.

Except, as most of us know, tragedy seldom happens as you expect.

Eventually the fears subsided, but never fully dissipated. Five years and two kids into our marriage, I think of his potential death less often now, but still more than I'd like to admit.

My husband is an enthusiastic forward-looking type. He gets excited about upcoming trips, parties, events, especially during these busy and tiring days of caring for young children. I'm not completely resistant to anticipation—I just try to keep it at bay for as long as possible. "I'm really looking forward to \_\_\_\_\_," he'd say, to which I'd reply, "Just keep your expectations in check." A sort of low-level anxiety rises up within me, an unrecognized discomfort with his potential disappointment. "The weather might not hold up," or "Remember they cancelled on us last time."

During this pandemic, my husband has been deeply craving

outings: football games at the bar, games nights in friends' living rooms, family get-togethers, and date nights out of house arrest without the kids. For him, these activities are invigorating and a regular requirement for his mental health. It's the combination of good company and good food and drink that make them meaningful.

Because we cannot easily access the good, in-person company, food has become more important to both of us. I bake and ferment: being on maternity leave, I have flexibility to lean into the millennial clichés and nurture my sourdough and kombucha. He opts for take-out as his coping mechanism. But as the stingy, DIYer who does most of the cooking, I seldom opt for ordering in. When he suggests we schedule a take-out meal at the end of the week, I say, "Well, I've got the meals all planned out already and I don't want to waste produce."

It wasn't until a recent tiff that I realized what take-out actually means to him. "We can afford to order in a lot more than we do," he said to me, "and I think you enjoy the break from cooking."

"I'd rather keep take-out as a back-up plan, for days when the kids are clingy and I'm feeling overwhelmed," I said.

"I get that. It's just that when we order last minute, I don't have a lot of time to get excited about it."

"Ohhhh. . ." I said, finally understanding why he was suggesting take-out on a regular basis. "Knowing it's coming is part of the enjoyment."

"I spend so much time fanaticizing about food," he said. He thinks about his favourite meals, reminisces about restaurants, dreams about where he'll go out for dinner when this is over. I suddenly realized my brain has been doing the same thing, less consciously. Several times a week I wake up salivating from a dream about a meal so elaborately imagined that the memory of the taste stays with me for hours.

"I need things to look forward to," he said. "It's embarrassing how much I look forward to games night over Zoom, or to ordering take-out since we can't go out, or to dragging the TV outside to watch the football game with friends." Looking-forward to small pleasures was getting him through these dark days of lockdown.

"Better to have anticipated and not have than to never have anticipated at all?" I asked.

"Exactly."

I realized then that, in my many attempts to protect him over the years, I had been diminishing his positive experience of things.

Relationship experts, doctors Julie and John Gottman, became notable a number of years ago for popularizing their research on "bids" in communication. We regularly extend bids for conversation, affection and interest to our loved ones. Throughout the day we make requests through statements to our partners, parents and friends: anything from, "Do you think it will rain today?" to "What are you binging?" to "Do you like this outfit?" to "Look what I drew!" can be a bid, an invitation for engagement, approval, response, empathy or shared experience. To offer a bid is to risk. It's saying, join me in this moment.

If saying, "I'm really looking forward to \_\_\_\_\_," is a bid, then saying, "You might want to keep your expectations low," might be a rejection of that bid. My husband is inviting me to dive into the shared experience of anticipation. My reaction is to try to pull him out of the pool while wearing my life jacket over my clothes.

Anticipation is vulnerability. It's excitement for what could happen, and, for those of us who lean towards anxiety or self-protection, it seems like setting oneself up for failure.

I've already seen the painful ways this has unfolded in our marriage. When I showed my husband a positive pregnancy test a month after we decided we were going to start trying to conceive, I said, "Just so that you know, they estimate over 20% of pregnancies end in miscarriage." "Congratulations?" he said. My husband had wanted to be a father as long as he could remember. But when I was the one whose body held the promise of children, he took his lead from me. In order to avoid the pain of disappointment, I stifled that initial elation for both of us.

Our baby was born nine months later. My husband has not yet died. Most of the things he has looked forward to have been positive experiences.

And, to validate that niggling warning voice in my head, some have been disappointing. In response that voice says, "Maybe you put too much weight on this event." But I wish instead I had revelled in his joy of looking forward. I wish that I had understood that, along with all the clichés and axioms, anticipation is part of the journey, and it's not just about the destination.

In writing this, I tried to find out who coined the phrase, "Keep your expectations low and you'll avoid disappointment." But I couldn't find any one originator. Instead I found many versions of that sentiment, scrawled in artsy fonts across pastel backgrounds, the meme or Instagram version of the inspirational poster. This sentiment is too cliché, too normative, too human nature to have one author. Most of us gravitate towards some level of self-protection as a default.

And yet we hold this tendency in tension with hope and desire. We cannot move forward or pursue goals or set them or plan or design or hope without anticipation. In order to build a career, you need to imagine how fulfilling it will be. In order to plan a trip, you've got to envision yourself in the sun or at the sites. We all find ourselves somewhere on the spectrum of complete indifference and ecstatic expectation on any given issue. Perhaps the next popular personality typology will find some metric for this condition.

...

Urge surfing, a term coined by psychologist Alan Maratt, refers to the process of applying mindfulness practices to the urges experienced by addicts. Maratt, an expert in the field of addictions, observed that urges come in waves, with a rise in intensity, a peak, and then an eventual crash. Rather than trying to push away the desire for the substance or behaviour associated with the addiction, urge surfing encourages the individual to allow the craving to spread over them, then to pay attention to the physiological, emotional and mental sensations that come with the urge.

While research into urge surfing has yielded positive results in addictions recovery, some are looking into other implications for everyday life. Regularly we long for things we can't, or shouldn't, have. I might want to eat an entire container of ice cream every night, or abruptly leave my screaming children in the house while I escape to quietly enjoy a cappuccino amid the dulcet tunes of a softly lit coffee shop. I might want to skip work everyday to watch binge baking shows on Netflix. (All hypothetical cravings, of course.)

While there might be contexts in which these behaviours are appropriate, there are plenty in which they are not. So the common teaching is to avoid thinking of these desires. Distract yourself with something else. Be in the now. Be content with what you have. Push the thought away.

But what if being in the now means recognizing, even dwelling on, these cravings? What if being present in my current situation means recognizing I'm wanting something I currently can't have?

One of the observations of research about urge surfing is that cravings, when accepted with curiosity and self-compassion, subside after 20-30 minutes. When resisted, they take longer and become overwhelming.

...

During the last May of my mother's life, doctors discovered her constant headaches were caused by her remissive breast cancer finally creeping into her brain. My brother and his fiancée made the decision to move their end-of-summer wedding to an earlier date, to increase the chances of Mom being able to attend. While wrestling through the cognitive and physiological toll of the brain tumour—no longer able to think deeply or walk without assistance or converse without exhaustion—all she thought about was the wedding. My brother would walk into the room and she would ask: "What colour flowers are you going to have?" "How many people are you inviting?" "What song are you having for your first dance?" My sister-in-law is a saint for answering repetitive questions day after day.

The wedding came. It was beautiful and there were many tears, and Mom smiled all day long and danced in her wheelchair all night. The next day it was all she could talk about. "I felt like a princess," she said, forgetting she was not the star of the show.

At the end of August, when Mom could walk unassisted and cook basic meals again, I said to a friend, "I guess they didn't need to go through the hassle of moving up the wedding after all."

"Or maybe," my friend said, "it's exactly what she needed."

Perhaps she needed the hope of a huge celebratory affair within reach to give her the strength to fight through the hardest part of living with the tumour. Doctors were working with her to not just give her quality of life, but as much quantity as her body would allow. The looking forward might have been what she needed to get through the hardest months of chemo and radiation. Maybe it was the gift of dreaming about this one special day that kept her pushing forward until she was well enough to continue on. Was the looking forward giving her the stamina she needed to override the pain of dying?

Mom continued to cradle the memories of her child's wedding throughout her decline. In the end, the eleven months she lived after her brain cancer diagnosis was more than any of us expected.

...

In the dark, long nights of the first few months of my second child's life, I spent many hours a day fantasizing about our upcoming southern vacation. On the day he was to turn four months old, we would find a brief respite from the cold months of Canadian winter in the sun. I bought a new bathing suit for my postpartum body. I packed all of our suitcases two weeks beforehand. I bought a covered floatation device so the tiny baby could join us in the pool with the protection of shade.

And then two days before we were scheduled to leave, our political leaders begged Canadians not to fly due to the

sudden spread of Covid-19. I cried as I told our almost three-year-old we wouldn't be going. His wails vicariously gave voice to my disappointment.

It took me until this recent conversation with my husband to realize how lovely the hope of this trip had been, how its benefits may have been worth the resulting disappointment that ensued when this trip fell apart. Those initial months of sleeplessness, of rocking a baby with day-night confusion for two hours straight in the middle of the night, of toddler potty-training regression and screaming fits of "Just throw the baby out the window!" as he adjusted to no longer being the only needy creature in our home—all these frustrations were minimized because of the joy of looking forward.

The anticipation of that trip was greater than a week of travel could hold. It was about more than the trip. I knew that at the time. Even so, there it was, a saccharine craving that hunkered on until I knew for certain it would not be satisfied. And then for months the memory of the daydreams still lingered like a sweet aftertaste.

Perhaps embracing the joy of anticipation means accepting that genuine happiness can still exist, even when an experience is only in our imagination. It affirms that vicarious experience is in fact experience. It isn't always escapism or avoidance. Craving is the human gift of imagination doing some of its good work. I am slowly learning the benefit of leaning into desire and longing, of waiting and looking forward. And I am learning to schedule take-out meals in our family calendar.



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# Breen Writes on Radical Acceptance in *Any Kind of Luck at All*

Book Review by Carole Mertz



Readers of *Dreamers Creative Writing* will certainly welcome *Any Kind of Luck at All*, a memoir about generational mental illness, drug addiction, and parental loss. Mary Fairhurst Breen has a wrenching story to tell, and she delivers it with smart handling of detail and fine manipulation of the non-linear structure of her experiences. Here is good writing we could wish to emulate.

In the opening chapters, we learn about Breen's mother, who had a defining influence on Breen's life. "My mum went off to the metropolis of Montreal to attend McGill University," she writes. "The war was on and there weren't enough teachers left to offer Grades 12 and 13..." She simply graduated after Grade 11 and went on to university, sharing boarding house rooms with her sister. When Breen reaches a similar age, she develops a fierce love of prominent literary heroes. Angelou, Kerouac, Margaret Atwood, and Alice Munro were among her stars. At the same time, Breen also develops frightening anxiety attacks. She loves her studies, but along with the anxiety attacks, she experiences a "bottomless pit" feeling "that causes people to take whole bottles of pills. One evening, that's what I did." Her mother immediately prepares an effective emetic, but suicidal episodes continue throughout this phase of Breen's life.

"Looking back through my mother's diaries, it would seem I did quite a few terrible things, lashing out at her in the way we do only to the people who love us unconditionally..." A possible cause: on her father's side there were troubles and emotional abnormalities. "He was a very small man and often sat sideways in his chair like a kid." Following visits to a good therapist, Breen begins to better understand this obsessive-compulsive, manic-depressive parent.

As a young adult, Breen marries a man who becomes an alcoholic and his illness eventually disrupts their marriage. They have two children together. Due to family obligations, Breen misses many potential opportunities to further her

career. Although Breen never achieves real economic security, she does succeed in maintaining constant and loving relationships with her daughters. In the middle chapters we learn of Breen's fluid sexual identity. She develops a lesbian relationship with her friend, Mary.

Breen is skilled at using humour to address profound life issues, often taking forays into comic depictions of her life, particularly with her challenges and successes as a young nursing mother. In her chapter "Lactation Humor," she shows us how fearless she is and how funny her writing can be. Some of her passages elicited 15 minutes of sustained laughter from me.

On 'cronedom' she writes, "Within the triad maiden-mother-crone, it's certainly the stage least fraught with worry. Just because we can't remember why we went into the kitchen doesn't mean we don't have invaluable insights to share." I like the way she shares her insights. She urges us toward "radical acceptance" of adversity. People who've had luck turn against them can only appreciate Breen's bravery. "My volunteer work has kept me connected to the arts, which makes my situation infinitely more bearable," she states. "Art is the point. Stuff is not the point." She will not berate herself for the bad luck she's had. She made choices "that made sense at the time," she says.

To avoid spoilers, I'll leave it to you, dear readers, to discover and appreciate what you will about Breen's life. *Any Kind of Luck at All* gives us plenty to consider, especially as we struggle to survive this present age of severities. Elements in this memoir are situations that surround us in our own communities. Breen is a Canadian author to admire; her message may aid us in our own struggles.

Note: Mary Fairhurst Breen grew up in the suburbs of Toronto, the city where she also raised her children. *Any Kind of Luck at All* is her first book.

# Alice 'n' Lobsterland

Nonfiction Story by Daniel Warriner

What I remember. My grandmother passed away due to complications from quadruple bypass surgery while *Alice in Wonderland* was being aired on TV. December 10, 1985. Dark, drizzly, and a degree or two above freezing. I was eleven and it was nearly bedtime for both my younger brothers.

We were in a second-floor bedroom, which served for a time as our living room while the first floor was being stripped of wallpaper and painted. My mom was there, too, when she wasn't tidying up around the house, taking her mind off the call that had yet to come with news about her mother-in-law.

I'm not sure when the surgery began, or how our parents had prepared us for whatever eventualities they felt were in the cards, but I doubt the operation had been scheduled for the evening, and the surgeons probably hadn't anticipated it taking so long. In any case, it was apparent something had gone wrong, and the tension in our bedroom-living room—of not knowing, but of somehow knowing—was so palpable, so pressurizing and comfortless, I can still evoke a sense of it as I write this decades later.

Outside the room, to the left, was a brass-knobbed, four-panel wood door, behind which a U-shaped staircase led to our attic—essentially a dim depository for misfit furniture, 70s/80s issues of *National Geographic*, spent board games, and a jumble of other odds and ends awaiting their inevitable disposal. But sloughing off junk wasn't the only reason to open that door; our ivory cream phone was behind it mounted to the stairwell wall.

Only six months after the mayors of Montreal and Toronto had made the nation's first-ever cellphone call, most of us were still using rotary dials, our mobility limited to however far we could stretch out a coil cord connecting a phone's handset to its base. And when my father's call did come, my mother would receive the news on those frigid attic stairs.

I have a distinct image of her standing there that night, and of the phone's springy cord dangling despairingly, neither of which I actually saw.

Few other images of those moments survive . . . A lopsided rabbit-ear antenna. An overstuffed cushion. A 12-channel dial on a TV, over by the door. The door is closed. Its dull knob is scarred. Each seems aware that the phone remains silent, and that its calm portends something dreadful. The doorknobs bristle with anxiety. The phone is absurdly self-reproachful. I see and feel them even now, no matter how trivial they were, how immaterial in light of the struggle for my grandmother's life at the hospital. They're ingrained for reasons I can't begin to understand. And just as mysteriously most other pieces of the memory have crumbled away. I can't recall, for instance, the shape of the light fixture, the color or feel of my pajamas, or



IMAGE BY NORA KELLY

whether or not the window blinds were closed, or if these were curtains in fact and not blinds, or where I was sitting (probably on a sofa but I can't say for sure).

Memories of childhood events, particularly painful ones, which can be deeply bewildering for the young mind, are prone to reconstruction, and over the years take on a surreal or dreamlike artificiality. And as time whittles them away, the imagination is more often called upon to fill in the gaps.

In *Midnight's Children* (1981), Salman Rushdie writes, "Memory's truth, because memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also; but in the end it creates its own reality . . ."

But why?

Friedrich Nietzsche, in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), suggested that understanding truth completely "would lead to our own destruction" and that the strength of a

person's spirit could be "measured by how much 'truth' he could tolerate, or more precisely, to what extent he needs to have it diluted, disguised, sweetened, muted, falsified."

Of course these notions apply to childhood memories as well, and to children themselves, whose blossoming but delicate spirits are in the early stages of developing a world understanding, at an age when fantasy and intuition intertwine freely and seamlessly.

Which is why I have doubts as to whether my family's TV even had rabbit ears (despite the antennae being inseparable from the memory). Could such a thing have been planted there to dilute, sweeten, or distort? Is it in this way my spirit accepts the experience and I am able to recollect it? If so, I must question the accuracy of the memory on the whole. I must wonder if my grandmother truly passed away during the opening scene of the second half of the 1985 made-for-TV version of *Alice in Wonderland*. I tell myself it must have happened, the chronology rings true and always has; the experience, mixed with Alice's, is seared within.

If I'd watched the first half, the night before, I can't recall. But I distinctly remember part two picking up with Alice confronting the Jabberwocky.

This monster—toothy, winged, fiery-eyed, with oily flesh and tusk-shaped spikes along its back—had the temperament of a Spielberg raptor, without the maneuverability that CGI made possible years later. Naturally, the encounter terrifies poor Alice, but—initially unbeknownst to her—the Jabberwocky is a manifestation of her fear of growing up.

An owl appears from a painting, with a warning. If Alice doesn't overcome that fear, she will never leave Looking Glass Land and presumably the Jabberwocky will go on terrorizing her for all eternity.

I may well be embellishing here, but that's what remains of the scene in my head. And I can't tell you how Alice fares in her ordeal; my father's call came before her whole story unfolded, and we were shuffled off to bed, and I've only ever read excerpts from Carroll's *Alice* books. At a guess I'd say she overcomes her fear and takes on adulthood with a stiff upper lip, forever after untethered from that bizarre world of experimental drugs and blathering animals.

My mother's voice from the attic stairs comes as indistinct murmurs. My gut makes sense of emotive tones, of shock, of confusion, of sympathy. My grandmother is gone.

What no one else knows is that I am to blame.

About a month earlier, or so I think, I'd come face to face with my own Jabberwocky in a dream. I'd never dreamt in black and white, and dreams since then always come back to me in color, so it's strange everything was a drab shade of gray. I'd expect an uncolored dream to dissolve faster over time, and yet I vividly remember the details, and can play out each scene from start to finish.

At first there's a pale, pockmarked moon, resembling the iconic orb in Georges Méliès's 1902 film *Le Voyage dans la Lune*, minus the face but with the same theatrical sentience.

It's partly hidden behind three gloomy clouds, like soiled, stretched-out cotton balls, all the same length, and identical in shape, as if charcoaled in the exact same manner, or impressed with the same woodblock.

The first cloud extends over the moon's top-right rim, the second over its left side, at nine o'clock, and the third, at bottom right, sits parallel to the one on top. This arrangement is fixed, and time fails to alter, add to, or take anything from the picture.

Like the drawn-out atmospheric footage of early 20th century sci-fi flicks, the next static "shot" lingers on a view of a sharply arced horizon—a luminous boundary between starless-black outer space and the moon itself. I'm ankle deep in ashen grit, aware that circumnavigating the moon is doable within minutes at a dead sprint so long as my feet don't get stuck in its surface of bleak granules.

Next I see two neat rows of craggy boulders, and one row extends from right in front of me all the way to the horizon, which is roughly thirty of these massive rocks away, with the same number of steps between each. My eyes follow both rows and they appear to converge as they recede into the distance, lending to a sense of cartoonish scale and composition.

Then I see the ringer.

At age eleven my image of devils has been inspired by the 1978 animated special *The Devil and Daniel Mouse*, and Chernabog from the 1940 Disney animated film *Fantasia*. The *Looney Tunes* character Tasmanian Devil is, um, a devil also. Plus demons usually have horns and raging-red skin. So how is it that in my dream, to my left, and facing the other row, stands a demon of an altogether different breed? It glares down at me with a smug crustacean grin, and at once I have no question this is a lobster demon. As if such archfiends crop up in pop culture all the time—as commonly as ghosts and fairies. Or as if they're widely known among biologists, as *crustacean daemoniac* in the binomial nomenclature, or among academic scholars as grotesque allegorical figures that make regular appearances in the sacred writings of all major religions.

Panoplied with an impenetrable carapace, and pincer and crusher claws, the lobster demon fans out its tail and raises a colossal steel mallet. Then, with my right hand, I am clutching a ball-peen hammer.

"Youuu ready for this?" the lobster demon sputters blithely, but I know what's about to transpire, and whether I'm ready or not doesn't matter to the beast, nor to fate's strings, on which the outcome has already been firmly tied. And with this nightmarish prescience all I can do is submit to my impending defeat.

"The winner keeps your grandmother," the demon declares, sending me into a cold sweat. It chucks up a villainous *mwahahaha* and doubles back from its maniacal cackling as sections of its shell clack merrily together. Then it booms, "On our marks . . . get set . . ." and we're off.

Now I see me, like I'm watching myself in an old 8mm film, but there's no sound, so I can't hear the lobster

demon bashing each boulder to bits. I can't hear the one I'm hammering at either. I'm barely chipping the thing. It's impossible, no matter how desperately I want to save my grandmother, to smash through this rock, much less the row, all the way over the horizon and around and back to where I started.

The lobster demon shrinks into the distance before disappearing from view altogether. My stomach turns as the dream ends. I have lost the race. The guilt is gut-wrenching. Gasping, I sit up in bed and vow never to speak a word about the atrocity in which I've partaken.

Fast forward to 2013.

It's evening. My wife, daughter, son and I are visiting my parents in Ontario. My brother and his family are there as well. His wife has come on her own, from Cape Cod, and somehow managed to fly commercial into Canada with a Styrofoam box of live lobsters. None of my animal-loving relatives are lining up to plop the groggy marine critters into pots of boiling water. But I'm raring to. Rabbits, squids, birds—probably not. The lobster, though, is not my friend, and without blinking I belly-flop each one in, body and soul, lifting and letting go with ceremonious zeal, relishing the sight of their shells turning a defiant, blistery red and the sound of their lives hissing out.

It's time to eat, and I could say, *Forget picks and crackers and get me the claw hammer—I'll make fast work of you, you goddamned lobsters.* But I think about the dream instead, which I'd kept to myself for twenty-eight years. Then out it goes, blow by blow.

My mother might have reminded us how much my grandmother enjoyed Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's stories, or how she habitually read the dictionary, or how hard it must have been to raise seven children while Grandpa Vic worked innumerable blue-collar jobs. My father may have regaled us with an anecdote from his and his siblings' unruly years, like how he blew up a torpedo—a railway detonator which explodes to signal for a train to stop—and the ear-splitting bang was likely the culprit behind his tinnitus. Whatever was said around the table, I'm sure my dream didn't elicit an outpouring of sympathy, and I hadn't hoped or expected it would; the eleven-year-old had grown up ages before, and the self-incrimination which had burdened the boy was long gone. Nothing deranging had come to pass as a result of the nightmare. It was a dream. A bad one. But just a dream.

I did gain something from recounting it, though. It prompted my parents to tell a story of their own.

After my father came home from the hospital, while he and my mother were half-asleep, my grandmother appeared at the foot of their bed. This wasn't some wailing apparition, misshapen and tormented, or embittered by an untimely death, but a vision of comfort, a caring presence that meant goodbye, and that we'd be all right. My father and mother both saw her. But neither knew that at the time. The sighting wasn't brought up the next morning, or that week. It wasn't until many years later, in fact, that their selfsame story came to light. And while to this day they don't believe in ghosts, they'll agree the inexplicable in some way took form in their room—each account remarkably corroborated by its

matching other half.

The mind conjures, and veracity becomes skewed. So much is certain. My grandmother died. I was watching Alice on TV. The door, of course, had a doorknob. The phone rang. I can feel it, without memory of ring pitch or duration. My grandmother's name was also Alice. Alice Marion Warriner, born 1918. The lobster demon came to me *before* she passed, not *after*, as in after I watched the movie that night. Wasn't that so? There was a crash, two days later—Arrow Air Flight 1285, all 256 passengers killed, near Gander Lake, Newfoundland. Was my grandmother's wake that day? What was the song on the radio? The one my brothers sang in the back seat of our beige Plymouth Reliant . . . "Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer" by Elmo and Patsy. Did my father shush them, or holler at them to zip it? Did he change the channel? Is that what happened? Was the car really beige?

*"And hast thou slain the Jabberwock?*

*Come to my arms, my beamish boy!*

*O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!"*

*He chortled in his joy.*

Alice reads this in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*, and *What Alice Found There* (1871). The poem, she confesses, "seems very pretty, but it's rather hard to understand." She adds, "Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas—only I don't exactly know what they are! However, somebody killed something: that's clear, at any rate."

My Jabberwocky beat me, but I killed the bastard, too, eventually. I grew up, like Alice, and in my teenage years it dawned on me that the outcome of our cruel competition had never been in my hands. I wasn't responsible for my grandmother's death, one way or the other. But the boy, bound for adulthood, had come to realize how powerless he was, in a world almost totally beyond his control.

Milan Kundera in *Laughable Loves* (1969) writes: "We pass through the present with our eyes blindfolded. We are permitted merely to sense and guess at what we are actually experiencing. Only later when the cloth is untied can we glance at the past and find out what we have experienced and what meaning it has."

Maybe what unties that cloth is a readiness to take the glance, after our mind or spirit knows how, and also what it's looking for, and can bear it. It could be the blindfold has untold layers, and the more time that goes by, the more one's memory of an actual experience makes way for the abstract, for coalescence and humor, for dissolution and reinterpretation. All the same, as time sifts onward, our experiences and dreams remain ours alone, as do the memories in constant flux around them, truth and untruth bound together, there to draw meaning from, to embrace or bury, or simply to let fade away.

# Opera

Poem by Bruce Meyer

Saturday afternoons when I accompanied my father  
on his weekend errands, he would dial the dashboard

radio to broadcasts from the Metropolitan Opera  
where a man with a mid-Atlantic accent explained

the grief of human calamity set to song. When traffic  
snarled and a soprano lamented how she gave her

life to art while her lover was tortured in the wing,  
my father would stare at the long avenues ahead,

and one day he told me he'd taken singing lessons  
but the road didn't go where he had hoped and fate

always plays a hand in what we are, though we sing  
when no one hears the silence in a broken heart.



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# Strife

Fiction by Alison Gadsby

"I'm thinking of going out," Chay says.

Liza licks the marmalade from her knife and places it beside the plate. The kettle clicks off and she pours the boiled water over her instant coffee.

"Where will you go?" she says.

"To the park," he says.

There are three parks close to their apartment and if he's thinking about going as far as Beresford Park that means he'll have to pass people. He will have to cross over a busy street with cars full of people living life because they believe everything is normal.

"Beresford," he says.

Liza takes a deep breath and holds it in until she feels lightheaded.

"You should come," he says.

She steadies herself on the counter and stares at the scissors and razors floating in the blue liquid. Why must he leave his barber shit all over the apartment?

She drinks her coffee in one gulp.

Chay hasn't contributed to rent in eight months. They haven't screwed in a year and a half. He still refuses to open the door for the grocery delivery guy and he puts the mail in a plastic bag and waits four days to open it, yet suddenly he has the urge to leave the house?

"Why are you doing this?" she says.

"This is actually my third time."

He puts his hand on the small of her back and she can feel the heat move into her spine.

"Don't touch me."

"Liza. It's time."

"What time?"

"Your boss has given you three extensions."

Liza should have been at work six months ago. She slept through every return-to-work deadline and begged for more time.

"We have to," he says.

"Don't tell me what I have to do. You're just worried your clients are getting bored of this little set up."

"I've been doing this thing online for people like us, afraid to get back to normal. Yesterday I made it to the dry cleaner on

the corner."

"I'm fine," she says.

He lifts her arm to put it on his shoulder while he turns her to face him. Before he can pull her into some sort of comforting hug, she slips free.

After her shower, she decides to dress in work clothes. She can't button the first pair of pants, so she tries another and then another, before she settles on a stretchy tube skirt and a men's shirt with one of her dad's ties. She still has all of his ties.

Chay stands at the door with his hand on the deadbolt. He's wearing his winter biking gloves. He has a mask lowered around his chin. He moves his legs back and forth like those idiot runners who feel the need to keep moving at red lights.

Liza turns the kettle back on to make the cup of coffee that will get cold beside her computer. She can feel him staring at her. Before it's finished boiling, she fills her cup and stirs in the cream with the marmalade knife.

"I'm not coming," she says.

"You have to," he says, "you've already got your shoes on. Let's go."

When she turns to him, his face is glistening with sweat.

"I'm. Not. Coming."

He whispers some words. A mantra maybe. He closes his eyes, taps his hands on his upper legs and turns his head from one shoulder to the other like he's stretching his neck. She wants to stop him, grip him by the shoulders and warn him that he's going to die if he goes out there.

Chay lifts the chain lock.

She goes to her bedroom and places her coffee beside the laptop at the small desk by the window. She listens for the door. Nothing.

Liza places her earbuds in and turns the music up. She has four spreadsheets to audit and thirty-eight pages of expenses to input. She doesn't have time for Chay's bullshit.

In the morning, Chay is cleaning his tools in the kitchen sink. He's got his wallet hanging from a chain clipped to his belt. He's wearing the new jeans he ordered online and a freshly pressed plaid shirt. He smells good, familiar, but strange. He's going to go out again.

He's put bread for her in the toaster and it pops up before she rises from the kitchen table. She closes the newspaper, slowly, methodically. She'll read it again later, but it will need to look unread.

As she lifts her mug to swallow the last sip of coffee she sees

the hair on the floor. It looks like pubic hair, but she knows it's beard hair.

"Did you have a client?"

When he turns, she is surprised by his face. Naked. Pale. Gaunt.

His eyes are bloodshot and the skin around them has been rubbed raw. He's been crying again.

He dries the razor, then sharpens it on a black stone he keeps on the counter. Liza watches the dust fall to the floor.

He doesn't need to sharpen his tools every day. He doesn't need to clean them, but he does. Even his most loyal clients have started ghosting him. Making appointments for the next time, then not showing up.

"Do you ever think about slicing someone's throat?"

"You've asked me that before," he says.

They had only been dating a few months when she asked the first time. Liza mentioned her obsession with wanting to push people into oncoming traffic when she passed them on her runs. Or jumping off the viaduct into highway traffic. When



she worked for a landscaper in high school, she fantasized about shearing off the fingers of the boy she worked with or running over a squirrel or cat with the lawnmower.

She talked about it with the therapist her mother hired after the accident. He taught her how to breathe through it. He called it Urge Surfing. It was boring. Liza stopped mowing lawns. She ran faster. She locked car doors. She wasn't a sociopath, she just wanted to know what it felt like to see someone or something alive one minute and dead the next.

She hates strangers. She doesn't like small talk and Chay is the only man she's let touch her outside of a fast fuck from strangers. When they first started dating she asked him how it felt to touch people.

"I don't even notice," he said, "they're like mannequins that talk."

The kitchen fills with the silence of his stare.

"What's wrong?"

"I need you to come with me," he says.

"I'm not."

"One of these days, I'm going to keep walking," he says.

"Good for you."

"I mean it Liza. When I turned back home yesterday, I almost."

He starts crying again.

"I almost."

"You almost what?"

"I didn't want to come back here," he says.

"So don't come back."

"That's not what I mean."

Liza stands, takes the newspaper and her coffee and goes to her room.

The next day, Liza doesn't want to leave her room. She opens the blinds over her window to let the sun in. It has already risen above the building across the street. It won't be long before Chay is awake. She'll smell the toast first.

Outside the window, there is a line of school children walking along the sidewalk across the street. It's Wednesday and it will take half an hour for the classes of kids to get to the church for their weekly mass. She and Chay used to stand out on the front porch and wave at the kids as they walked by.

She opens the bedroom door quietly. He's not out there. If she can get her coffee and toast made quietly, she can return to her room without speaking to him.

Chay is lying at the threshold of the entry door. He is fully dressed in bike gear, including his clip-in shoes. He's taken his bike down from the hook. He holds his helmet to his chest like a toddler might clutch a stuffed bear.

She tiptoes to the kitchen. His scissors are soaking in soapy water. Liza lifts them out one by one, drying them with a towel. Chay surprises her from behind. She turns and almost stabs him in the belly. He jumps back, but after a moment he steps closer and presses his body against the blade. Liza feels the scissors jump forward as they break through his shirt, then a layer of skin.

His pupils open and close to the beat of his breath. It will be the end of both of them if she pushes the scissors all the way in.

"Do it," he says.

His face becomes her father's. She's fourteen. He's telling her he's dying.

"You're dead," she says.

"I'm not."

"You're not?"

"No. I'm dying," he says.

"She did it on purpose."

"Who?" he says.

"The lady. She killed you."

"No. It was an accident."

"Liza."

"Liza."

"She drove up on to the sidewalk and. She killed you."

"No."

"Yes."

"No. It was an accident."

It's Chay. There is blood on his shirt. He clutches his abdomen. Liza lifts his shirt over his head with the scissors still in her hand. There is blood dripping into his bike shorts. The yellow lycra turns purple.

He's holding her. She's being held by him.

The scissors. She should drop the scissors.

He's sobbing.

"I'm dying in here," he says.

The feel of his soft skin under her hands. She strokes the edges of his shoulder blades. She kisses his skin. She holds his clavicle between her teeth for a moment. He shudders. Liza feels the stickiness of his blood as it soaks through her t-shirt.

She rides the waves. Up and down, she surfs the ocean. The water is cold, salty. She floats deeper into the blue water. She swims to the surface and takes a sharp breath like she's been holding it for too long. Drowning. The steel scissors are hot in the palm of her hand.

# Deeply Rooted

Nonfiction by Joan Conway

This is my fifth session of chemo for breast cancer, and even though I am prepared to be at the hospital for much of the late morning and early afternoon, I feel shaky. As I walk into the room, I put on a brave face, step on the scale, watch the nurse record numbers.

"Excellent Joan, your weight is the same as last session." I let out a long breath.

'We have you set up in the corner.' I see her eyes smile through her plastic goggles, the only distinguishing feature as she wears a mask, as well as a cap, which completely covers her hair.

This is my first six-hour session, how on earth am I going to get through the day! I settle into the recliner draped in a white cloth that can easily be removed and washed when I leave. My hands tremble as I open my pack and spread its contents on the table by my side, my journal, a novel, a few books of inspiring poetry, my phone for music, and magazines - today it is 'Where Women Create.' This features unique studio spaces, but as I settle into the chair, I smirk at the idea that creative spark can arrive in the oddest of places.

My lunch bag is tucked inside. I peak in for reassurance. Glass containers with matching red lids are stacked in a neat row - hummus and crackers, cucumber and red pepper slices, a peeled boiled egg, a pink lady apple already sliced and cored, almonds. I took such care this morning, wanting to entice my taste buds, trick my mind with these individual packages, small presents congratulate me for withstanding the day.

The steroid drips through the IV. It looks benign in its clear plastic bag, but I know that once in my body it will slither through my veins like a snake. I will be unblinking, on high alert for two days. After the steroid is drained from its pouch, the first round of chemo drugs is hooked up.

I pick up my book and read but am distracted when I notice a woman going into the doctor's office. I am told by the nurse that he now phones most patients and only meets face to face when cancer patients have their first consultation. I look at her thick dark hair, feel my heart open for the journey she is about to embark on. Our eyes meet but hers flicker in fear as she takes in my bald head wrapped in a thin silk scarf.

My skin is dry despite the cream I apply. New creases form about my eyes - am I reverting to a reptilian state, will scales soon appear? My muscles have atrophied, they hang loose on my arms. Although I might say that this woman and I are close to the same age, I feel as though I am ten years older as a result of my treatment during these past months. I wonder if she thinks, 'Oh my God, this soon will be me?'

The hours drift by. Somehow, I snooze, then startle awake as the machine beeps, announcing the end of the cycle. I track the nurse's movements with my eyes. Not having anyone with me makes her gentle reassurances even more crucial.

'Your doing great Joan, just a few minutes more while we

drain the bag.'

I pack up well before the time. The moment the IV is removed I head out the door, take the stairs to stretch my legs and to avoid the enclosed elevator. In the stairwell, I remember many Christmas's ago, I joined a group of women who make it a tradition to sing carols outside of the rooms where patients lie. We gathered in the same stairwell to hear ourselves before starting out. With the hard surfaces along with the dynamic of being in a chamber, the acoustics were amazing.

As we would start down the hallway, my throat would tighten. Seeing frail people without family or friends nearby during the holiday season struck me as an extra hardship. I could barely belt out a note without tears welling up in my eyes.

Now, as I walk down the stairs, I think of people not being able to have visitors in the hospital due to Covid, my own appointments without the company of others. I clutch my pack to my aching chest, feel my knees buckle, grab the railing to steady myself. I want to collapse on the stairs, wail in this chamber for all that I have lost, and for all the others who suffer alone, but I hear someone open the door behind me. I force myself down the stairs to the exit.

The sun is high in the sky as I stumble out of the hospital. I blink at the bright light, hear car engines rumble, children holler to each other in the school yard, which is right across from the hospital. They too have just been released from their day. I am suddenly comforted thinking how life continues in strange and reassuring ways.

I know I need to return to the riverbank before heading home. The view is washed in green, leaves exploding over night. It was merely days ago when I watched them open, a tea green mist barely perceptible to the human eye. Now the full green palette is before me, swatches of khaki saplings, emerald birch, chartreuse cottonwoods, all interspersed with deep green bands of pine and spruce.

A huge weight slips from my shoulders as I totally immerse myself in this green world. I stop to examine some waxy leaves from a young cottonwood tree. They shine as though dipped in oil. On the branch are some unopened buds with their sticky golden sap oozing out. I rub this resin on my wrists, their pungent odour fills my nostrils.

When I lived on our wilderness property, I strove to understand plants. The cottonwood buds, infusing the air with their fragrance, inspired me. I read they were filled with medicine, learned to soak the buds in olive oil, then turned the golden oil into a healing salve called Balm of Gilead. I was equally intrigued with its history, as the balm is mentioned in both the Qu'ran and the Bible. At times when I touch plants, I can sense a thin film blocking my memory, as if I once knew how to use their medicine. I am sure that if I could time travel, I would find a missing link in my ancestry when women were healers and held this knowledge.

I stop at a large cottonwood tree growing alongside the

# I want to collapse on the stairs, wail in this chamber for all that I have lost, and for all the others who suffer alone...

river. Its bark is deeply furrowed, the thick skin of an ancient being implanted in this guardian of the earth. I think of its roots embedded into the riverbank. It drinks hundreds of liters of water a day, a network of veins transports nutrients up through the trunk into all parts of the tree, the branches extend in every direction, leaves reach up to the sky. This cottonwood towers over sixty feet, its canopy spreads as a green umbrella, shades me as I stand under it as I was told to stay out of direct sun as much as possible because of the chemo drugs.

My acupuncturist taught a qigong posture used to meditate as though one were a tree. I take a stance with my feet hip distance apart, knees soft, allow my weight to sink into my feet. I float my arms up to the level of my heart, palms facing my torso creating a circle with my arms. I imagine I am hugging a tree, wish to become grounded with roots descending deep into the earth, blood as sap circulates and nourishes my body, my arms and legs lengthen, the crown of my head reaches up, softens to receive sunlight and the energy from the sky above me.

I release my worries from the hospital, see them vanish into the vastness of space, slowly exhale and inhale. When I place my hands on the bark of the tree, I remember that I can remain pliable, find grace in my circumstance. These trees are sentinels to keep me safe.

...

When I worked with youth, it was as if my limbs were stretched in many directions with spider like senses. I could feel through the air, intuit their moods and the things they would not say.

I sit at the art table with Ollie. Red osier dogwood branches, sinew, beads and feathers spread before us. I reach for one of the twigs.

"Here Ollie, if you bend this into a circle and tie it with some sinew it will dry into a hoop. That's the base for a dream catcher."

"I don't know Joan, it looks hard." I can sense the three other teens at the table, their chairs pulled back, waiting to see if he will try before they take a turn.

I guide his hands, "See, it's pretty strong, it won't break."

He looks pleased with the circle he has created and is willing to take the next step. I gather the sinew into a small ball and show how to create the web by wrapping the sinew around the frame. Then catch each hitch so that the inside circle grows smaller and smaller.

He works slowly, with patience. I watch his hands, long fingers, smooth brown skin and think in another time, he might be groomed as a carver. The other youth have pulled their chairs closer to the table, I can tell they too are ready to give it a try. I am relieved. If Ollie would have thrown it down,

in an impatient gesture, which so easily happens, they would have all left.

Instead, he holds his dreamcatcher up and says, almost in a whisper, 'I didn't know I could make something so beautiful.'

We both beam.

\*\*\*

Night stretches before me, a dark chasm I cannot fill. Aware that my partner is sleeping upstairs, I creep about the house, dim the lights, listen to music through headphones, watch YouTube clips on types of gardens. I will plant a kitchen garden but will give up my community plot where I grow squash and potatoes, as well as other vegetables that need more sun than our shaded yard can provide. I find a sketch pad to plot out what it will look like but even though this interests me, it is not enough to take away the awareness that I want to sleep.

I stretch out on the couch, am fitful, cannot get comfortable. My eyes ache and I have a headache from exhaustion. In desperation, I reach for my cell phone to find a meditation, which might calm my nervous system. I find a full body relaxation, start with my toes and move up through my limbs into my torso until I eventually end up at my head. This helps but still I cannot sleep. I decide that resting will have to do.

The quality of darkness outside the crack in the curtain changes. Night's deep velvet tones soften to a leaden glow, with it comes bird songs as they too awaken. I recognize the deep low whistle of a varied thrush, the sputter of starlings, the sweet plaintive sounds of what could be a finch, and of course the rambling caws from crows. They nest in the trees on the back of our property, soon their fledglings will be hoping about the yard or hiding in my shrubs as they learn to fly. The adults will keep a close eye on them, I will have a hard time even going into the back yard without being dive bombed by concerned parents.

I wish to be held in a nest throughout my incubation, protected by downy feathers, bits of lichen, thin grasses and

sticks, all interwoven and intricately engendered, lodged high in a tree out of harms way.

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The noise outside the window rises to a clamour as crows land on the trees surrounding our house. I have marked their arrival. Every morning at 5:15 they start their raucous calls; it is enough to rouse me out of my resting state which I know I cannot return to.

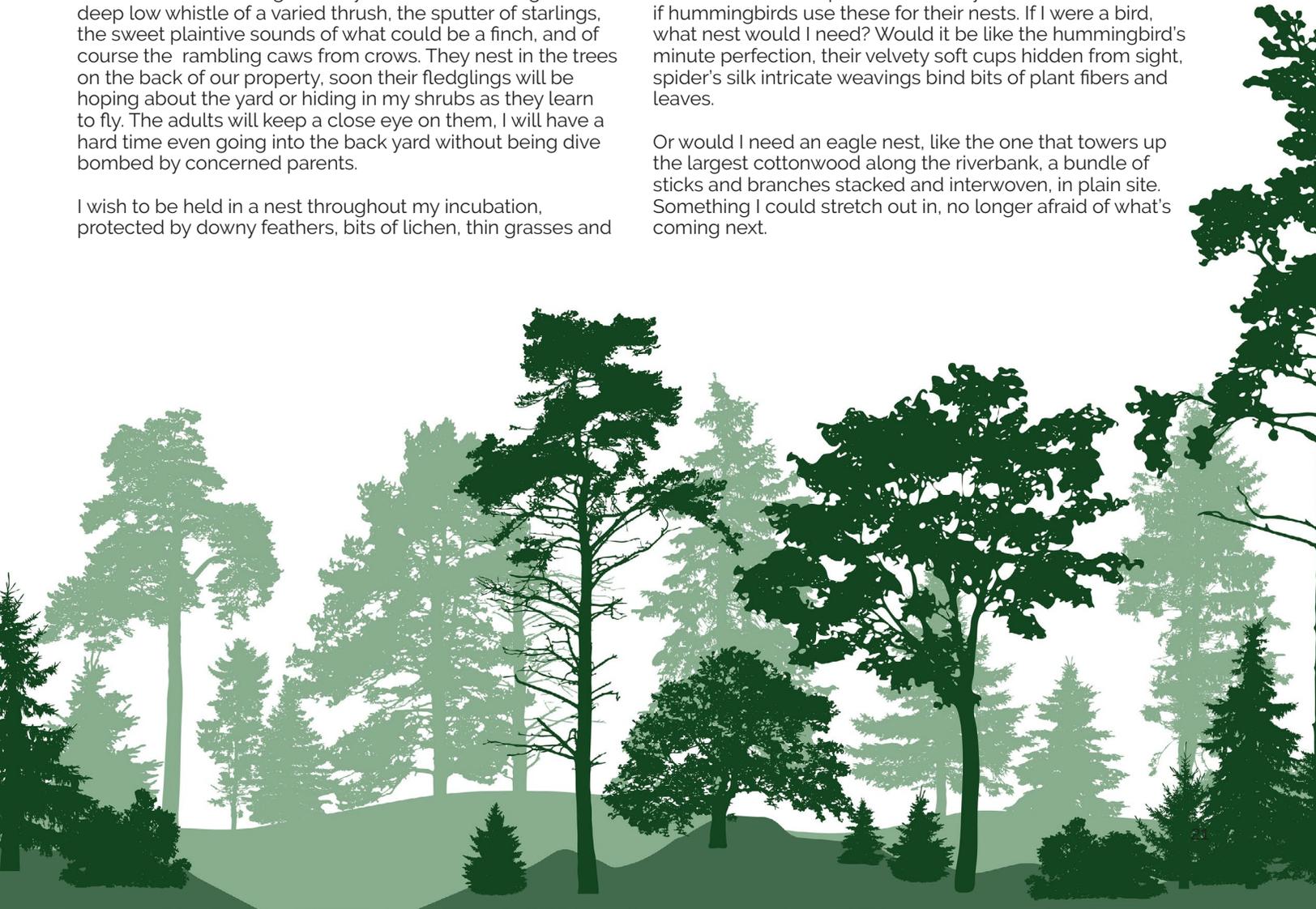
I grab a wrap and head towards the door but before I do, I take down the calendar that is on the fridge and mark an x through yesterday. I will have one more alert day before the steroid wears off. If it is the same as the last chemo cycle, I will be totally exhausted and will have a difficult time just to get up off the couch.

My bones will ache for several days. I will struggle to walk around the block. However, after that I will have a few good days before my next treatment. For the moment, all I can do is greet another day.

It is light out although sunrise won't happen for another hour. I am relieved to see the morning. It feels like a huge accomplishment to have made it through the first night without sleep. I tuck myself into a lawn chair and wait to see what birds will arrive.

The tulips by the patio are now in full bloom although their deep purple heads are still closed until the sun hits them. My clematis will soon open with its fuzzy silken hairs. I wonder if hummingbirds use these for their nests. If I were a bird, what nest would I need? Would it be like the hummingbird's minute perfection, their velvety soft cups hidden from sight, spider's silk intricate weavings bind bits of plant fibers and leaves.

Or would I need an eagle nest, like the one that towers up the largest cottonwood along the riverbank, a bundle of sticks and branches stacked and interwoven, in plain site. Something I could stretch out in, no longer afraid of what's coming next.



# Finding Joy

Nonfiction by Kat Main

In the attic stands a cardboard mansion fashioned and furnished by Aunt Joy. The doll house has sixteen rooms and stands four feet tall, spread across the north wall of the attic. Barbie One is posed in the shower, arms braced against the walls. In the kitchen, Barbie Two splays her legs beneath a table adorned with plastic turkey and yams. In the bed, Barbie Three's hand dips faintly to touch her dusty forehead. Cobwebs fasten the dolls to the walls of each rose-papered room. Ken grins from a yellow Camaro outside the house, waiting to whisk Barbie away from this life.

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My sister cranks the heat. Lights blaze in every room. Bottles of wine and vodka line the kitchen counter. Five cousins – all girls – falling off our chairs. A horde of banshees saying goodbye to Aunt Joy and this old house she inherited from Grandmother. My sister balances on my lap. We snap selfies until my phone drops into her vodka coke.

We cousins have been sporadically lodged in this house throughout our childhoods, stored on cots and couches to make way for the boarders from the Brockville Psychiatric Hospital. Grandmother erected thin partition walls throughout upstairs to create five tiny rooms to house the boarders. Their monthly social assistance cheques were guaranteed regular income to bolster Grandmother's home sewing and alteration business. What else could you do with a smoker's cough, grade 8 education, dead husband and nine kids underfoot?

The boarders came downstairs each morning for breakfast. Herbert wore a black garbage bag over his naked hairy chest to protect himself from bugs crawling over his skin. Tea, buttered toast, two blue pills, and the crawlies disappeared. Afterwards, Herbert wondered what to do with the black garbage bag.

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January 4th. Joy hadn't answered the phone for three days. Cousin number two dropped by the house and found Joy in her bed. One arm bent over her eyes, hand knuckled into the mattress at an unnatural angle. Blood spilled from her nose and mouth, crusty and dry. She was blue.

\*\*\*

December 29th. Six days before cousin number two finds Joy, I'm visiting from Alberta for the holidays.

We crowd the small kitchen table, Joy and we five girl cousins, eating our belated Christmas dinner. A small turkey, mashed potatoes, peas, a lump of cranberry jelly ridged from the shape of the can. Beside Joy's plate: two small blue pills.

We lob banter and buttered rolls across the table. Just

how many hours does it take to cook a ten-pound turkey? Was someone on a smoke break while the potatoes were burning? Are we sure we have enough peas?

Girls, girls. Serious grown-up voice from Aunt Joy. Settle down. Let's all get along. For Pete's sake. Then she tosses a pea at my sister's head.

In her way, Joy mothered each of us at one time or other. Me, during my mother's vacations to the Psych after her overdoses on painkillers. My sister, the year after our mother breathed no more. Cousin number three, when her mother kicked her out of the house at the age of thirteen.

We, in turn, have mothered Joy since the voices took up residence behind her eyes twenty years ago. Answering middle of the night phone calls. No, Aunt Joy, there are no cats inside the walls scratching to get out and eat you. No, you don't need to sleep with a mosquito net on your face to keep the bugs from crawling down your throat. No, your ex-boyfriend didn't make you stab that store clerk down the road. Really, there was no stabbing. The police aren't in on the conspiracy. We promise, you're safe.

I passed the turkey and Aunt Joy told us how she was going to redecorate the kitchen. Lime green walls. Bamboo patterned curtains. She would hand-sew the matching placemats. She bought the material last Tuesday. For the first time since Grandmother died three years ago, I couldn't see any voices lurking behind Joy's eyes. I kept looking, but her voice stayed even, her eyes bright and clear. Next, Aunt Joy said, adding a leg of turkey to her plate, I'm going to design my own clothing line. I have so many plans. Wait until you see.

\*\*\*

January 6th. Two days after cousin number two finds Joy, my sister and I arrive from the airport and knock on the door. Cousin number one opens the door with a box of alcohol in her arms and a joint hanging between her lips. It's going to be a good old Irish kind of send off.

To Joy! We thump red plastic wine glasses together. The fridge is across from me, a hulking white morgue of spoiled milk, expired condiments, an empty jar of peanut butter. The exterior of the fridge is covered with rusty brown spots the size of plums. I cannot fathom what could remove those spots. Comet? Bleach? A sledgehammer? The smell of Joy's bedroom above us leaks into the kitchen through the radiator behind me. I down my wine and nudge my sister to pass the bottle.

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The snow swallows us up to our knees. I take my cousin's hand. She's twenty years younger than me. We fall



backwards at the same time into the snow, slicing our legs and arms through the heavy whiteness. Drunken snow angels waving to heaven. Hi, Auntie Joy!

It's minus twenty-four degrees Celcius but the wine and vodka are keeping our blood warm. We are laughing so hard we cannot pull ourselves upright, sideways or any other way. My sister yanks me, then my cousin, out of the snow. Cousin number three lights a fresh joint. The smoke mingles with our breath in the frigid night air. We take a thousand group selfies with frozen fingers under the moonlight.

...

Stuffed teddy bears, faded and dusty with small glass eyes, are roped to the standing lamp in the corner of the bedroom. My sister snores next to me on the futon. I study the two round scars on her forehead where the halo was drilled into her skull six months ago. Unstable C2 fracture, the doctor said, a miracle she's alive and walking. After the accident, her red Honda Civic looked like it had been stepped on by Godzilla.

Layers of wallpaper peel from the corner of the ceiling above

us. I can relate to this wallpaper, slowly coming unglued inside this house. Through flimsy walls I hear the cousins downstairs. Dull thumping of wine bottles. High-pitched cackling. I close my eyes and see an endless white wall swimming with rusty brown spots the size of plums. We are sleeping in Herbert's old room.

\*\*\*

The next day my sister and I hold our breath in Joy's bedroom. A sickly sweet smell clogs our throats. Sweat pants, socks, and panties are piled in heaps. Cigarette butts and roaches crumpled in a black plastic ashtray. Her certificate for "Health & Life Skills Class" askew on the wall. The rumpled bed looks like Joy's just woken from an afternoon nap. Minus the blood-soaked pillow that my sister gingerly lifts and drops into the black garbage bag I'm holding.

\*\*\*

Cousin number three finds a mouse, hard, flattened, and grey under the piano stool, an imprint of my Aunt's shoe across its backside. Caught fourteen mice last month, Clarence the handyman from Brock Cottage tells us. Joy kept a jar of peanut butter in the fridge specially for the traps.

Clarence returns the next day, bangs on the back door, sobs with beer-soaked breath. He needs eight dollars to buy Aunt Joy a cross. Promised he'd buy it for her ages ago. She always wanted one. Now it's too late. But he's got to buy it.

Clarence, the eight dollars, and the cross never reappear. The house is alive with mice.

\*\*\*

Jake, Aunt Joy's on and off again boyfriend, shows up with a plate of egg salad and canned chicken sandwiches. He made them himself. They are warm and soggy. I make him instant coffee that I find in the cupboard and he eats half the platter of sandwiches. He flips through his phone and reads the times of his phone log with Joy. *Yup, last time I talked to her was 3:14 pm on Monday. He says this three times. I liked to help her out. Shoveled the walkway for her last week as a matter of fact. She usually pays me ten dollars. Not that I care if I get paid the ten dollars, mind you.* He mentions this four times. We give Jake ten dollars and chuck the leftover sandwiches.

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We hang a sign on the door for the customers: Joy's Alteration Business is now Closed. Thank you for your Patronage.

We sort bobbins, thread, and fabric. All the snippets of the sewing business she inherited from Grandmother along with this hundred-year-old house. Dollar Tree shopping bags hold customers' orders: a set of hemmed curtains with a homemade thank-you-for-your-business card, patched blue jeans with more patches than original material left, twelve miniature embroidered Christmas stockings so perfect you'd swear they were factory-made.

Dresser drawers labeled: cotton, lace, corduroy, sheers, denim, rayon. Bins of pastel knitted baby blankets. Cupboards of jewelry supplies, pill bottles of beads. Boxes of watercolours and oils. An unfinished painting propped against the desk with wavy apricot lines in the shape of lilies.

We work our way through the house, packing, cleaning, sneezing, stuffing fifty years of creative talent into black garbage bags.

\*\*\*

Three cousins go out for errands: to pick up the death certificate, to work a shift at Tim Horton's, to replenish the booze. My sister and I take turns washing our hair in the kitchen sink. I pile the dirty dishes back in the sink with Aunt Joy's butter knives, tips stained black from years of hot knifing on the stove. We take turns having a shower, hopping on ice-cold tiles beneath a dribble of too hot water.

\*\*\*

January 13th. Time to fly back to Alberta. My sister and I haul our suitcases out the back door past garbage bags overflowing with wool, fabric, Barbies, and rose-papered cardboard rooms. Muslin pools onto the snow like spilled red wine. We wave to our three cousins standing on the curb beside our cab.

\*\*\*

A male flight attendant with curly hair performs the airplane safety demonstration. My sister pays close attention, her face strained with fear. She looks up to confirm where the oxygen mask is concealed, feels beneath her seat for the floatation device, counts the rows to the emergency exit. The flight attendant notices my sister and attempts to make her feel better. You going home to Calgary? Ever try driving down Deerfoot when it's icy and you end up doing a 180? Now that's scary. Odds are one in twenty million that you'll die in a plane crash.

My sister doesn't miss a beat. Try rolling your car five times and breaking your neck. My sister shows him the two round scars above her eyebrows where the halo was attached to her skull. The attendant shakes his curly head and gives her a free set of earphones.

My sister holds her breath and strangles the armrests. Her face is tight, eyes wide. I draw a picture of a cat puking on her barf bag along with her name in big balloon letters. She doesn't look. Suddenly, the smell of sour cabbage and rotten eggs drifts back from the seat ahead of us. I plug my nose, point to the man seated in front of me and fan the air while making dying faces. My sister busts a gut and her grip finally loosens.

The constellations of Ontario blink 35,000 feet in the darkness below us. In my pocket is a silver thimble from Joy's sewing room. It fits snugly over my thumb. We replay the old messages on my sister's phone and Aunt Joy's deep breathy voice fills the space between us. Hi honey. It's me. Again. Still waiting for you to call me back. Call me back. Okay, I love you.

# Trauma

Poem by Kimberly Foulger

These memories live in my lizard brain  
The space without words  
Washing my body in a cortisol bath  
And I don't know why I can't relax  
No matter how many bubbles I add  
Or candles I light.  
I watch the door, I watch the window  
And flinch at every noise  
Dream every nightmare  
Until I coax those memories out of the dark  
Out of their primal hiding spot  
And give them words  
Pull the plug, blow out the candles  
And I stand wrapped in stories.



# Quiet Reflections on a Trying Year

Poem by Philip Youden

In Time Square the ball drops  
at Eastern Standard, time-travelers

converge from around the world  
with dreams of resolution.

Champaign glasses clink, fireworks  
erupt in the night sky, outbursts

of drunken voices singing incorrect  
words to Auld Lang Syn.

My first time alone on New Year's Eve,  
future uncertain, past unresolved.

I reflect on a trying year and the desire  
for time travel escapes me.

To learn the words of this discordant  
ballad called life is challenge enough.



# This Is How We Heal

Poem by Jamie Quinn Mader

This is how we heal:  
Through chasing storms  
And being caught in sun at dusk  
By three coffees to get through the day  
And shaking it off to auto tuned hits on the balcony  
Through baking and warming our hearts with soft words  
The sound of raindrops on the hood of your car at 3am  
Somewhere between the late night drives and the ugly early morning vibes  
We heal and grow big hearts from the shatters of explosive heartaches

This is how we heal:  
Through daring fantasies with Gods and witches and magic and science fiction.  
With happily ever afters and suspenseful cliffhangers  
With talks of other worlds and escaping into our imagination  
With sharing our stories as though they are epic  
By having feelings on a stage in an almost crowded bar  
Choking back tears cuz they blur the words on your phone  
Through laughing at yourself and your candid stumbles  
By having a story to tell we open our hearts again to the world  
And the world fills all the cracks and all the in between pains

This is how we heal:  
With small acts of kindness for another  
Wishing them love and compassion you can't fathom for yourself  
Good morning texts and positive affirmations for others  
Reminding your loved ones of the love in their life  
And creating space for gentle patience with each other  
Care packages, fresh baked goods, love letters and soft smiles across cities.  
It all comes back and  
One day you'll say you are enough to someone you love and that someone  
will be yourself.

This is how we heal:  
By opening ourselves up  
By feeling every feeling  
By moving through the motions  
By holding other's hearts  
By letting others hold our hearts  
Healing is a conscious act of loving



# Storms Above

Nonfiction by Janice Vis-Gitzel

I tell myself that storms intrigue me, that I have my best thoughts amid thunder. *I like the rain.* I tell myself that these are the reasons why I climbed from the upstairs bedroom window, why I hide in rooftop shadows where shingled slopes meet. I watch the horizon grow murky with cloud cover, and I tell myself that I'm waiting for the storm.

It's not a lie—I am waiting.

The air around me is waiting too. It's frigid and fragile, filled with a chill of inevitability, a tense tranquility that's breaking under the promise of a late-fall storm. *The sky is treading on thin ice.* I know about thin ice: I know it always breaks. But knowing how long the break will take, how long you have to get away, to get out—that's not something I've learned yet. And not something I want to think about right now, so I tell myself that I like the rain. But when lightening cracks the sky and the rain begins, it's cold and hard, and it's harder to believe that I like the rain. I pull my knees to my chest, wincing as my bare legs scrape against the gravel of asphalt shingles. I'm not dressed to be here. It was an impulsive, reckless, necessary decision to climb out that window.

Something harsh and nasal breaks raindrop patter. My neck pivots and chilled water slips down my spine. I sink into myself as I notice a feathery figure a few houses down. A crow, perched on a roof-peak, is staring at me. I stare back, suspicious. He shifts his beak up slightly—a sign of acknowledgement, maybe, or arrogance. Hailstones tumble from the sky, dusting rooftops, trembling on the shingles before melting away. The crow doesn't tremor, doesn't flinch. He simply stares. He seems so aware of me. But I am here to hide. It is frightening to be seen. I can't tell if my fear is from him, exactly, or if it's a part of me, or if it has formed somewhere between us, in the shared gaze that knots us in a moment of uncertain recognition. Or maybe it's just the storm. The rain grows heavier. *There is animosity in the air today,* I think, *in storms above, storms below.* Is it in the crow as well?

Thunder tumbles somewhere behind, and I turn instinctually, as if I'll glimpse the violence of the screaming heavens. I see sheets of clouds and shivering hailstone, now growing larger, colder. When I turn back, the crow is gone. That, too, is frightening, though I can't say why.

*But no—not gone.*

The biting rainwater dripping down my back melds with something deeper, some knowing. *The crow is still here.* Hiding, lost, spying maybe? It shouldn't matter. It does. My gaze traces the outlines of the rooftops, seeking but not finding. I shift, intending to move to the other side the roof, to find him again, but a sweep of wind scatters hailstones in my face. *It's too cold.* I should get off this roof, should climb back through the window. *It could be dangerous to be up here.* But then, danger comes in many forms. Wet shingles are slippery. *It could be dangerous to move.* And the crow is still here, somewhere. I am bound to this bird, somehow. Does he feel it too? Perhaps he is tricking me, trapping me. Or perhaps he is as alone as I. Perhaps we are both hiding in storms tonight.

Or perhaps there is nothing here but a strange encounter in a strange world.

Lightening cracks the sky again, not so far away, and an identical fork copies it in the distance. *The sky is breaking,* I think. More lightening. A twisted alchemy. A bellow of thunder. *Or a summoning.* The thought pulls my gaze back to the crow's perch and he is there again, staring again. He calls, a loud, long awe that carries something across rooftops. *There is animosity in the air,* I think, *but maybe not in him.* Maybe. I don't know for certain.

How long does it take for the world to break?

And then, whether because I want to know or because I don't know what to do, I ask the crow about his purpose, his secret intelligence. I ask him why he is out in a storm, about what sent him. He stares. The sky flashes. The lightening is too close now. Being on the roof—it is absurd. *But the crow is still here.* My questions grow louder, impassioned, quiet inquiries descending into an intense interrogation. I ask the crow if he knows about thin ice, about breaking. But the crow doesn't move. I find I am angry, angry with the crow, and angry with the world that is so very, very cold just now. And still, the crow doesn't move.

Except—maybe—one of us shivers, and I suddenly become afraid. I close my mouth, feel embarrassed by my outrage. The crow is strange, but he is here and so I must be too. This is not logical; this is imperative. And so the crow and I sit together, stare together, for minutes, hours, eras. I think about the depth of him, his perfect stillness, about unbearable resilience. The wind wails and the rain is ice, but I have known ice for a long time. My legs are numb, unnatural blue splotches emerging between the bright pinks of skin scraped raw. They will hurt later, I know, but not just yet.

How long does it take for the world to break? How long does it stay broken? Can you mend it by tying yourself to a crow?

He screeches again, shorter and sharper. He spreads his wings and takes off from the roof, leaving me in the storm with a torrent of relief and regret. I have been released; I have been abandoned. *There are too many storms,* I think. *I don't want to lie in wait, and I don't like the rain.*



# CLASSIFIEDS

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