



HORSESHOE

Volume I Number i
Fall 2022

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Volume 1 Number 1
Fall 2022

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ISSN: 2816-8992

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Submission Guidelines

- We welcome submissions of prose (up to 4000 words) and poetry (up to 5 poems) from new, emergent, and established writers.
- We accept simultaneous submissions but please notify us if your work is accepted elsewhere.
- We do not publish previously published works: online, digital, or print.
- A response by email will take anywhere from 2 weeks to 6 months

Submission deadlines

Horseshoe welcomes submissions for our second issue by February 14, 2023. Please email submissions as a single attached document. Please include a cover letter. Your work should not include any identifying information to facilitate the blind review process. Submissions may be emailed to: submissions@horseshoejournal.ca

Single Copy: \$15

Horseshoe would like to thank Grenfell Campus, Memorial University, and in particular the School of Arts and Social Sciences, for its generous support.

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Editor's Note

Welcome to *Horseshoe*. This, our inaugural issue, brings together many of the voices that have contributed in some way to the literary culture of Western Newfoundland, and Newfoundland more generally. The name *Horseshoe* is an homage to some of the writers who helped establish a literary scene in Western Newfoundland. More than forty years ago, some of those writers gathered at Al Pittman's property on the bank of the Humber River for an afternoon of throwing horseshoes. That first gathering turned into an annual tradition that sees members of Memorial University's Grenfell Campus English Program (where Pittman taught back when it was still known as Sir Wilfred Grenfell College) compete for a coveted (and hideous) homemade trophy. Many writers and professors of English have competed for the title of horseshoe champion over the years, including (along with Pittman), John Steffler, Randall Maggs, Adrian Fowler, Shoshannah Ganz, Stephanie McKenzie, Tony Fabijancic, Tom Halford, and Aley Waterman. Many of those same individuals have also worked to nurture the local literary scene during their time spent teaching at Grenfell Campus, as have other voices included in this issue, including Robin Durnford and Nathan Elliott. Grenfell's English Program has for many years sought to enrich the arts community in Western Newfoundland by providing a platform for writers from farther afield to share their work, through festivals such as the now defunct March Hare and its counterpart The April Rabbit, through the brand new Marble Mountain Literary Festival, and through the many readings the Program hosts annually. Those events have included other writers featured in this inaugural issue, including Mary Dalton, Lindsay Bird, Dan Murphy, and Matthew Hollett (who has also spent time teaching in Grenfell's Visual Arts Program). The symbol of the horseshoe, both with its connotations of local tradition and its magnet-like shape, seemed a fitting name for a new literary magazine that aims to build on the past by pulling together new, emergent, and established writers to contribute to an already rich literary culture. We are thrilled (and grateful) that our first issue includes so many excellent Canadian writers. We are also thrilled that several of those voices are the same ones that have been so important to Western Newfoundland's literary culture. A few of them, as champions in the annual horseshoe match, have even had the honour of hoisting the venerable trophy above their heads (before storing it in a shed or basement until the following year). It is our privilege to bring these voices to you at the outset of what we hope will be a long run of issues.

Adam Beardsworth,

Tom Halford,

Editors.

Luck

Mary Dalton

The realtor's a cooer:

“Such a lucky find— absolutely
Eden, just an hour from the city,”

she flutters, though her
tone's evangelical:

“come July the whole hill
will break out in dog roses.”

With a sweep of her arm
she conjures the scene.

She flings her arm further,
on out past the valley below them.

A ridge to the west, three
silhouettes: horses

dark and iconic

against the flaming sky.

A pure Tourist Moment.

Alba well knows she's a mark,

craves to smash up

these slick stereotypes,

these tropes, to

curl an arm round

this plump striver,

slip into her folksiest,

her jolliest manner:

“Sure my duck I grew up

with those cursed wild roses,

worse than dandelions if

you're wanting a garden—

roots down to hell

with side roots to purgatory.

You knock a few thousand off

and I'll consider a rose-fight.”

She'd most likely stop there—

after all

the realtor's merely one other

plying her trade.

But the story haunts Alba—she aches to

take an axe to the idyll,
speak of those horses,
that sweet Arcady one hill over,
wonder if
they've sprung from

the herd of twenty-six
(Besses and Dollys and Dobbins,
Toms, Sams, and Jacks)—
found charred on that ridge
one clear summer morning
a century gone.
A lightning night-storm had
stolen the luck
stored in their shoes.

Through a Glass Darkly

Mary Dalton

What her crystal ball told her,
grumbling and swirling:

The charred forests will reach up,
sway leafy arms to the sky.

Salmon will crowd the falls,
tails lashing, blood running.

Sea-birds will uncoil
themselves, the beaches washed clean.

Croesus —and his ilk— call
stolen billions home from offshore.

Each table will groan, laden
with bread, milk, and honey.

A chicken in every pot,
a shelter for every head.

Poilievre and his sack of poison
will vanish in a puff of smoke.

Clear heads will prevail:
vaccines in every arm.

Celeb babble and other baby talk
will—poof!—be gone from the airwaves.

The Muses, lithe, will sashay on in,
the listeners all gladdened:

no more dancing attendance
on truism, shibboleth, tiresome cliché.

A buzzing, an electronic sizzling,
a hiss. Then Alba's globe turned opaque.

Alba and the Good Friday Cat

Mary Dalton

He was a walking crucifixion,
the eyes on him a glass you didn't
want to look into.

Mueck's giant, hunched
and staring in his corner.
A coat that marked him
kin to the clerk in Gogol:
lead gray, dulled
by now-and-then feeding,
by car grease and clay.

Alba watched him,
wary on her stoop.
An ink-slash cloud in the sky.
The day a festival of
man's inhumanity to man.
The radio playing
its symphony of murder:
bass notes for the occasion.
Alba shivered in her
thin coat of cotton,
last night's supper
and her brother's story
drifting into mind.

Her brother told her:
This fellow couldn't hold a job, see,
something gone wrong with his brain.
And his gums were going—
so the dentist told him;
ordered him off to the peri-
odontist.
Buddy called up the Welfare
and this is what he heard:

for the ones with bad luck,
bad karma, bad vibes,
the diabetic, pathetic,
the psychotic, rheumatic,
schizophrenic, allergic,
the smashed-up by a bus or a moose—

for the ones down the rabbit hole
 who fell through the cracks,
 missed out on the good genes,
 the fast-earning portfolio,
 the ones who can't
 bring home the bacon,

we've a special arrangement,
 a super dental solution.
 We've a handy-dandy remedy,
 economical and neat.
 It's a dilly, a doozie,
 why, it's a brilliant
 one-size-fits-all plan.

When your chompers give you trouble,
 or your gums are screaming red,
 we'll be there on the double,
 fix that aching in your head—
 then the dollars we'll fork over
 so a doc can haul your teeth.

No cleanings, and no fillings,
 oh no drillings, dear, for you,
 no root canals, no implants—
 no buck-consuming jazz—
 but oh if there's a crisis,
 why then we've judged it proper
 for a doc to yank your teeth.

That way we'll keep our borders strong
 between those rich and poor—
 politicians: slick pearly smiles,
 mouths sunken for the poor.

Alba slid a saucer out to the cat;
 he edged nearer, slow, sullen,
 lapped up the meaty slop,
 Slunk off through a gap.
 For Alba now
 it was off to the Basilica
 under a charcoal sky.

Glynmill Swans

Adrian Fowler

for Joanne

They glide together on the water still,
Nudging the far bank, their questioning forms
In one measure cresting the shimmering stream.
They dine on rushes gently stirred below
By their languid maneuverings to and fro.

Which one suggests this venue
For their morning tête à tête, this spot
To pass the time in? They are mute, so how
Do they decide to swim out here at dawn?
Do they reminisce about offspring far
And wide? Do they remember how they met?
They don't always stroll out as one. I've seen
Them separate, seeking time to themselves,
To wonder what it means perhaps to spend
A life together. I have seen him forage
While she nested out of reach. But still they
Circle back, returning each to each.

Their little island stands abandoned now.
No cygnets follow eagerly to shore.
But yet they rendezvous to waltz as one
This dawning of a new day in the sun.

The Widow's Baby Grand

Adrian Fowler

There you sit
shut in a corner of the parlour
your alluring curves
obscured by shadows
in this place where people
seldom come to speak
and never now to listen
to your lament of love cut short.
Your strings unstruck
your anguished cry unsounded
where are your bright arpeggios?
your flashy double octaves?
your somber bass progressions?
Where is your aching minor key?
All day dust falls unseen in the dark room
shrouding your shameless rosewood
in a fine desiccation of grey.
When did this live entombment
reduce your blossoming passion
to screaming appetite unheard?

D.H.

Adrian Fowler

She lived down the street,
a different country entirely.

Like an exotic bird
blown north in a windstorm
she appeared on my doorstep

squatting on the concrete walk
scarlet coat
shiny black pumps
skirt flaring above the dimpled knees.

Wordless I welcomed her
hushed by her beauty.

For decades afterwards
like a letter
from a forgotten lover
she returns.

A pheromone freighted
with unutterable longing
insinuates its way
into the mangled core
of who I have become

shouldering aside
heartbreak and triumph
salvation and deceit
storms that threatened to swamp
the whole show.

First and last time I saw her.
Here she is again.

wave

Robin Durnford

“It waves me still.”

—Hamlet

the last time I saw my father’s hand it was waving
the shock of it all at once
through the window
I still see him, alone
ghostly head in the frame

he came back to say goodbye
(like he couldn’t leave)
on his way as he always was

I thought about it a lot later
how he said goodbye, came back,
said goodbye again

what was going through him then
did he know I would be ok?
did he know it wasn’t me who was leaving?

*

frosted evening on the western side of the continent
and I’m not thinking of him
and my new boyfriend stands me up on a streetcar bridge
(the tallest one in the world)
and we feel lonely as the dirt

dead of winter, and I’m not sure
how it will all come together

*

the call came in the midst of the shaven day
too many voices to hear my own loud mourning

he’d never said anything
about dying never mentioned
I wouldn’t see him through that pane
again

wave goodbye
again
wave

old girlfriends

Robin Durnford

never had enough or any
 well, guess I've had some in a round-
 about way—like that day when
 the world turned and we found ourselves
 on a railroad track far from everything. That was
 Tracey. Or when I smashed a cigarette (age 9)
 in the bathroom at home. That was Kathy.
 Or the girl on the bad trip who rocked me ecstatic,
 no lie. That was that

can't remember

but Penny of course—smoking weed
 in the flowery alley, me paranoid of that light
 in Murray's Premises. They found me out, too,
 and time became a frieze. Then Paulomi
 waving us back to Milton, the Iraq War,
 that was Darcy

little cold wars with no enemies seized, ice but no veins.
 soft memories float these darlings out of me
 when hard facts like moonstruck roses
 chill my lonesome brain

ghost town

Robin Durnford

we only had a couple summers
 but
 the town framed my shadow
 as I roamed each foreign shore
 (my beach isn't there anymore)

shells held my breath
 pounds of dried fish
 same old accents at the door

a tin chime reminding us
 of the rough winds ahead

so many shades slanting past
 everything hurt

the jostling world elbowed us
 out of the way

too much reality, too many stories made for TV
 this ordinary day
 of shadows mad at the loneliness

wanting to raise our voice too
 demand someone hear
 but
 the dead can't hear anyone, nor history
 and the fish have no ears

no matter how many times you slice your I
 into this rock, the beach will burn it

gannets and gulls, crows
 flocking to the bones

the snow will always come—
 season's change, giving it all away
 but

 we don't remember how the leaf falls the next day
 after summer

we just assume the sky sees us
the gods have a plan
only they know
how this day ends.

I'm doubtful biding time, silent
by the door, awaiting a destiny
I know I'm not ready for—listen:

the ghost that will become me
has already made its move

Olbers' Paradox, or Sunglasses at Night

Matthew Hollett

Since there are countless stars, the question goes,
why isn't the night sky as glittery as Times Square
times infinity? Olbers wasn't the first to wonder this,
though some prankster taped the paradox to his back
and it stuck. If every line of sight ends in a star,
the night sky should be lustrous as lemon peel,
full moon reduced to fruit sticker. So why, instead,
this lava lampiness of milky way and murk?
Why is there darkness? "Suppose the void is so immense
that no ray from it has yet been able to reach us!"
quoth Edgar Allen Poe, earning an asterisk
in the history of astrophysics. As it turns out,
the reason we know *Sunglasses at Night*
as pop song and not ophthalmological advice
is that most stars aren't visible from Earth
because the time it takes their light to arrive
is greater than the age of the universe. Of course,
this is lunacy. If Olbers had only watched Looney Tunes,
he'd know that enlightenment is a lightbulb flicking on
over your noggin, and all it takes is a falling anvil
(or Newton's apple) to bring stars dervishing.

After André Kertész's New York, Central Park Boat Basin, 1944

Matthew Hollett

An unfinished picture, half-fished
from a tray of developer, spills forth
a tree upside-drowning in rainwater
and a double exposure: some species

of minotaur, half-man half-schooner,
slouching towards a boathouse or a bathysphere.
Charon, or one of his psychopomp coworkers
trimmed to the bones: a pair of legs sutured

to seven sharp pieces of silver. Only strangers
ever get any younger. Kertész, at ninety,
asked why he was still taking photographs,
replied: "I'm still hungry."

Tinker's Point Path

Matthew Hollett

When the tip of my pencil snaps, I think of
 Tinker's Point Path, that stub of stubborn grass
 where the trail cracked off into blackened rocks
 like burnt shipwrecks, and a stern wind
 clipped the sharpest branches from our words
 before we could finish them. *Someth about*
thi pla maes me wan to li dow, you shouted,
 so we did, side-by-side on the stubble, salt-spray
 sandpapering our noses. I'd been reading about Turner's
Snow Storm – Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth,
 how the painter had asked to be strapped
 to the steamboat mast as it swayed,
 swung there for four hours as the ice
 scrimshawed the ivory of his eyes,
 then lambasted his canvas until it howled
 the same howl. *I did not paint it*
to be understood, he later claimed, *but wished*
to show what such a scene was like. Turning
 my head, I noticed the cliff-edge cuffed
 in wild rosehips like a spatter of dried blood,
 having clung to their masts somehow
 all winter. You lay beside me, whittling
 silence into fine argument. *I was lashed*
for four hours, and I did not expect to escape,
but I felt bound to record it if I did. But no one
had any business to like the picture.

Tail of Light

Shoshannah Ganz

Brief tales of light from years ago
 Haley's comet a pause, orange
 comma to the glowing ball of hash
 we shared, passed and partook
 gulping, giggling, gasping
 burning air, high and light

under an almost bare maple
 crisp autumn leaves still hung
 over the lonesome laneway
 pitted with hard puddle hollows
 rough clods of grass, rock, dirt
 obstacles on our nightly quest

Hale-Bopp became our
 Hale-Pop, thinking of our Pop
 looking back, somewhere
 behind the many bright windows
 laced with Dutch curtains
 tired swans dusty with age

Pop gazing out at any moment
 would see through thick country darkness
 our faint hash fires
 like small fall fireflies
 we made our own brightness
 under the falling stars.

Bright Objects

Shoshannah Ganz

Every poet has a poem
about a bird in flight or fall
a murder of crows at night
bright objects attracting
unexpected gifts
a silver spoon, an egg, a shell

a visiting sea bird specialist
a big Norwegian
gap between his front teeth
leans across the cluttered table
“do you have anyone
it does not matter
I need you only tonight”

between bitter amber beers
I watch old lovers try
to conjure at the bar
what trail of sea smooth
shiny pebbles, sun glinted
glass, iridescent feathered
lure caught my eye
stopped me mid-flight
pulled me to you,

how I chose,
him from him from him.

Philosopher's Park

Shoshannah Ganz

So young among the still-standing columns
he climbs the arms of the ancient olive tree

scrunches up his face at tongue tasting
bitter black olives, hard pit drop to the dust.

The toddler teeters on dry grass
soft leather shoe prodding small sticks and

rocks, squatting to talk to a giant turtle,
thinking wise old thoughts like the

ancient philosophers who walked and
talked and argued on this ground.

They broke the world into so many small pieces
with their guttural Greek words,

fractures and filaments, like the broken pottery
preserved behind glass,

labelled and dated
in multiple languages

that we still can't find a way to make
mind and matter, any of it, whole again.

How to be Human

Shane Neilson

1.
Fists taught me to open my hands.

Al Purdy said about Milton Acorn (who once wrote the line,
The fire was want, and the hammers were fists): “He taught
me both how to write and how not to write.”

People-monsters taught a pedagogy of monstrosity.
That the negative example contains the possibility of care,
how to be human.

I now walk as a sheep
in monster costume
to fight their kind –

this is the thing to remember: people-monsters
are often purposeful (and self-justifying) –

yet confusion comes when fighting is a kindness,
and for this a series of circles taught me the unresolvability

of being inconsolable from moment to moment:

God grant me the wisdom to know the difference

Before I have *Wisdom*, the child’s hand is balled into a fist;
my hand must first open.

This is the balance (also the agreement)

We’re a chimera, he and I, a classical monster
charged to guard *Goodness* –

How to be human: to hold a coiled truth that changes, from moment to moment,
into retribution, vengeance, protection, and misunderstanding,

kept nocked on the bow –

a toy made from a stick and string, with straw for a shaft and pillowfeathers for fletching, each arrow made when alone in a room –

until *Wisdom* says,

You may not take the sad and angry consolations!

Take a step. Be impaled by quiverfuls of rain –

Enemy monster, you may always encourage me to release my hands, to spread them wide – that is the other *Wisdom*, the one that comes from outside

and if you know the inconsolable song too, I'll know you as a sheep inside,
like me

2.

Here is the secret:

Never say the word love, except if you have never lied to the loved one.

Bring gifts. Oh yes, in sickness and what is deemed health!

Touch, said Nowlan: It's what we all want, in the end, to be held, merely to be held, to be kissed (not necessarily with the lips, for every touching is a kind of kiss)

In the end, do not tell me of love, the secret password of monsters.

(Janet! Wriggle instead into the death-bed and let me die with you in my arms.)

As much as possible, do not think of love –
the wrong pedagogy,

the kind that flings the human body
from ledges into restful down.

The mouth: odious oracle.

Instead, think: in my failings are my great gifts.

If ever provoked to say the word love, think of your own neck!

If still further provoked, you must scream, first: *But for grace!*

If you say love, you are a liar – this is proveable, by discourse.

I want the Great Kindness to come, and not for me –

I want all the horrible lovers to suddenly turn their rhetorics into ploughshares
and just take care,

that's all –

to do an honest day's fucking work
not pretending –

then the romance of the human can start

3.

I wish I could say it is:

Tell the truth,

but –

I've believed, wrongly.

I wish it had something to do

with the truth,

which is so close to beauty

that I write poems in beauty's vicinity –

but –

the pit is where the truth goes,

disposably, as we inflict the new on knowledge.

I wish I could say it is:

Be true,

and the choirs, sing!

Be true,

The whole magnificent production joins,

Be true!

Yes, somehow all the practicalities

find their arrangements.

Be true to things.

Selfsame.

4.

Yes, how to be human

is senseless,

is multitudes in pain,

is a mutually-struck agreement

to sacrifice the word L-O-V-E

on our bloody altars so that we could be kind,

the seasons kind,

and altars somehow bloodless?

Also this alchemy, I do not understand why,

but I know:

sun on a river,

a long row in a field yet to be hoed,

a child in a fluffy sheep's costume

for the Christmas choir,

she's sulking at need of sleep –

oh, be true to things

as the monsters are in great fidelity,

realize the symmetry;

fall in love before you die

by never using the word,

this is the paradox.

5.

love me love me love me please

was what the people-monsters said,

and I was afraid,

so I repeated the words

out of fear

and the Angel of Difference came

and whispered, *Sssssshhhhh*

Ladybug

Lindsay Bird

we play restaurant, and give me
all your monies
and we play doctor and wave the magic
ladybug at pain

sometimes love
is a tap I turn off
and sometimes I touch it
and its shell divides into wings

The Dinner Party

Lindsay Bird

I have never been able to name joy
when it stands before me, slapsticked
joy telling a joke
in the kitchen and we're all laughing together
minus the robins doing their spring thing
outside the window while inside the window
joy is spreading like apple juice
through a paper towel and the sogginess
makes the towel stronger and realize
its purpose but I do not realize
joy even as I pick it up and it gives a piglet
scream, surprising me
I drop joy and all its nonsense
by this point I should find a synonym
for joy but forgive me, I just found joy
and need to repeat its name
like the most interesting guest
at the dinner party who left before dessert
my mouth aching with ice cream
when I realized we would not meet
again

Monkey Goes Too

Lindsay Bird

Monkey was left again this morning. His body light
and limp like the window shadow of the alcoholic

who gives a little wave when we pass
on our way to school. We are all alive at the same time,

fading, growing, or foolish, forsaken by
a babyhood that babbled me into belief

that *Monkey goes too*. A simple psalm undone
by centimetres penciled up the wall in mom science,

foretelling a friendship so fierce
a secret second version of it exists to occupy

her arms during a swirl through the washer,
will expire. I can't help but ask, like a dieter

eyeing a Dairy Queen, *does Monkey go today?*
A plea that sinks beneath the froth

of her, body shifting from butter soft
to bony, with no reply. My face, split-second stony,

stitches itself into Monkey's smile,
insides akimbo, his fur the colour of an amber

empty sitting out for curbside collection.
What gets left, and where, and who.

Learn to abandon. Monkey went too.

A Found Poem

Randall Maggs

amongst the carnage underneath the ridge.
 The bugle's blast and flares at 3 am. The floating runways
 catapult. Heavy guns recoil at LZ Falcon, 5 miles away.
The forest of screaming souls—later, what we heard
 the people's soldiers called the place.

Hard to figure how a small red book
 survived the shelling. Someone dropped it when
 he fell, I guess, a soldier said, and passed it on. His young
 lieutenant found it filled with poetry and letters. He looked
 out at the dead again, the blood-soaked fallen soldiers
 missing limbs, their blown-off knapsacks hooked on
 bushes—you'd never find whose hand had written here.
 "Beautiful writing, beautiful script," he said, older
 now, married to a woman from Saigon:

*Oh, my dear. My young wife.
 When the troops come home after the victory
 and you do not see me, please look at the proud colours.
 You will see me there, and you will feel warm
 under the shadow of the bamboo tree.*

Sad to think she never got the message.
 She must have wondered all her life, and paused
 at times when she was doing something else, wanting
 morning glory in the market-place, or biking past
 the catafalque. You wonder how such never-knowing
 shaped her life. Had she heard his yearning in the night?
 Was she on her own? Nights are chilly in Hanoi.
 She must have had her moments, thinking
 of his legs entwined with hers.

here a leg there a leg, generals like us keeping score
 need a little combat time?—go find yourself a bush war

Rhododendrons

Randall Maggs

His eyes were on the unfamiliar forest-edge,
 So far so good. Quietly, he slapped a cheek. The bugs
 were merciless, and every shade of green. A burst of muted
 static echoed, then a chatty murmur that he knew,
 acknowledging the Huey coming in. He blinked
 a moment, reassured. Mornings
 you felt better anyway.

They'd finished cutting back
 the landing zone, the listening post itself was next,
 but not for him. He was getting out that day. The thought
 of being all alone out here in hostile territory? Solitude was
 one thing, but guys like that?—you had to be psychotic.
 This last week had been a revelation—everything
 was look and listen and interpret. He got it, though,
 your continuity depended on it. He scanned the artful
 shadows. The foliage seemed all the same, generic jungle
 tangle looking like his mother's rhododendrons.

What a fucking life, you trucked out
 every morning in a chopper. The goddamned things.
 The sudden pitching floors. He'd been a running back
 in school and hated when you lost your footing.
 Summers in Old Orchard, he'd forsworn those clanking
 midway rides, like the Tilt-a-Whirl or Gravitron that pinned
 you up against its wall and dropped the greasy floor away.
 He loved those fun-time girls from Montreal but, clearly,
 they were lunatics. They had no fear. They loved it
 being tossed and hurled about and upside down. His first
 mission here, he'd heard a sudden chunking sound and—*Jesus!*
 those were bullet-holes between his feet. The pilot cursed
 a blue-streak on the intercom, dropped the nose and
 dove and rolled away. Later on the helicopter pad,
 he stood a moment contemplating bullet-holes
 and travel-angles. “Yes indeed,” a friend,
 an airframe tech from Baltimore, had grinned.
 “Kind of like the Projects. Even makes
 you homesick don't it?”

The loaded slick was settling down.
 The troops were edgy, new like him, and looking
 out the open sides. Again, he checked the clearing's edge,
 his mother's rhodos everywhere. “They always make me think
 of paradise,” she'd said once to him. “Some tropic island

where your father's anchored." So it fell to Ben to prop them up against the weight of snow. *Snow. Ha.*

In Vietnam your shirt is soaked by 9 am.

He'd put that in a letter when he got a chance, his next to Montreal was overdue. He'd give a leg to be there now with Hendrix at the Paul Sauvé . . . *Oh bloody Jeezly hell*—those moving leaves he'd seen—that wasn't any trick of light or mountain breeze—how long had he been dithering, no more than half a second surely. Oh, they were scary fuckers, yes they were. That barber in Phu Bai with his questions, grinning in the mirror as his razor grazed your jugular. Still, no Victor Charlie in your sector Intelligence confirmed, but he'd seen the AK-47 barrel being levelled, and he knew that they'd been out there all along, just waiting. Man. The endless shit that happens here, like everybody says. He shuts down everything external—he'd learned this, watching as his quarterback would focus on the signal in his helmet.

How well he knew that seeming vacant gaze, then how the eyes would turn to him.

Your ball man.

Squatting in the stillness after, a local habit he'd picked up, he remembered, one-eyed, what he'd seen was panic, then what looked like resignation. At least it hadn't been a kid, like the other feather-weights he'd helped to drag away. Nonetheless, the world would be an altered place tomorrow. And he'd never see his mother's rhododendrons quite the same.

Home Front

Dan Murphy

We are at war planting
Our gardens and taking shots
In the arm. Everyday
I go out before 9 a.m.
Into No Man's Land
For milk and a dozen eggs.

If I hadn't looked deep
Into your eyes back then
I wouldn't have noticed you
Waiting at the checkout. Fighting
For a breath of yesterday.
I still dream of your mouth

More sensuous now when hidden.
I am invisible too. Able to slip
Between the cracks but still recognizable
By my walk. You can find me if you wish.
I've learned to smile with my eyes
And whisper "Fuck off" in the darkness.

We are ghosts under our masks.
Swept under the carpet by lockdowns.
Able to pass through walls. Our hearts
Now closed tightly as fists of coral and
Cold as the blackness of the North Atlantic.

Ukraine

Dan Murphy

There is no poetry left
On the TV screen. Only
Thunder on the horizon.
Tinned flashes of light
Illuminating my furniture.

Sunsets that fire makes
Before blinds are closed.
Orange kilns of explosions
And the last looks from eyes
Boarding buses and trains.

Some of us hang a flag and
Give it room to fly over the balcony.
Hope for the children clinging
To bloody shirts and sucking
The nipples of their mothers.

Most of us turn war off. Pointing
The remote like the barrel of a gun.
Pushing the circle, with a line drawn through it.
The knife driven into the poetry of a nation
Turned off with the push of a thumb.

How to Gut a Fish

Sabrina Pinksen

1.

Dig your fingers under the gills
of the fat turbot your father's
just torn from a net, stolen
from the shallow seabed
of the Grand Banks.

2.

Slice the gills open. The sound
of the corded cartilage *is* a feeling
in your fingers: a scrape and grind
against the thick rubber shielding
your hands. The eyes like cold marbles
as its life leaks onto the fibreglass floor.

3.

Carve across the top
of the turbot's tender belly
and tug the knife through
its iridescent scales. Reach inside
and pull out the crimson, currant, eggplant,
indigo, and lapis of its insides, until there is only
the white flesh, sinew, and bone.

4.

Watch as your father pulls a creature
from the net. It is long, green, and shining,
and he presses its swollen belly
and it gives birth on the table. You are
a twenty-three year old girl,
one-hundred-sixty miles offshore,
and your father brought you here
because you are sad; he didn't know
what else to do with you.

5.

Toss the guts into a bucket. Look
at the fish, their concave bellies,
and bulged eyes. They'll be sold

once you get back to St. John's.
Sixteen thousand pounds of fish
that your green, aching hands,
have cleaved open.

6.
Blink against the icy spray
and wipe at your face with the crust
of your salty sweater. Taste
the stinging copper, the sour bile
in your throat, until the wind rips
across the deck and scours you clean.
Catch a glimpse, a flash of your goosed skin,
the blood matted to your tender arm,
where the turbot scales collect and glisten.

7.
Allow the harsh, cold air to flay
your lungs. Roll your neck and listen
to the click of your joints. You are
your father's youngest daughter
and he tore you from your basement
apartment off Columbus Drive
and brought you to this grey, violent place.
Days ago, you wanted to die, but now
the muscles in your cold fingers
remind you that you are alive,
and you bow your head over a turbot
as its tail slaps the table, the glinting metal
of your knife before it cuts into the gills.

Lien

Sabrina Pinksen

You look at me from a photograph
while I eat the *bánh cuốn* your mother makes.
I have been coming to your house for years—
a dollar fifty feast at the table of steaming trays,
the rice cooker peppered with black beans,
dura chua, pumpkin, and tofu.

Some days, I catch you coming home from school.
You gallop over the stairs,
a flash of navy stripes, your thin red scarf,
the squeal of the door as you shut yourself behind it.
Do you think we're an invasion—
the click of chopsticks amidst our anglo tongues?

Or is this just another part of your life,
as normal as *phở* at 7 am before the heat breaks,
your little brother squashed between
your belly and your father's damp back
as he drives you to school on his motorbike,
to your English class taught by a foreigner,
whose name you turn to music with your tones,
who gets paid more than your family makes,
to teach your fifty classmates how to say *dog*?

Chó.

I lived here for over two
years,
before I learned how to say
it
in your tongue.

Last month, a truck towing a refrigerated trailer
crossed into England from a seaside port in Belgium.
There were 39 people inside the container,
and while the waves of the North Sea rose,
so did the temperature
and the carbon dioxide
and the fear

and the 39 people
all smuggled
all Vietnamese
suffocated.

Lien,
your mother nods as she takes
my plate.
Hẹn gặp lại, I say.
See you a-gain, she says.
Outside, I read your father's
hands
as he asks which direction I want
to go.
He pulls my motorbike onto
the street
and points it north, toward the
lake,
where years ago, men who look
like me
dropped bombs, agent orange,
and napalm.
Now your father plucks my
helmet
from the rearview mirror of my
motorbike
and places it on my head.

Chickenwind

Bernard Wills

You think you have problems...
 There are problems and there are problems
 and you have not had problems till you've had cats
 or so Tilley Graham would tell you
 if you visited her in her squat, shabby trailer
 barely the size of a pickup
 that her fed up, frazzled father bought her
 behind the farm as it was dirt cheap
 and he needed a place for her and the 26 cats
 who are now 32 cats who couple unrestrained
 by the incest taboo which it seems cats don't have more's the pity
 but when I said behind the farm I was being imprecise-
 it's actually behind the chicken-factory barn
 and as chickens, I am told, piss relentlessly
 there is a massive fan bulging out like an aluminum giant's eye
 that blows out uric acid
 in one unceasing South Atlantic hurricane,
 one warm, lung-searing, wave
 and it may surprise you to know
 that Tilley doesn't want your visit
 and does not want your opinion on her cats
 as she has her own
 and that's why that relentless blast of burning chickenwind
 suits her fine thank you very much
 because your judgment is not needed or even wanted
 for Tilley Graham knows exactly
 why each and every cat is there and not elsewhere
 and all 39 of them have their own story and their own purpose
 and Tilley her own special, cosmic destiny
 to rescue cats from the cat killing cults
 that proliferate in these anti-Aquarian, not so new age, nihilistic times
 of witchcraft, devil-worship in the highest places,
 white vans with shaded windows circling the block,
 and all the oppositions
 of the wrong planets in the wrong houses,
 the 12 fold starry heavens
 going flat out bonkers-
 and if those giant bags of bulk food and litter,
 the messy after-births of 47 cats
 and the dagger-sharp glare
 of semi-alcoholic, snooty aunts,

creased by time and thin as rails,
who always knew and always said,
out loud AND in company,
over plastic forks and devilled eggs,
Kool-aid, punch and potato salad,
that that girl would amount to nothing
but strung out, slutty trailer trash,
a crazy, useless heap of fat slag-
are a lot to deal with well,
she'll hunker still in the fortress of her own conviction,
true to her cosmic calling
from behind that stubborn, chickenwind redoubt.

Ernie Won't Go to Rehab He Said No No No

Bernard Wills

Tilley's trailer was one of several they had
 and actually I think it was Ernie's at one point
 and if ever there was a son of a bitch
 with an iron gut it was that guy.
 You could see him puffing about daily, on a tractor
 dragging behind him the rusty, dented hopper
 that belched up plumes of pesticide,
 circling the peach and apple trees
 in a swirling white haze
 without so much as a flimsy paper mask for protection.
 Booze is THE prophylactic friends
 and a drinker like Ernie just does NOT die
 perhaps because you cannot kill that craving
 and Ernie's got the itch day in and day out
 and if he's still alive somewhere
 on some other chicken farm
 tossing crates of the Colonel's
 precious chickens on a truck,
 spreading the feed careless of the hatchlings underfoot
 (don't be shocked, a chick or two
 squashed by a stray boot will not be missed)
 you can bet YOUR farm
 he's having beer and rotgut for dinner, Kelly's or Bright's 76
 and that his insides are still all rusty, stained iron
 and his stringy flesh a specimen thoroughly brined and pickled...

But Ernie's not been back
 at MacCallan's Farms since his spot of trouble.
 Real drunks just focus on the one important itch
 and Ernie's pecker hadn't been heard from in decades
 and it's probably 147 in alcoholic years
 but Ernie hooked up with the wrong crowd,
 bootleggers with some crates of Russian Prince,
 Bacardi's and a lady named Bonny
 and why he squelched his well-honed hermetic impulse
 is anyone's guess
 as Ernie doesn't need enablers or friends,
 he can drink just fine, in his peeling trailer, on his own
 and sharing, surely, is of all things alien to his nature
 but stupidly he partied,
 it dissolved...in fumbings, zippers zipped and lewd gropings...

satyric nature awoke, once more, like Rip Van Winkle,
in an era of changed relations
and Bonny wanted none of his ugly, wrinkled ass...

The Judge was ready to leaven justice with mercy
thinking, perhaps too kindly,
that demon-drink was at the root of Ernie's problems...
three months for unwanted touching
OR, he spoke gently yet firmly for all that,
the same three months in rehab,
remanded to an alcohol treatment facility.
Here, though, was Ernie's stab at infamy-
he didn't dress up in a shirt and clip on tie for nothing-
he ruffled up his slight frame, five feet and three inches,
whiffing through the gaps in his teeth: 'I'll take jail your honor'.
Yep, no rehab for him, he'll sweat it out in jail,
every wrenching spasm of withdrawal
digesting solid food, slowly, bit by bit...
racked with pains of the god-damned
alone in his bunk with a raging, needful demon
winged from a bottomless, reeking, shit slimed bat cave...
and an infinite craving by God
is something to stare down as, indeed, is a craving for the infinite.

Sea Goddess

Shelly Kawaja

The ocean stretches, yawns, and light filters into the bedroom. A yellow cast on white walls. Dust gathers on the fibre art; a starfish in muted orange, and spills onto the highboy. Devon breaths into his pillow, makes an occasional grunt or snore, muffled by synthetic down. Lana remembers a time when the morning greeted them with arousal. A time when they lounged in bed enjoying the touch of skin under sleep-wrinkled sheets. Now, she throws off the blankets as soon as she opens her eyes.

In the kitchen, Lana squints through the window as the coffee machine gurgles to a stop. There's a woman on the beach. Topless. Her belly puckers where her jean shorts pinch and she moves with a low swagger in her hips as she pokes a stick through patches of seaweed. The woman's breasts are smaller than hers, very pale, areolas practically invisible.

"You don't see that every day." Her husband shuffles into the kitchen barefoot, a frayed elastic dangling from the waistband of his boxers.

Lana snatches the pot and pours a coffee. "Must be freezing down there." She hands the mug to her husband, pours another for herself, then rests her tailbone against the counter and sips.

Devon peers over her shoulder out the window. "I need to get to my boat."

"You could not go."

Sunlight slants across his face and he narrows his eyes. "They're only tiny." He kisses her on the cheek, then chuckles. "Wifey for Lifey?"

Lana turns her mug around and reads the loopy cursive. "A gift from Joan."

"Ha. Joan knows." He kisses her again. "Wifey." He turns and shuffles out with his coffee. Tiny holes wink along the hem of his housecoat.

Devon crosses through Frank and Joan's backyard with his pack slung over his shoulders. Frank, on deck as usual, normally greets him Saturday mornings with a joke about dumb blonds, or titties, or an old man's saggy balls. Frank's eyes fix on Devon, but he doesn't call out this time, instead, he raises his coffee in a quiet salute. When Devon's close, he leans over the rail and hisses too low to make out.

"What's that?" Devon adjusts his pack and grips the rope hammered into the top of a land marker.

Frank whispers louder. "She hid the binoculars." His lips disappear and he shakes with quiet laughter. "She fucking hid them."

Devon starts down the bank with the rope tight in his hand.

"Where you going? You're not heading back in are ya?"

He skids down the path of beaten grass, dodges wild rose bushes, and clacks onto shore.

"Did I tell you about the hippy and the sailor?" Frank shouts from above.

The hippy—no, the woman crouches next to a small pile of driftwood she's made on the beach. Her broad shoulders are freckled red. Her jean shorts gape at the base of her spine. She turns a piece of wood over in her hands.

Devon shrugs out of his backpack, tosses it in the boat and pushes out into the bay. He climbs aboard and paddles until the water is deep enough to drop the motor.

The woman glances up, waves.

He averts his gaze, guns the motor, and steers his boat into the chop of the arm. Shag Cliff is only a fifteen-minute run, but already he's the only human for miles. The water turns inky black in the shadow of the mountain range. He eases around the point and makes for the lone sandy spit at the base of the cliff. Devon kills the motor, lets the boat glide, then paddles the last few feet to shore. When the water is knee deep, he jumps over the side. Waves slap wet on the gunwale, then burst, rushing him into the quiet mountain range, spread like open arms. Or legs. He hauls the boat up on the beach, pulls on his pack, bounces it into place then follows the natural lay of the land. Jagged sheets of shale skirt the cliff face, tapering to a narrow outcrop of smooth stone, an ancient path that carries him behind the bluff and into the trees.

Lana lifts a hand to block the sun. The woman on the beach has six small piles of driftwood arranged in a semi-circle. She stands in the middle of the circle with her hands on her hips and surveys the piles, then she looks up at the house. Lana steps back. A small step. The sun shining off the windows must obscure the inside, but when she looks again, the woman raises an arm and waves. Lana drops to the floor, crawls across the room on her hands and knees and snakes onto the couch. She steals a glance out the window over the back cushions. The woman is back-on now. Breasts bared to the sea.

Ping! Lana fishes her phone from her pocket. A message from Joan: *Look! Us in ten years!* Lana taps the video and watches four old ladies (at least twenty years older than her) run down a sandy beach, strip down to their skivvies and jump, laughing, into the ocean. One of the women grins at the camera, her wrinkly chest hidden in a blur of censorship. *We do this every spring. The shock of the cold. The connection with nature. It reminds us we're alive!* She raises her arms, turns and plunges into the waves.

Lana texts back, *Looks freezing!*, then slinks off the couch and crawls to the bedroom.

Devon finds the bones picked clean by scavenger birds. Foxes maybe. Even a bear is likely. Rib cage. Spine. The skull is what he came back for, and of course, the rack. He counts ten points on each side. What that converts to on the B&C he doesn't know, he's no trophy hunter, but the antlers are a perfect symmetry, mirror images of each other. Devon picks up the skull, tugs it free from a dead tangle of grass and wipes dried leaves from the eye sockets. There, just above the right eye, his shot. A small jagged hole. If he'd aimed a little lower, there'd be no sign of his shot at all. Devon lays his backpack flat on the ground and sets the rack on top of it. He ropes the antlers to the straps and knots the cord tight.

Last fall, on the final day of the hunting season, he and Frank tracked the animal through the valley and up into the hills. The woods grew so dense they were forced to scale steep inclines of scree scratched into the mountainside by once-upon-a-time glaciers. They kicked into shattered rock for footholds as Frank favoured a hernia in the left side of his abdomen. Frank should have known better, but every crack and snap that echoed through the valley taunted them on, until they were too deep in the hills to drag the moose out of it.

It was a young moose, probably in its second year, and Devon's first kill. They hauled as much of the animal out as they could. Frank said all they left behind was stew meat, tough as shit. Joan wouldn't touch the stuff. But they left the animal hacked up on the grass with only the best cuts missing. Once a townie, always a townie. He was just playing bayman. Devon gives the knots a final tug, hefts the pack onto his shoulders, and the antlers fan out from his body like wings. A Guillermo del Toro creation, if Guillermo del Toro was from around the bay. Devon laughs at himself and the trees respond with a windy sigh. He snaps a strap across his chest, another across his hips, adjusts the pack at the top of his tailbone and heads back the way he came.

“That’s a fine rack.” Frank squeezes the air. “Symmetrical.”

Lana pulls her sweater tight across her shoulders and relaxes into the cool evening calm on Frank and Joan’s back patio. Joan opens a second bottle of wine.

“What are you gonna do with it?” Frank lifts his glass, filled well past the midway point, and puckers his lips to meet it.

Devon stares at the skull and antlers resting on the lawn. “Mount it over the fireplace.”

“Ha!” Frank sets his glass down. “The wife’ll love that.”

Lana tries not to bristle. That’s what she is after all. Wifey for Lify. Fierce doer of laundry. Scrubber of floors. Frank winks at her.

“I bet she would.” Joan unwraps cellophane from a plate of squares, picks one out and bites it in two. She pushes the plate at Lana.

“The stairwell?” Devon raises his eyebrows at her.

Lana shakes her head and picks up a cookie.

“The basement?”

“Maybe.” Frozen chocolate cracks between her molars.

“We don’t have a shed.”

“Use mine.” Frank rocks in his chair and the sunset flashes off his transition lenses. His shed sits at the far corner of the yard where it blocks the view of the eastern arm. The door heavy with lopsided and gnarled antlers. “Plenty of room for that little rack.”

“I just think walls are for art.” Lana works the frozen cookie in her mouth. “Not hunting trophies.”

“It’s not a trophy,” Devon says.

“Of course, it is.”

Frank grins. Joan sucks her cookie.

“That’s as much a work of art as anything you got up in there.” Devon points at their house next door. “Your rug hooking, or latch-hook-whatever-it-is, your Bob Ross—”

“No—”

“I had to trek out there.” He gestures across the water. “Into the mountains. The *wild*. What if I paint them? What if I painted a Bob Ross on my antlers?”

“You hunted an animal. Shot it. Took the antlers and *skull*. How is that not a trophy?”

“She got you there.” Frank clears his throat. Joan pushes the plate of squares at Devon.

The next morning Lana finds the coffee already made, her husband in the backyard, and the woman on the beach with her breasts out. The sun beats down on the water and it’s the kind of day that suggests a fine July, and a

finer August might be possible this year. Devon has supplies laid out on the grass; oil, rags, bleach, a tub of water. Antlers propped against a bench as he moves around them, attentive in his work.

The woman disappears behind the bank, then reappears naked. No—her underwear is just the same colour as her skin. She swaggers down the shore onto the lick of sand and wades into the ocean. The bay was choked with ice less than a month ago. Blocks the size of small cars washed up on the beach. Lana leans into the glass until her breath blurs her vision. The woman pauses when the water reaches her thighs, dips her arms in to her elbows, then dives. Devon stands, rests his wrists on his hips, rag dangling from his hand as he watches her. She swims with the long, cool strides of someone who has spent a lifetime in freezing oceans.

Devon shakes his head, then lifts the rack into his arms like a rare Botticelli and carries it into the house.

“What do you think?” A bit of bone scratches the wall when he holds the antlers, shiny with oil, over the fireplace.

“Careful.”

He lowers his masterpiece to the floor. “What about there?”

“So empty eye sockets watch as you descend to the basement? And what’s that?”

Devon fingers the jagged hole, grins. “I almost got him in the eye.”

“That’s...” Lana gestures at the whole ensemble in a circular motion. “That’s never going up in here. Never.”

“Well, that—” He indicates the painting above the fireplace. A print she ordered from bigpaintings.com. “That’s just...nothing. This is—”

“Please explain to me what this is.”

“It’s a thing of beauty. A natural wonder.”

Lana folds her arms. Outside, the woman strides out of the ocean. Shoulders back. Head high. Slick as a seal rising from the waves. “You can put it in the garage. In the garage. Where no one will see it, but you.”

After they lie in bed not touching and Devon falls asleep, Lana watches the video again. Ladies run down the beach in a twinkle of bare bottoms and soft legs. Arms in the air. Hands gripping wrinkled hands when the water reaches the tender part of thighs. Lana has never swum naked. She and Devon left the city six years ago to live in a rural community with an ocean in their backyard, but she’s never swum in it. It’s the Atlantic. The Newfoundland coast. Cold enough to rub you raw. Lana’s phone goes dark. She drops it on the end table, turns over and stares at Devon’s advancing bald spot.

The night ticks by, marked by her husband’s deep breaths and almost-snores. He rolls close to her and she elbows him back to his side of the bed, stuffs a pillow between his breathing and hers. She pulls the corner of a bedsheet over her eyes. Sleeps for a bit. Maybe. Devon trespasses onto her side of the bed again. His knee touches her leg. Lana throws off the blankets, gets up and grabs her sweater from the floor.

Outside, the ocean breathes, open and powerful. Lana uses her phone like a flashlight until her fingers find the rope, then she scurries down the bank to the beach. Her aloneness confirmed by the echo of her footsteps, the open calm in the air and the dark windows in the saltbox houses along the bank. The new Airbnb where the woman must be staying is also dark. Is she alone in there? Lana stands where the woman stood facing the ocean and pulls off her sweater. Before she can think, she hauls off her t-shirt, too. In a frenzy, she kicks off her shoes and pants. She rushes to the water with her arms crossed over her chest. The sand on the soles of her feet is shockingly cold and the first wave is unbearable. Lana drops her arms, clenches her hands into fists and wades to her knees. Her thighs. Her

breasts luminescent in the moonlight. She laughs as her legs go numb, and takes another, jaunty, step. Something sharp digs into her foot. She stumbles and lets herself fall into the ocean.

Lana dashes back to shore, arms swinging wildly, waves pushing her forward as if they too understand that that's enough for now. She shivers and hops and pulls her sweater on over her sticky, salty body, but her pants resist. They stick to her thighs and her skin burns as she tugs. Lana grabs her phone from the sand and calls Devon.

“Lana?”

“I need a blanket. On the beach.” Lana clenches her teeth to stop them chattering. “I went for a late-night swim.”

“What?”

“Blanket, please!” She hangs up, hunches into herself, and watches the house until a light comes on in the bedroom. She breathes into her hands, then squats her fingers in the back of her knees. The six little piles of driftwood have been transformed into animals; deer, rabbit, bear, fox, owl, and fish. Arranged in a semi-circle.

Her husband is a moving shadow down the bank. He turns up the shore and waves the blanket. “A swim?” Lana closes her eyes as he cocoons her in fleece, rubs heat into her arms. “Should I worry?”

“Why do you think those antlers are a work of art?” Her voice trembles with cold.

“I don't know.” Devon crouches next to her and hugs her close.

“There must be something to it.”

He sits on the cold rocks and Lana lifts the blanket to let him inside. She slips her hands under his hoody. He flinches, stiffens, but the loose hoody lifts easily and she pulls it up his torso. “It's pretty goddamn cold down here, wifey.”

She puts a finger to his lips. “I'm a fucking sea goddess.”

“Huh.” Devon adjusts the blanket so it spreads over the rocks. He curls around her, runs his hands over her back. “It's the hunt, I guess.”

“What about it?”

“Being out there, it's just you and...the wild.” He squeezes her closer.

“And?”

“And it's dark. So dark you're sightless. You just stand there. Waiting. Then you start to see shapes. Branches. Trees.” He tries to pull her leg over his, but Lana pushes his hand away.

“What else?”

“Ah...a distant ridge. The edge of the valley. A bird call breaks the silence. A wren, or thrush, or something.”

“And then?”

“And then...the earth beats beneath you. Slow, at first. Quiet. Then it grows louder, stronger, until it thrums in your feet.” He kisses her neck. “You taste like salt.”

“The earth thrums?”

“It travels up your spine. Into your shoulders.” He kisses her shoulder, reaches a hand between her legs. “The valley yawns open. But you wait. Still as mist. Or a rabbit in the brush. The sky turns yellow over the mountains. You

see a flash of shattered scree, stretchmark silver down the mountainsides. The mist lifts and you hear a crack, way off in the distance. The rabbit takes off. You move.”

Lana pushes his joggers down and holds him in her hand. She shifts on top of him and he pulls himself up until she’s nested in his lap.

“Every ache melts away. Every thought. Every distraction.” He grips her hips and moves her back and forth. Speaks into the soft spot behind her ear. “There’s only you. Terrified. Aware of every breath. Every sound. You see yourself as you pick your way down into the valley. Into the trees.” Devon leans forward until Lana is on her back. Rocks push into her skin. Her hair catches in sand. The ocean sighs. Stars wink in a multitude of layers. And the animals around them watch.

The woman is on the beach at dawn when Devon hefts the rack into his boat. The antlers and skull already roped to his backpack. “Some morning.”

She twists toward him, fully clothed this time, her driftwood animals half-submerged in water.

“Too bad about the tide.” He nods at the moon, full, and still visible in the morning sky.

The woman smiles, her phone fixed on the animals. She turns back to her work as the fox capitulates to a wave. Raises a hand as if to slow time. The wood breaks apart and the individual pieces drift and bob.

Devon pushes the boat into the bay, climbs aboard and begins to paddle. “I like your art!” he calls. The woman waves, still filming. He drops the motor and steers his boat back toward Shag Cliff.

The Point, July 2020

Leo McKay Jr.

White over blue, white over blue, white over blue. Clarence rested his head in the long grass and watched the sky slide deeper into itself. When two large clouds, one slightly ahead of the other in the wind, appeared to him as sailing vessels on the open water of the sea, he knew the edibles had hit.

Even though the surrounding landscape was rocky, the spot where he had laid his bike in the grass was soft and loamy. There had been several hot, humid days in a row, and the greenery, as his body had encountered it on the way to the ground, held the warmth of the sunshine that gleamed through it. The soil beneath bore a comforting coolness. Fleeing had worked. The tingling he'd earlier worried might be starting up in his feet had failed to appear.

He lifted his chin until his view became mostly sky. A fringe of sun-shot grass leaves waved like fingers just above the level of his forehead. Down this low, he could smell the heat of the sun in the grass, raw and bitter.

He'd recently had three panic attacks, two at the start of the pandemic, about a week apart, then another just a few days ago. They were the first panic attacks of his life, and the experience was unlike the way movies and TV depicted them, which was all about hyperventilation, something he did not even feel close to when he was having one.

Panic attack number one occurred an hour before one of the first virtual meetings of the early pandemic, and it had been made more terrifying by the fact that he did not understand what was happening to him. He'd been alone in his apartment, and in retrospect he could see that the episode had been triggered by dread.

Pre-pandemic, he would have gone to work the next day and talked about it. "This weird thing happened to me yesterday. Look at me, I'm still shaking." And someone else would have recognized a panic attack as he described it.

But with in-office work shut down, he'd been limited to randomly Googling phrases such as "I feel like I'm going to die," which took days of intermittent effort to lead him to the Wikipedia page for panic attacks.

That entry, when he finally found it, helped him better understand what had happened. At the very least it allowed him to identify a particular symptom of his own attacks: the painful sensation of pins and needles on the bottoms of his feet. This had been a precursor each time. And each time, the painful tingling had persisted throughout. He'd had no idea that pins and needles were associated with panic attacks, but Wikipedia made it part of a bulleted list: *tingling in hands/feet*.

This information came in handy just a few days later when it happened again, an attack much shorter and less severe. The mere fact that he knew what to call the thing had seemed to help.

Then yesterday he'd had a third episode. And it had happened not in the run-up to a work-related virtual meeting, but in its aftermath.

The racing sailboat clouds soon scattered off to the south, leaving only a dissipated white scuff mark. He closed his eyes, but the sun shone directly on his face, and his eyelids did little to keep the brightness out. With his eyes closed, though, he became more strongly aware of the sounds around him, which shifted among three layers. Somewhere a crow cawed repeatedly, deep and harsh. There was the shushing of the breeze moving over and through the grass and the trees. And under these two layers the hum of the city came across the water, fluctuating in pitch.

As the effect of the cannabis gathered in intensity, the layers of sound took on a visual aspect in his imagination. He saw them as bands of multicoloured ribbon, moving like the display panel on a piece of sound-editing software.

He lifted himself onto an elbow and forced his eyes reluctantly open. His head rush had turned chaotic, and he felt that opening his eyes might slow the tumbling.

The world lay before him in strips of horizontal colour. Solid green at the bottom: the field he lay in. Above that: the darker green of trees, flecked and striped with blue and blue-green ocean behind it. Solid blue of sky across the top.

The sky was skiffed whitish with a light haze. In the absence of clouds, the wind did not show itself in the sky. But the trees in the small clump of woods down closer to the water were actively bending back toward him in a variable breeze.

The upright tree trunks moved with the sway of a trained dancer, or the graceful neck of a majestic bird. And as he watched the trees bend in the wind and then return upright, bend and return upright, he became aware of how much of each tree remained invisible beneath the earth, a root system as extensive as the network of branches he could see, equally present, though out of sight. He thought of the physics involved in keeping those trees from toppling in the wind, the powerful root wood fingering into the earth, straining against the rocks and soil.

“Oh my fuck, I’m stoned,” he said aloud. And he began to laugh as he shifted his weight off his elbow and lowered himself back to the ground.

Katie, his co-worker, had given him the brownies as an ironic office Santa gift at the Christmas party just prior to the pandemic. At least he felt the gift had likely been meant ironically, since he imagined that, to Katie, he was an old man, and he imagined that Katie’s generation, like most generations when they were young, thought they’d invented the pleasures of the senses.

It had been two in the afternoon when he’d remembered the brownies. They’d been in the freezer since before Christmas. The sight of Katie’s eyes in his team’s Google Meet session had reminded him, the way the reading glasses he’d only ever seen her wear virtually made her already intense dark irises enormous.

He checked in on his feet, moved his toes briefly against the loose cloth of socks. They felt fine for now, but his mind held a certainty that it was only a matter of time before they were not fine.

Two pm in July left hours of full light in the day. It would take about an hour for the weed brownies to hit, and he had a destination in mind that he was pretty sure he could reach in well under that amount of time.

There was another Google Meet call scheduled for three thirty, not with his regular team, but with some pop-up group he’d been assigned to, Strategic Something or Other, that had already met twice and whose reason for being he still did not understand. He decided to skip it, to miss the three thirty call. He had never missed a professional meeting in his life, and he felt afraid at the prospect, about what the consequences would be. But he also felt grateful for the pandemic, and for the format of these group video calls, which had revealed to him just how little he mattered. Physical presence could be deceiving, he’d come to realize. He’d spent a professional lifetime attending meetings at which he had not been a participant. He’d not been listened to or valued or sometimes even acknowledged. It was the distancing effect of virtual meetings that had shown him his own insignificance. There he was on the screen, clearly visible alongside his co-workers, but he was also separate from the proceedings, a detached observer, powerless and devoid of meaning.

He dug his bike out of the storage room in the basement of his apartment building, strapped the helmet to his head, threw a leg over the crossbar, and popped a chocolatey cube into his mouth, where he felt its microwaved warmth dissolve backwards down his throat.

A soft breeze came up off the water. The sunlight was golden in the leaves of maples. He hunched low to the handlebars and pedaled through the roundabout at the end of the arm. As he headed south and east along the mouth of the harbour, the roads wound through and among the nearby coves.

There was a point of land he knew, across the water from the park at the tip of the city’s peninsula. On Google Maps, the roadway scored one side of a triangle, harbour water marked the other two sides. And if you got off your bike at a place where the view of the harbour was blocked by evergreens, and crossed the road and followed a narrow track

through the dripping firs, you came to a clearing of grass and reeds that looked down through another stand of trees and onto the flat boulders at the water's edge.

There had recently been a lifting of some pandemic restrictions, and he felt freer the farther he rode, freer than he'd felt in months.

A swimmy feeling had pressed him into the ground, and when he woke up, the afternoon was brighter than it had been. He wiggled his toes to test for tingling and found that his legs and arms were abnormally long and only got longer, ganglier, and harder to control the more he moved them. When he stood up, he towered unsteadily over the trees, and when he leaned over and reached out, he could touch the tops of the highest buildings across the water.

When he woke up again, the sun was coming at him from a darker part of the sky. The corona of golden light around it had shrunk, and the blue at its edges had sombered and deepened.

He was more than twenty years older than the next youngest person on his team, and he saw the pandemic differently than his co-workers. His age and experience made him more aware of human vulnerability. Just last year he had had a stent applied to a major artery near his heart. He was on blood pressure meds. And now the panic attacks.

A friend of his from high school was posting on Facebook about her own experience of long COVID. She'd spent more than eighty days self-isolating in her bedroom and was still experiencing symptoms, though her posts did not detail what those were. Her doctors, she'd recently posted, thought her kidneys might be permanently compromised.

Every epidemiologist Clarence had seen interviewed in the media had said there would be no return to normal until there was a vaccine, and according to most experts, a vaccine was at least two years away. One article he'd recently read said that people should start coming to terms with the possibility that there might never be a vaccine. Seeing his high school classmate post about the support she was getting in her illness made Clarence realize he himself would not have any support if he got ill. He had two grownup children who had not spoken to him for years. For over a decade he'd had an ex-wife. That was one person who might have supported him in illness. But she herself had died from cancer just a couple of years before. Clarence felt he'd been a support to Kimberley in the few months she'd lived beyond her diagnosis. He'd visited her in the hospital's palliative care ward. He'd contributed money to the care of her cat. But his children had grievances with him on this and other matters. And he knew their grievances likely had merit. His children were smart, fair-minded people. He did not think they were accusing him unjustly.

He stood from where he'd been lying in the grass, left his bike on its side, and followed the meadow to where a less worn path went through the trees to the harbour. The light here was speckled and wavery. The air was cooler in the shade. But the bright day beckoned from the rocks and water ahead.

There was a bank of black earth at the spot where the tree roots ended near the shore. Thick, mature-looking moss grew in clumps. Beyond the soil, gray boulders extended onto a shelf of dry granite, an area the size of a room in a house, half a metre above the level of the waves, which were mere rippling undulations at the moment. At the edge of the plateau of stone, Clarence stood and looked down to where part of the same single piece of granite extended at a lower level, out beneath the surface of the water.

"Next week... some of us will be returning to the office."

Google Meet was glitching on his laptop. It would not stay in grid view, but kept toggling back to its default, which showed five of six participants and put whoever was speaking in a tile on the left that took up most of the window.

Nobody had their mic muted, and every time someone cleared their throat, set down their coffee cup, or even if their cat meowed, Meet thought they were talking and shifted them to the big tile on the left.

The effect was disorienting, like trying to have a serious conversation during a game of musical chairs. Before the subject of a return to the office had come up, he had allowed his focus to drift past the laptop screen and onto the sunbaked parking lot outside his apartment building: an eroding block of ancient asphalt, fringed by the weedy leaves of nuisance maple saplings and the broad stalks of overgrown dandelion greens. Beside the green-tinged pressure treated boards of a nine foot privacy fence sat a defunct Hyundai Pony, bare rims permanently knuckling the hard-packed dirt. The sun glared up in flecks from places where roof paint had flaked to primer.

He felt an expectant vacancy in his feet. Not a tingling, exactly, but a vulnerable emptiness where tingling might soon begin. When he turned his attention back to his laptop, Katie's was the big face on the left, her magnified eyes clear behind the lenses of her reading glasses. That was when he remembered the brownies.

He took off his shoes and socks and set them deliberately to the side, each sock inside its shoe. When he stepped down into the water, the anesthetizing cold did not prevent him from feeling the slimy layer of rock that greeted the bottoms of his feet.

He was barely in the shade here, though the line of shadow from the trees would only creep deeper into the water at this time of day. He sat on the dry part of the rock, letting his feet dangle into the cold of the ocean.

Most of the downtown core of the city lay directly across the water. The green of the park was out of perspective and looked bigger than the entire city core behind it.

What was going to happen?

He was still stoned, though the rush had noticeably ebbed. He relished the feeling of the cold water on his feet. It was hard to believe this tranquil spot was not much more than a stone's throw from the city's downtown.

A buzzing pulsed in the pocket of his shorts. His phone happened to be pressed to the very spot where the tube had gone in for his angioplasty. There was a circle on the flesh of his upper thigh, smaller than a dime and just a little whiter than the skin around it. Hard to believe, but the surgeon had made an incision there, had fed a probe through, and had used that probe to unplug a partially blocked artery near his heart.

He brought the phone out into the light, holding it in upturned palms as it buzzed and flashed. The meeting he'd meant to flee had followed him.

The block of glass and plastic felt troublingly warm. Its haptic interface made it pulse like a diseased organ. He remembered then about moss, about its medicinal properties, that it could be used as a dressing for wounds. He twisted back to reach the end of the bank behind him where moss dropped away into raw earth and stone. He peeled back the deep green carpet with one hand, revealing the black soil beneath it. He placed the phone, still buzzing and flashing, between the green and the black, and when the moss came down, there was quiet.

He wondered if the pins and needles might have started up in his feet, but it was hard to tell. His feet were submerged in the cold Atlantic, where the green tinge of the water and the dappled shadows of its wind-rippled surface transformed them into something other than his own. The cold was spreading upwards, through his shins and calves. He could feel it gathering just below his knees. He closed his eyes and felt his body knifing forward through the imaginary darkness, through the sound of the city and of the water and of the rush of wind through the trees. He listened hard, but could not distinguish the sound of his breath from the sound of the world in which he found himself breathing.

The Only Chess Story I'm Capable of Writing

Nathan R. Elliott

Opening moves in the Pacific Northwest

We pulled over every so often as we drifted into a new neighbourhood. We hauled our windbreaker-clad and blue-jeaned bodies out of our 70s wood-panelled station wagon and climbed into another weathered phone booth, each identical with its glass windows, blue trim, and black phone with metal cord. We stepped over the cigarette butts and occasional condom wrapper on the floor, tried not to disturb the empty beer bottles on top. Every booth was a tiny well-lit living room that invited you in the comforting, numbing ambiguity between hope and despair.

We took up the phone books that hung by a shiny metal cord in the booths, and we looked for names like ours.

ELLIOTT, JOHN

ELLIOTT, SUSAN

ELLIOTT, JUDITH

Nope, my father said each time, he's not here. Then we climbed back into the car, again, to drive down more streets, all shiny and damp in flickering fluorescent light.

On the third, maybe fourth phone booth, far enough that we were in a different neighbourhood, with different phone books, Dad found the E's, yet again.

ELLIOTT, DANIEL

ELLIOTT, DAVID

ELLIOTT, GARY

ELLIOTT, NATHAN

ELLIOTT, ROBERT

ELLIOTT, SAMUEL

ELLIOTT, WILLIAM

Dad murmured softly. He read out the address next to the last name, 813 Hemlock St, Apt 7A.

"I thought we were looking for Uncle Bill?"

Dad grunted a smile. "We are. Bill is short for William."

That booth had “For a good time, call MELISSA: 555-5423” etched into the glass, surrounded by a shaky heart. Below that, far more confidently, “FUCK YOU JOHNNY.”

I was learning to read.

We walked into the gas station and the guy working inside directed us to Hemlock Street. It was just a couple of blocks away.

Ten minutes later we stood in front of an apartment complex, one of those that has a cement stairway and doorways that open directly into the living room from the outside. A streetlight buzzed in and out over another phone booth in the parking light. We walked up to 7A, a second-floor apartment.

We knocked.

The door opened almost immediately—in those apartments you are never more than a few feet from the front door—and there stood my uncle: tall, slender, black hair with just a few grey streaks. He wore dark blue jeans, a plaid button-down shirt, a navy windbreaker: the taller, lither version of my father. He stood in front of the mattress that lay flat on the yellow-orange shag carpet, already well out-of-date in the early ‘80s. An ashtray with a still-smouldering cigarette lay on the right side, a few paperbacks surrounded the ashtray. A small black and white television, barely audible, rehearsed the news.

My uncle’s wide, darting eyes: they are what I remember most from that night. Did I know that they registered surprise, even panic, as the rest of his body remained utterly calm? Or have I laid that reading of his body language back onto this memory as the years have passed? Either way, I can still see Bill’s surprised eyes, leaping back and forth between us.

My father greeted his older brother. “Hi Bill.”

“Hi.” This is what passed for an elaborate conversation in my father’s family.

My uncle’s eyes rested on me for a moment, then went back to my father, clearly trying to work out how we had found him.

Dad paused, then managed, “It’s Christmas. . . Mom wants you to come home. For Christmas Dinner.”

My uncle accepted. There were no tearful, holiday-style reunions however: the clichés stop there. He came, he ate, my grandmother was happy, and not much was said about him being there when he so nearly wasn’t there. My uncle, himself, remained as silent and reclusive as Boo Radley.

Sometime after this incident, he moved back in with my grandparents. Why he had left was never explained to me. Why he came back remains a mystery, but suddenly he was there again on family visits, smoking cigarettes in a far back bedroom and reading mysteries and listening to the radio.

All of this happened, or some version of it. I cannot swear to the colour of the carpet or tell you exactly how many times we stopped: I’ve taken all the usual liberties to tell this story. I might have been eight, although I have some reasons to think that I was seven, which would put me in the second grade, in December 1982, and visiting my grandparents in Tacoma, Washington for the holidays.

A friend found a much earlier draft of this initial opening corny—something out of a Hallmark Holiday movie, she told me. Corny or not, it happened: one damp winter night somewhere in the Puget Sound area, my father, at the request of his mother, went looking for his eccentric, estranged, older brother to persuade him to come home for the holidays.

Initial Exchanges, between North Idaho and the Puget Sound

The same year we went looking for my uncle, my father was teaching me to play chess. At some point in our lessons, he told me that his older brother was a far better chess player than he had ever been. Bill had even entered a few tournaments. My father informed that he had never been able to do much against Uncle Bill.

You should ask Bill to play, Dad said after we finished one of our summer night chess sessions, ask him to teach you some things.

And so I did, the next time we were in Tacoma, visiting my grandparents. To my surprise, this silent, shadowy presence came out of his back bedroom, smelling vaguely of cigarettes and damp sea air and Old Spice. He quietly, efficiently dismantled the moody eight-year-old version of me on the other side of my grandparents' dining room table.

We went on to play two or three more games.

I never had a chance, of course, yet I was fascinated by the way he played. I would play him every chance my uncle gave me. It felt thrillingly inexorable to watch his pieces close in on me before I quite knew what was going on. Threat and menace everywhere: I learned to read meaning in every move that he made.

I did not, and do not, then or now, understand why he kept playing me. The chess was threatening; the silent moody man on the other side of the chess board—despite all appearances—seemed to enjoy my company. Something about his commitment to silence comforted me.

A few years later my grandmother retired from her job in the welfare office, and my grandparents decided they would move back to Idaho, where they had raised my uncle and my father. They even managed to buy the same house in the same small mill town, and my uncle took up residence in the same upstairs rooms he had shared with my father during their boyhoods in the 50s and 60s. He helped them put in a huge raspberry patch in their garden—the vines shot beyond my adolescent six feet, and later, as a university student, I spent a few weeks one summer pouring cheap concrete to stabilize posts for them to entwine themselves.

And then—just as quietly and suddenly and somehow completely predictably—my uncle was gone again. My grandmother called my father one evening to say that Bill had left; he had moved to Alaska. We didn't really know why, my father told me. Every time I asked over the next few decades, I just got a shrug.

“Everyone should have a crazy uncle,” he smiled. I found that Cheshire Cat smile maddening, as it came with the feeling that my father knew more than he was telling.

My verb tenses tangle at this point as the past and present threaten to bleed into one another. Very occasionally there have been allusions to heated arguments about the Vietnam War—arguments started by my grandfather concerning my father and uncle's potential role in that conflict. Who said what, why it was said, what the ramifications were and are—it all remains unclear. My father and his brother served in the Air Force; Dad always subtly shies away from the subject when it comes up.

It's hard for me to even imagine a heated argument in that family, everything has been so silent for so long.

Finding a position in the North Atlantic

Decades later.

My memory of this time is framed by ambiguity, a confusing in-between place that mixed joy and loneliness in equally potent measures. I was taking care of my baby son in a small, rapidly dying fishing village while my poet wife taught English poetry and prose at the branch campus of the provincial university an hour up the road. My son was a revelation reshaping my life on an almost hourly basis, yet I was as isolated as I have ever been in my life taking care of this baby boy named after both of his grandfathers. I began to write to break the tedium and isolation.

As it was some small contact with the outside world, I also took to playing chess on an online server, often with my father, and, just as often, with strangers from all over the planet. I was hardly a menace to the chess world, but decades after my father taught me to move the pieces I could give my father a decent game, defeating him almost as often as he beat me. I could take on a high school kid from Mexico or a housewife in Paris and get them to least sweat a bit. I had been playing the Spanish opening for decades, I was trying to learn the Sicilian Defense, had some rough idea what the Queen's Gambit was even before a TV show made it famous, and I could close out a game if I found myself in a decent position. If my son kept me up all night, I lost. If I was miraculously rested and focused, I might take a few games.

Somewhere in that fog of baby and snow and wind and chess, my uncle slid silently back into my life and we met again over virtual chessboards from his own snowy, isolated world on the other side of the continent, some six time zones away.

My father and I took to discussing him. Why did he play us? What could possibly be in it for him?

For he dismantled us with terrifying, minimalist simplicity. While I might now be able to beat my father and make life interesting for a German grad student, my uncle was still inexorable. He was the Terminator, patiently unhurried, relentless metal grinding behind the move of every pawn. He was the Borg—resistance was futile—and it felt strange that your antagonist barely registered emotion as he pulled your arms off and ripped your heart out of your chest.

My quiet, reserved father's moves always had a whisper of emotion; I could tell by his pace and the kind of move he made when he was elated or discouraged or aggressive or cautious.

His older brother's moves felt utterly dry. I had no sense of what he was thinking or feeling; every antiseptic move merely inched him closer to his goal. Except, perhaps, when I made a small mistake, a mistake so small by my standards that I hardly knew I had made it. Only then could I feel the tiniest twinge of something on the other end.

I was trying to write stories about chess at the time; I even had a chess novel in mind. So I asked my uncle—in the chat function of the chess server—why he liked the game, what motivated him to play it. He knew I was writing, so he tried to answer as much as he could, which is to say I might have received as many as 200 words from him.

It wasn't winning or losing, that wasn't why he played. He liked the puzzle of it all. It was simply figuring out the best move for that situation. He wasn't really playing opponents; he was playing chess itself. If it seemed like he didn't care if he won or lost, it was because he didn't care if he won or lost. A loss was simply a pleasing sign of a challenging chess puzzle. That complete detachment made my uncle utterly frightening on the chess board.

I asked him about the tournaments he had played in. He shook me off, insisting that he never got far, never did much. He went for a good game. He got one or two, maybe three on a good day.

Later, he kept asking about my writing, about my chess stories. They were going exactly nowhere. I sent him a few nonfiction pieces I had published about my wife and son and my new life on a Canadian island in the North Atlantic.

He liked them, he said.

Montréal Draw

Eventually we moved on from Newfoundland, to Montréal, and my life again took on a very different shape and tempo. And, after thirty very long years, I found myself occasionally beating my uncle. Very, very, *very* occasionally.

Every checkmate has a distinct flavour, reflecting the two people and the way in which the end came about. My father and I, despite our apparent personalities, play a kind of high stakes poker version of chess—trying out spectacular traps that are high-risk, high-reward and yoked to bizarre bluffs that result in either glory or despair. My father is a quiet, reserved judge who hides his daredevil side carefully, strategically. This small-town kid from rural Idaho where half of his high school class never made it to graduation—he was never going to play it safe if it meant

staying in that town for the rest of his life. He plays quietly and efficiently as well, but he'll risk a lot to win, and he'll do a lot to make sure people never see that side of him coming.

In order to beat his older brother, I had to take a completely different approach. I had to be imminently, almost supernaturally patient, always searching for the tiny error in judgement on an exchange of pieces for position. Careful, observant, rested, completely sober at all times, I might find my uncle's mistake, then gradually put more and more pressure on that error, while being careful to never overextend myself. It was simultaneously excruciating and exhilarating.

And then, if I was lucky, I might get him to resign after 40 or 50 moves.

These games with my uncle are when I come closest to feeling like I'm playing real chess, that the game itself has taken over and we are simply playing, really playing for the sake of the game.

While waiting out the pandemic in a Montréal Plateau apartment—playing disadvantaged black, playing the Sicilian Defense I was still trying to understand—I forced my uncle to accept a draw. This ambiguous tie will remain one of the most memorable games I have ever played in my life, chess or otherwise—the more memorable as it didn't end in a win or a loss. Trapping my uncle and forcing him to accept, not a loss, but that a resolution would never be achieved, felt imminently satisfying to me.

Endgame

When my grandmother died of the lung cancer brought about by my grandfather's four-pack-a-day cigarette habit, my father called Bill to tell him the news.

"We had a good mother," said my uncle.

My mother told me she felt this five-word-eulogy uttered by her brother-in-law, a man even more silent than her reserved husband, said everything that could ever be said about the woman and the sons she brought into existence.

My father is well into his seventies now, and years into a chronic leukemia diagnosis that he continues to hold in check. He has even managed to take his immune suppressed blood cells through a pandemic thanks to his own quiet stubbornness and the zealous protection of my mother.

My uncle draws close to his eighth decade, still living a mysterious, hermit like existence somewhere in Alaska. My father calls him occasionally. He still plays chess with him. Every so often my father tells me yet again he's never really figured out how to defeat his brother on the chess board, he's never resolved the puzzle. He doesn't see why his brother bothers to play him when Bill simply wins all the time.

I want to tell my father that the answer is likely similar to the reason Dad is willing to keep losing to my Uncle—that it was never about winning or losing. I want to find a way to tell Dad he did win. One damp winter night he found his silent, wounded brother and he pulled him back into some semblance of family. Months later he played the piece that was his own moody, introspective, far-too-sensitive son. He pulled them both out of themselves, just enough, with the strange game they both needed to play.

A few nights before I wrote this, my uncle dropped out of our most recent game, and I won on time after only three or four moves. A few nights later I texted my father—any sudden cheap wins on an expired chess clock always send a shock of worry through me—and I asked about my uncle. My father texted back almost immediately and told me that Bill was, indeed, having health problems. An enlarged prostate and a colonoscopy bag were involved.

My uncle, he said, needed a break from chess. Your uncle, my father promised, will play again soon—when he's rested, feeling a bit better. It's a promise that has been made—and kept—before, and it's a promise that makes the middle-aged man I am now feel like an eight-year-old boy in search of comfort. The man I've become knows that we're entering the endgame; I can feel rooks landing with stern confidence on the seventh and eighth ranks, and I know even the best games can't go on forever.

New Sincerity

Aley Waterman

Donna primed herself for the art one early September day. She had made sure to lower her defences over an oatmeal breakfast, to really feel open to the possibilities of the art. In order to do this she took deep breaths and stared into her oatmeal. She did not add anything fancy to her oatmeal, just salt and water.

To prepare for the art, Donna made sure to experience every bite, to consider the flavour or lack thereof slowly as it sat in her mouth, to patiently eat the oatmeal and not get distracted by her phone. To choose an outfit that seemed to speak to her even if it seemed not her regular style, to walk rather than take the TTC, to part her hair down the middle, to slowly and intentionally wash her face and hands, to not ignore the text from her mother but instead to respond to it briefly, saying that a longer response would come later.

Donna had a Tinder date lined up for immediately after the art, and perhaps if she had been a little closer to her soul she would have scheduled a gap between both activities. But Donna liked the idea of meeting the date near the gallery, and she liked the idea of focusing her body towards the art and not towards the anxiety of a first date.

When Donna arrived at the place that housed the art, also known as the gallery, she was readier than ever. She was listening to Yo La Tengo in her headphones. She paid the tall art guard 6 dollars on this day, at this moment. Donna was 25 years old! Her life was such that on a Monday afternoon she could just go take in art, and then hang out with a stranger in a specific way that involved – but was not defined by – expectation. What a time to be alive.

Donna entered the room of many rooms with art on the walls for days. When she angled her head upwards towards the art, the way in which she was ready for it *all* just took over. She started, then, to cry.

Donna cried before she looked at any paintings. She cried before she saw the beautiful glass designs of Lalique and how they danced off the light above. She cried before she was able to stand a nose away from a Edward Hopper painting that somehow was like having your own soul write a letter to itself and take all it knew, revealing it anew in a secret language. She cried on the bench, cried into her ice cream, cried and cried so much that she could not even read the descriptions written in small font on the walls of the gallery. Then she became very exhausted.

Donna's Tinder date was a boy named Satchel. He was awaiting her outside of the art place with his arms crossed. There was strength in him, evidenced by the fact that he was truly nervous for the date but had opted to just sit in that feeling until time forced the date to occur.

“How was the art?” asked Satchel.

“It was amazing,” said Donna. “In fact, it made me cry,” she said.

This, actually, was the first thing she had ever said to him aloud, though they had conversed on Tinder a lot. A chill ran down Donna's back, into her chest and stomach. She was unsure if what she had just said was:

- a) Entirely true and deeply honest, or
- b) Entirely false and a total fabrication

Garbage Baby

Aley Waterman

It is a hot summer's day in Yorkville. There is a food festival. An entire street is blocked off for the festival. It is 25 dollars to get onto the street. There are dumpsters, new ones, shiny and blue. So many people carrying tiny cardboard boxes soggy with Cavatelli. The sun is beaming high in the sky, there is but a single cloud.

A toddler appears. She has a tiny curly ponytail on the very top of her head and there is a picture of a duck on her shirt, though these details may not matter in the long run.

What matters really is this: the child licks one of the dumpsters.

A woman named Emily sees this happen and finds it very very funny. A man named Clyde sees the toddler licking the dumpster and finds it deeply disturbing, even though it is a new dumpster. Clyde even has to kind of shake his arms, "shake it off," so to speak.

Emily and Clyde meet for the first time by the artisan taco stand. They share a love for tacos and a love for street festivals. "It really makes me feel like a part of my community," says Clyde, and Emily agrees, though she finds this to be a boring sentiment.

Time will pass. The toddler will go on to become a regular child, and will never evidence any negative symptoms from the dumpster incident. Emily and Clyde will go on to date for years, will move in together, will never be fully in love but enough in love that they won't be able to find a way out of it for a long while. The idea of "getting out" will make them kind of throw their arms up and be like "out where!?" so neither of them will bring it up. There will be an unspoken awareness, though, that they will not have children together, despite the fact that they both want children. This shared but unspoken awareness will cause a bit of a ticking time bomb for their relationship, but something with less pizzazz than a time bomb, something more like a regular alarm clock that could fall off the counter at any moment, and the batteries would just pop out.

Though in this moment at the artisan taco stand Emily and Clyde would both be disappointed and surprised by the other's reaction to the toddler licking the dumpster, and in fact such a conversation might have been enough to undo it all from the start, the incident comes up about 4 years later when they are reminiscing, vaguely, clinically, upon the day they first met. Clyde tells Emily: "the day we met, I saw a toddler lick a dumpster. It was so terrible. Seeing that really bothered me," and Emily said: "I saw that too! I thought it was the funniest thing!"

And it is all too late now, isn't it? Because Emily and Clyde already knew these KINDS of things about each other, but now they REALLY knew them.

Captive

Ian Colford

She would miss this town when they moved away. If the hearing went badly—if the decision went against him and Josh lost his job and they had to leave—she would miss so much: the slow pace, the abundant supply of local produce, the walkable distances, the lush variety of green spaces close to home, riding her bike without fear. Last summer, in the lead-up to moving, Lisa—a professed “city girl”—had not been able to dispel her qualms about small-town living. She knew herself well enough, knew she craved stimulation and was easily bored. The distance from Halifax was not overwhelming, but they were leaving family and friends, an active social life, countless restaurants. How would she cope without the Italian fries and Caesar Salad combo at Rinaldo’s? And shows at the Rebecca Cohn Auditorium? Every second week there was something worth seeing. One day, almost a year ago now, they drove up so Josh could sign the contract with the Cumberland School Board, and she’d struggled to hide her disappointment at the *smallness* of everything. But in the eight months since, she’d shocked herself by adapting. It was true, Truro wasn’t anything like Halifax, where she’d spent her whole life. It was an ordinary rural town of 15,000 people—quiet, some used the word *sleepy*—where autumn smells of hay and manure and a twenty-minute walk in any direction brings you within sight of open fields and grazing livestock. For sure, there were things she missed about Halifax, but she did not miss the traffic jams, exhaust fumes, congestion: the filth and noise of the city.

Monday. The weather had cooled but she resisted quickening her pace. Through seven interminable hours she’d had to rein in her wandering mind, but the anxiety remained, simmering just below the surface. Her neck muscles were knotted like rope. Her thoughts repeatedly snagged on questions of what might be happening, who was saying what. But she was still in no hurry to get home, where she’d have nothing to do but sit and wait.

Clem Carson’s house was just here, on the right. Sporting his Montreal Canadiens toque, he was raking his lawn, gathering up dead leaves and twigs, freeing the emerging shoots of grass from their winter tomb. As she passed, he raised one hand in mock salute and with a smile called out, of all things, “Howdy there, Missy!” She raised her hand as well, returned the smile. Would he talk to her today, provide a distraction? But he lowered his gaze and without another word went back to his chore. They’d met last fall, just because she’d been passing by, and chatted often over the fall and winter months, exchanging life stories. He’d taught for forty years at the same school where Josh was now. Retired, widower, children grown and gone. But lately she’d noticed a change: rambling conversation, repeating himself, a slippage of memory. One day he knew her name, the next he didn’t. Today, she realized, she was a stranger to him.

She wondered if anyone looked in on him.

“No.” She shook her head. She’d actually spoken aloud. He was old and alone, but it wasn’t her place. She couldn’t get involved, not now, not when they might be leaving.

She tugged the scarf tighter around her neck. The day had tested her endurance, the minutes creeping by. How many times had she checked her watch? And then, the shock of seeing it was 3:30, time to go. She hadn’t been prepared. She was out of sync, her concentration in shambles. What if the hearing wasn’t going well? Josh was telling the truth, but what if they didn’t believe him? They might not. All day she’d sat at her desk, answering her phone, dutifully reading through the latest case files. Anyone watching her would think she was busy. But her brain was elsewhere. She hadn’t accomplished a thing.

Now it was coming up to 4:00 but seemed like it should be much later. Her phone remained stubbornly silent. The air had grown still, as if waiting for a signal, and she caught a whiff of copper, like just before the lightning hits. The winter had been punishing—a frigid, icy string of howling storms following one upon the other—and she was grateful that the recent turn in the weather seemed to presage milder days ahead. Above her, the grey sky hovered, unchanged since morning. The rain had held off. The days were getting longer. She always emerged from winter like

a rabbit from a burrow, watchful, sniffing the air, hoping it was safe but wary of being duped by false promises. She couldn't wait for summer.

They'd left the city with such high hopes. Only a week after they got here she'd found a job, one she liked, one that actually made use of her social psychology degree. It had been almost too easy. She'd planned to focus her job-seeking efforts on indie markets, grocery stores, retail outlets and coffee shops, and consider herself lucky if she could convince one of those to give her some hours. But she learned through their landlord that Hansen House, a local women's shelter, was looking for a psychologist, and that same day before the office closed, she was handing her application to silver-haired Marcie Arnott, who had been running the place more or less on her own.

Josh was teaching at Cumberland Central, a new science and technology course he'd designed himself. Last September, he'd been giddy with enthusiasm, itching to get into the classroom. He'd spent three years since his graduation substituting, which had its perks—days off, nothing following you home—but it was a grind. A different school every other day, lesson plans that bore another teacher's imprint. No room to improvise, no chance for spontaneity. The kids didn't know him and didn't want to. The good thing was that he had become known within the system. He was liked and respected. But in Halifax, permanent vacancies were few and far between, and it seemed whenever one came along, there was someone waiting in the wings to step into the job.

He couldn't say no to Cumberland. Lisa understood, even though it meant uprooting. The move made sense. In Halifax they were both going nowhere fast, their careers stalled before they even got underway. The frustration was taking a toll. At least Josh was teaching. But it was worse for her, having filled a dreary succession of term and temp positions unrelated to her degree since her own graduation two years ago. Like everyone they knew, they had debts and responsibilities, not to mention dreams and ambitions, and the Cumberland position was good money. It was secure. Still, leaving home is never easy.

Hansen House was fine, and she got along well with Marcie. But Lisa still didn't feel settled, and Josh's problems at the school weren't helping. Her days had a provisional feel to them, like she was marking time. The job, the flat, the town, the things she would miss if they had to leave ... it all felt like it could be gone tomorrow, and she wouldn't really be sorry. She hadn't mentioned this to Josh, but it felt like her future had drifted out of focus. There were times she didn't know what she was doing here. It had to be a symptom of something: residual disorientation from the move. It was the first drastic upheaval of her life. Maybe that's what happens when you live in one place for twenty-seven years and then drop everything to go somewhere else.

She crossed Sheridan Street and turned right on Tower. J-C's Convenience was just ahead, but she wasn't stopping today. They had everything they needed for tonight's supper—leftover meatloaf with some carrots and green beans. Hardly exciting, but right now food did not top the list of her concerns. She'd tried to muster some enthusiasm for the egg sandwich she'd made last night for lunch, but ended up chucking half of it in the compost bin. And Josh didn't eat when he was nervous. They'd agreed there was no point going to huge effort for the evening meal on a day when anything could happen.

She checked her phone again. Josh's interview with the panel had started at 1:00, almost three hours ago, the last item on their all-day agenda. He'd promised to phone or text when it was over. From her perspective, the issue was simple. The girl was lying. How could they not see it? But she supposed they had to at least go through the motions, consider the case from all angles, or appear to do so, if only for show. Josh hadn't said who was on the panel—she wouldn't have known who they were anyway. But she couldn't help wondering what preconceptions they'd bring to the matter. She also didn't know what kind of support he was getting from his union rep. The guy—Tim *something*—was inexperienced and Josh had expressed some concerns. Then there was Josh's probation, which wasn't up until September. Apparently that was a factor, an unfavourable one. It was easier to let someone go if he wasn't officially on staff.

There were so many ways this could go wrong. She didn't want to think about it. But it was in her head, leaking into her other thoughts, elbowing everything else aside.

A sudden breeze leapt up and slapped her in the face. Feeling suddenly exposed, she tightened the scarf again and huddled into herself.

Wild, to think one person could cause so much grief, spread so much worry.

In late fall, Josh's mood had darkened. He said he was fine, but she couldn't ignore the brooding, preoccupied silences. The change was physical. He seemed to become smaller, shrinking into his own body, and her breath caught on those occasions when it seemed like he was pulling away from her, distancing himself from the intimate realm of their marriage. Over Christmas she confronted him, and he finally told her what was going on—omitting the particulars—owning up to the torment the situation was causing him, the tension looming over his days like storm clouds. They talked it out and she convinced him to bring it to Principal Hoeffler, make it official, get it on the record. So immediately after the first staff meeting of the new year, he met with Hoeffler in her office, described what was happening and asked for advice.

Lisa turned the last corner and noticed someone sitting on the front steps of her house. A small hunched figure in a puffy green winter jacket, a blue wool cap pulled down over cropped light-coloured hair. Lisa and Josh were in the upstairs flat. Heidi Burgess, owner and landlord, occupied the downstairs. Divorced, childless, affably accommodating, in her fifties, Heidi taught in the library tech program at the community college. For a moment Lisa thought it was Heidi sitting there. Had she locked herself out? But the jacket was not familiar and when she drew near she saw it wasn't Heidi at all.

The girl lifted her head as Lisa turned on to the property and approached along the damp gravel path. She was young, thin, with narrow porcelain features. Nobody Lisa knew. Kohl-lined, alarmingly recessed eyes. An imploring expression on a face so deathly pale it was like a face drawn in outline, waiting for the flesh tones to be applied. She wasn't wearing gloves. Her nose and small hands were red from the cold.

“Can I help you?”

“Does Josh Armstrong ... uh, sorry. I mean, does Mr. Armstrong live here?”

A student.

“I'm his wife.”

The girl flinched. Lisa's words had come out sharply. A student coming to the house ... It had never happened before. Was this good or bad? And why did it have to be today of all days?

“I don't think he's home yet,” she said, softening her voice. “But I'm only assuming that since the car's not here.”

“I rang the bell and knocked,” the girl said. “I don't think anyone's home.”

Lisa nodded. Strands of hair had escaped from her wool cap and fluttered about her eyes. She tucked them away as she studied the girl's sun-deprived face. She felt herself staring. The perfect skin. Smooth, softly rounded features. She waited. Maybe the girl would say something else, explain herself. Seconds ticked by. What to do? It was cold and she wanted to go in.

“Can I maybe help with anything, until he gets here ...?”

“There's something I have to tell him.”

The girl's voice cracked on the last word. Taking a breath and placing a hand on each knee, she seemed to collect her resolve and stood.

“This was a mistake. I should go ...”

“Come in,” Lisa said, forcing a smile, then realized the smile was genuine and didn’t need forcing. The girl was in trouble. Maybe she *could* help. After all, it’s what she did, what she was good at: creating a welcoming space for people to find their strength while their world crumbled around them.

Projecting calm, she smiled wider as she retrieved the keys from her bag. “Warm up. Please. Just for a moment. My name’s Lisa. What’s yours?”

From what Josh had told her, Lisa understood there was a girl who had been disruptive from the first class in September. He wanted to allow his students some latitude. He wouldn’t jump on them for every infraction, not right away. After two months with little or no structure to their days, he believed in giving them time to reacquaint themselves with the culture and routine of the classroom. He was young enough to remember what it was like, making that adjustment amidst the distraction of warm September weather. Two weeks in, his strategy seemed to be working: the noise levels had dropped, they were settling down. But this one girl ... if anything, she was worse. Every day it was something: texting, talking back, cracking gum. The class was academic stream. Most of the students were preparing for university. The better students were committed and serious and didn’t appreciate the disruptions, the time wasted as he repeated himself, making points already made while he struggled to collect his thoughts and drag the lecture back on target. She had a small coterie of supporters, a couple of girls who laughed at her jokes, egged her on. He understood it was a power play, but couldn’t figure out why they went to such lengths to please her. On days when the ringleader was absent, the others sat quietly and even took part in discussions, and the class approached the active learning experience he’d hoped it would be. He told himself if he refused to rise to her provocations she’d get bored with herself and maybe give up the game. But as the October rains settled over the town and with mid-term exams on the horizon, the contest of wills was ongoing and he’d started keeping notes, documenting her misconduct. With his colleagues he feigned confidence and pretended all was well. But the truth was that he was an unwilling disciplinarian and he worried about drawing attention to what could be regarded as a flaw in his teaching style. He didn’t want Hoeffler and the others thinking he couldn’t control a class.

Lisa led the girl, who said her name was Ashley, upstairs to the flat, letting her keys drop with a clatter on the table as she went by. An easygoing gesture, airily familiar. The main thing, if she wanted to get to the bottom of what was going on, was to appear relaxed. But the tension in her neck was already creeping upward. Tonight she would have a massive headache.

“I can make tea if you’d like.”

“Uh ...”

Lisa took off her coat and hung it on one of the hooks near the door.

“Do you ...?”

Ashley shook her head and wrapped her arms around her thin body.

Lisa shrugged.

“Okay.”

“I won’t be here very long.”

Ashley pulled the wool cap off her head, revealing heavily studded ears and a tangle of neck-length wavy platinum hair, the dark roots showing. She stuffed the cap in her coat pocket.

“Is he coming home soon?”

Lisa led the way to the kitchen, took the kettle to the sink and ran the water.

“I don’t know.”

When she turned around Ashley was gazing at the collection of wooden birds Lisa and Josh had arranged in the space above the kitchen cabinets. They’d accumulated the birds over several years, bringing some back from trips abroad, purchasing others locally. A private joke of sorts, but also a testament to their travels, near and far.

“Ashley, I have to ask. Will your parents be wondering where you are? Should you phone to let them know you’re here?”

Ashley shook her head and commented distractedly, “It’s just me and my Mom.” She turned back to Lisa. “She’s at work. She’s a nurse at the hospital.”

Lisa nodded. The girl’s gaze held steady until Lisa had to look away. She pushed the switch on the kettle.

“I just thought it might be over by now,” Ashley said.

Lisa raised her eyebrows inquiringly.

“The thing, that session or whatever, that Mr. Armstrong had to go to.”

Lisa felt her breath catch but recovered quickly. Josh had explained the process, which sounded like a tribunal. When his turn came, with his union rep by his side, he would answer questions. The principal and some teachers would be questioned as well. The girl making the complaint could attend in person or by video link or submit a written statement. He didn’t know what she had chosen. The seven-member panel was made up of representatives from the School Board, the Parent-Teachers Association, a lawyer, and a couple of other officials whose roles Josh had been vague about.

“So you know about that.”

Looking away, the girl nodded.

Lisa indicated the kitchen table. “Have a seat.”

Ashley pulled out a chair and sat.

“Megan told me it was today. She said it was bullshit.”

Lisa could hear the thrumming of her heart. Was this ‘Megan’ the one making the complaint? Josh had never referred to her by name.

“Uh, listen, Ashley,” Lisa began. Ashley’s eyes widened. Again, that unintended hardness in her voice.

She shook her head, sighed, and started again.

“Ashley, please, just tell me why you’re here.”

Back in January, when Josh had gone to the Principal and described the girl’s—Megan’s—behaviour, Hoeffler had expressed concern but simply asked that he monitor the situation and keep her posted. It seemed Megan was known as a troublemaker, but lately other teachers had seen signs that she had turned a corner, reporting fewer disruptions and a better attitude. Also, the family background was difficult—single mom, a younger brother with Down’s Syndrome. Josh considered this new information and decided a few days later to talk with Megan in a controlled setting. He’d strike a conciliatory tone: sympathy without condescension. It was a Friday. Megan was to meet him after classes. Regulations required another adult be present, so Josh arranged for the school’s part-time counsellor,

Sandra Garner, to attend. He said Sandra was a pro. A calming presence. They would assemble in an empty classroom, not his own: neutral territory. Later, after everything had blown up and he found himself facing an accusation of sexual misconduct, he told Lisa that Megan had brought a friend—as witness? Moral support?

Josh described the sequence of events. He arrived first and sat at the front, facing the room. Megan and her friend came in a few minutes later. He asked Megan to take a seat in the second or third row and for her friend to sit at the back near the door, because she would go into the hallway when Sandra came and Josh and Megan discussed the matter that had brought them there. But after ten minutes Sandra had still not arrived. Several more minutes passed in edgy silence, and Josh was about to call the whole thing off when his phone buzzed. It was a text from Sandra, apologizing. She was at the hospital with her son. He'd broken his ankle at hockey practice. Could they reschedule?

He told Megan and the friend to go. They'd do it another time.

And that was it.

Two weeks later, Hoeffler called him to her office. The girl was claiming he'd put his hand on her thigh and made offensive, threatening comments.

Shocked, Josh asked the principal to check with Megan's friend, who had been present the whole time. She'd verify his account, that nothing of that nature had taken place.

But when Hoeffler summoned him back the next day, her glance was cold and her tone distant and official. In a meeting lasting less than a minute, she informed him that Megan's friend was claiming she hadn't been there and knew nothing about it. The complaint was moving forward. Hoeffler advised Josh to get in touch with the union.

It was, in Josh's words, "a serious if well-intentioned blunder." But Lisa was furious, at Josh for being too trusting, for exposing himself to dangers he should have anticipated. At the girl for lying. And at Hoeffler for not backing him up.

A few days later, Lisa was in the grocery store pushing her cart around a corner and almost slammed right into Hoeffler. The woman glanced at her but then, seeing who it was, wouldn't meet her eye.

"I want him to know how sorry I am."

Ashley sniffed and rubbed her nose. Lisa fetched a box of tissues from the bathroom and placed it on the table. The kettle was boiling. She switched it off.

She sat across from Ashley but didn't say anything. The girl grabbed a tissue and blew her nose.

"I don't know what to do. I know I said I wasn't there, but I was there. It's all made up. Nothing happened."

Lisa nodded.

"Oh, God." Ashley moaned, casting a stricken glance around the room. "I'm in so much trouble."

"No," Lisa said. "No, Ashley. Listen. You'll be okay. You will. You just have to tell the truth."

"But that's just it," she said, pulling another tissue from the box and staunching her tears. "I can't."

Lisa shook her head.

"Why? Why can't you say what really happened?"

“Oh God ... I can't ... It's ...”

Ashley wiped her eyes again, then clasped her hands together on the table. Lisa watched the girl struggle to control her breathing.

“I shouldn't ... It's too” She breathed deeply through her mouth. “God, I just can't. She'll wreck my life. She said if I don't do what she says she'll mess me up good.”

“She said that? But how? How would she wreck your life?”

“You don't know her. She's ... It'll be too awful... I can't be against her. I just can't.”

“What? You mean she'll spread stories?”

Ashley nodded. “She'll say things. She lies all the time. Everyone believes her. She's done it before. I've seen her do it. So I have to do what she says. I have to. I don't have any choice.”

Lisa felt an enveloping warmth spread from her roiling stomach throughout her body, seeping into every pit and crevice, heating her brain, settling in her armpits. The anger was pure, like flames rising up her throat. She rolled her hand into a fist.

But when she spoke, the words came out slowly, evenly. “Okay. Yes. I see the problem.”

“At first she wanted me to say that I saw him touch her. But it didn't make any sense because why would he do that in front of me? No one would believe it. So Megan told me to just say I wasn't there at all.”

Ashley pushed her hair back from her face. Lisa noticed the fingernails, gnawed down to nubs, the cuticles red and raw.

“This has been terrible for you, hasn't it?”

Ashley raised her head and gazed at her with damp, vaguely hostile eyes.

Josh said that after the complaint was filed, Megan's family had pulled her out of school. Presumably she was attending her classes—though not Josh's—online. Josh had had no contact with her. But Ashley had been sitting in the classroom, with Josh staring at her every day for weeks, both of them knowing what was at stake, both of them knowing she'd lied.

One crime, two victims. Three if she counted herself.

“You have to tell the truth. You know that, don't you?”

The girl stared, her expression sullen. Lisa felt a creeping twinge of doubt.

Her phone buzzed. She got up and went into the hall.

It was Josh: It's over. Home soon.

She responded with a quick OK.

When she returned to the kitchen, Ashley had her phone out, studying the screen. She saw Lisa, shoved it into her pocket and jumped to her feet.

“I have to go.”

“He's coming. It'll only be a few minutes.”

“I shouldn’t be here.” Suddenly she was a frantic bundle of energy. She pulled the toque from her pocket and with violent finality yanked down it over her head. “This was a mistake.”

“You can tell him yourself.”

“Get out of my way.”

Lisa was standing in the kitchen entrance, blocking passage to the hall.

“You can’t keep me here.”

She studied the girl’s face, those lovely shadowed eyes, still wet from recent tears, glaring at her, ablaze with fury, threatening menace.

“I’m going to tell Josh everything you said. Then we’ll go to Principal Hoeffler and tell her. That’s how this is going to end.”

For the length of a heartbeat, Ashley’s expression shifted: a telltale moment of indecision that gave Lisa a glimpse into her struggle to locate a path forward, clear of the mess she was in. Then something within the girl snapped shut. With clenched jaw she inched forward and muttered, “Get out of my fucking way.”

Lisa stepped back and Ashley shot past, took the stairs two, three at a time, pulled the door open with a clatter and bang, and burst outside. When Lisa got to the bottom she stood in the porch, breathless. She looked up the street and down, but the girl was gone.

Too late now. She’d wanted to ask, Why Josh? Why him? What would smearing a good man’s reputation and ruining his career have accomplished?

She didn’t see anyone outside, but a white delivery van was parked a few doors down, the driver seated behind the wheel. Yes, there are people, eyes everywhere. If somebody asked, what would he claim to have seen? A girl running. But running from what?

Then the blue Mazda turned at the four-way stop and began its slow progress up the street. Lisa was an impatient driver, always leaning on the horn. But Josh was careful because there were children everywhere, and you could never tell what was around the next corner.

It was still some distance off, and his face was in shadow, so he probably wouldn’t see her. But she raised her hand anyway, and waved.

The Underpass Anxiety of Dead Pigeons

Mark Anthony Jarman

Our fingernails were painted blue, we rode around in her red Buick. No wait, we rode a camo Humvee in the desert, we were lost in the desert. Same deal – we move in last light, nervous eyes feeding the brain.

9-1-1, what is the nature of your emergency, what did you witness this time around? Did you see a barber's chair bathed in blood so dark?

Where to start, who stars in this musical. Our bodies glow like charged particles, but it is far too late to read the covenant's fine print. And what don't we crave when it is too late? Blue pulled up by the health club, pulled up by the night club, Blue woke up in a motel bed and she'd stolen his stash and \$500 cash. It was so late and we wanted some cigars, a December darker than caviar and Blue wanted one last tin of decent beer. But why drop a lovely etched shotgun on the panicked porch?

After 9-11 I joined the navy because my old man was Navy. In the fog we chased Somali pirates in pissant Zodiacs and we hit some fine Scotch on the rocks.

You've reached 9-1-1: Are you Sunni or Shiite or Mennonite? Men in masks claimed they were police; Buffalo Bill was playing vinyl, he opened his door caught in a mood of nostalgia, fell for their simple ruse. 9 mil casings yet again, exit below your ear, below your reptile brain.

Sorry for your loss, says the genuine police officer, a detective with a bowtie.

Blue changed his shoes super-fast, someone's blood on them, private blood on the barber's floor, buzzing electric razors dropped on the floor, still humming, connected on black cords like long strings of licorice.

Doctors cracked open the barber's chest, open wide please, the plumber put on snakeskin cowboy boots as Lisa pleaded with the man, she'd pay back all the money she took. Note, if he can get to her, he can get to me.

But who pulled the trigger, who ate all the 25 cent hot wings with the Shah? What is the nature of your emergency? After 9-11 I joined the infantry, dogs barking mad in the grinding desert, I saw pallets stacked with US dollars, I was an accessory. My cousin was playing music and driving for UPS, teeth flashing upper gold. Did a dingo eat your career? Very sorry for your loss.

What is the address of your emergency? He's bleeding, he's still alive! Please hurry! Keep breathing, man, keep your eyes open, stay awake. He told him to get off his car, both of them got out of the car. The city guard rail and underpass anxiety of dead pigeons. We picked up my cousin, we dropped off my cousin, forensics got a full print off the door handle, don't touch the car, Disney owns the car.

I was hanging back in the trees watching. Disney owns the trees and river and Blackwater has the desert, but who got the pallets of US cash?

He took one in the eye, took one in the neck (a through and through), took one in the stomach. Hang on, man, units are on route to your neck and stomach; sorry, dude, Disney owns your eye.

A man hooked to an IV, to AI, to an IED in the ditch, SHTF, his orange shoes thrown akimbo on a dark lawn's skunk hour. The ambo hauls a man away somewhere invisible, up the river to feed him royal jelly on the Isle of Dogs, at Abu Dhabi, eye for an eye.

He stuck up for his friend, he killed his friend. The Pope killed him, Pops killed him, Pops was a boxer back in the day, Golden Gloves, Pops stole my 2012 Ford Focus and Pops has the dead man's credit card.

Felony rhymes with Melanie, homicide ends the ride, shit goes sideways and ER doors stutter open to you in their spastic welcome.

You didn't hear the shot?

Uh. No.

Man, don't insult me, it was three feet away! That'd wake me up from a mile. But no, you didn't hear anything. What a crock, you don't want to take it all and he gets off free, just give me a name, was Blue there?

All of a sudden I don't remember. I'm being honest.

We had no issues, no beef, there was a beef, a smart little cocktail dress, a neck, it takes two to Roomba. She fought back, he called me, said his gun might have a body on it. A baby in the well, that poor barber just cutting hair, door opens like 1000 other times, shot him for nothing!

Really sorry, didn't mean it, lit up the wrong guy. I can't get past this, can't get east of this.

The teen asks, Can I bring him back? He looks briefly hopeful, I'd bring the guy back if I could, he says. But I guess not, huh?

Then a sad little laugh no jury would ever understand, a jury happy to float him and his sad laugh up to the pod, to the jailhouse tats and smiling buddhas of the penal colony.

Friend, criminal Justice is a growing field, a bumper crop, vials and brass casings bloom on the street, the shot's fracture lines sketched like a web on the QB's skull and the detective strings up his allotment of festive yellow tape.

I want to see my baby, she says, pushing the men, I want to see my baby.

Ma'am, you really don't want to see him like this.

In the box stores they pray for you, in the desert they pray for someone else, in the desert they pray the drones go blind.

After 9-11 I mingled with the fiends on King; a casino bus stopped by the barracks to pick up the hunchback; he likes his meth. A free bus ride to the native casino; we need no taxis with jaundiced suspension and the natives are happy to take back their money.

So where were you Sunday? Saturday, Monday, ten years ago, in the National Guard, in the Renaissance. In life's hyper experiment I grabbed my razor, he grabbed a hammer, a crossbow, an RPG, a .22 wrapped in a beach towel in the driveway, try to hit reverse, to sail away, sorry, too late, always too late.

Any pulse?

We're assessing insect activity on the body. Ask your doctor if this medication is right for you; pills may cause swollen face and tongue, paranoia, paralysis, liver failure, rectal bleeding, reptile brain, Rip bullets may punch holes in your driver's door, burgers may flip with no employees visible in the room.

She asked me to drop her at the Shamrock to plug 45s on the jukebox. I heard shots and now I hear her old songs, her face rising to me, her mica eyes, his DNA on a Doritos bag.

I'm not going to lie to you, I don't know nothing. I'll enlighten you, they used my phone, my Buick, my Abrams tank, but no way I was anywhere near that place. The age of enlightenment, all day running his mouth and we were sick of it, he was warned, his soul floating up into orbit, washed in the light, in the rivers of Babylon. They sold the Kurds down the biblical river, broke our union, broke the promise, man, I had to step in to save the Constitution.

The victim's mouth swimming with blood, really feasting like a king on his own blood. Turn him on his side, man, keep him from drowning.

He taped her hands, duct tape, she was very scared. He got 30 years, got democracy, got the service sector, but I'm a gazelle, free of litigation, of litmus cinderblock roadblocks. She said hey keep on sailing, she saw a ruby hummingbird and posted it on Thanksgiving.

I hope she's ok. No, she is not at all ok. Check her phone records, okay? Her dental records. Happy hour Friday 11-6, too late, she's dead, five days later she clings to life.

But where is her mint red Buick? Muzzle flash in her lively mica eyes, her eyes that echoed ancient empires, duct tape that navy grey, colour of fog.

Deep in the muddy river divers found me with eels winding in my naked ribs, found the pearl-handled pistol. America the Carpet King hides a baby in the wishing well and way down in that frigid air the ghostly taxman utters your name, your PIN, your mother's maiden name.

Can I borrow a few bucks for a bag, can I borrow your prisoner? She won't talk, but she knows the players, knows the fretless bass player from Bombay, the bad trick list from Abu Dhabi.

The pallets of US cash simply vanished, someone had a very good day. An Abrams tank crushed your car; can we get your side of it? Tell us, talk to us.

Ok, Ronnie D did it, E did it, I caught some zees, they stole my TV. They claim to be gang, I tell you they're not gang. Sir, I'm being honest. You're asking me to know what I don't know. I was listening to Johnny Cash and eating a really good lobster roll. The next car, pop pop pop! I ran and hid. This was inside the Dollar store, this was at the ball game, on the sofa outside the shelter, in the Mercedes SUV, in my room with the fan on high.

After 9-11 I joined the Marines in the desert, got daubed in greasepaint, wanting to help in some way, smote Turkish dogs. Her eyes and lost empires, semper hi-fi, this is how we Sonic.

Now he did have a gun, but someone else was shooting. Zeke did it, Red shot him, Down Low was the shooter, no, I heard it was Dow Jones doing Adam Smith on his lunch break. Don't spare the horses, don't touch the car, he stood on her car, stoned. Tall dude, bald, holding a tire iron. No one beats on me. No one! They shot him several times and he didn't drop. Reverse bone loss with low yield bonds, thank you for your service.

Detective in a bow tie says, Show me your hands! The suspect shot himself, shot Bambi on the ice, shot my puppy on the porch, shot Teflon President on the city sidewalk.

A tiny shell's power, a pretty spiral cut in the chamber like a seashell, a sniper's casing ejected, stone steps and grass rich in the blood of the lamb, the wine-red sea. Chicken Little did it, Cortez the Killer did it, a body in a closet, more duct tape, Iago dropped his phone at the scene. Mine his phone for data, ok? Check for priors.

These young ones don't care who they light up. It was over nada, it was over weed, it was over a stolen Malibu, it was balloons of heroin scratching my stomach. I still can't take airports.

After 9-11 I used to be an astronaut, an extrovert, an embolism. She was so great, I miss her, she was so pregnant, alas I was no swimmer. Do you think astronauts walked the moon for real? Any witnesses? A camera at the bodega, the mosque? Bingo. Let's get their faces all over the TV news tonight. No old beefs? None! He left the gang. Blue walked away. Well he was alive when I left, when the shuttle exploded. Friends, has your lifestyle affected your insurance rates?

That second woman might be key, accessory after the fact. Arrest her and let her go, check the Tecumseh Valley Kozy Kabins. Exit the residence with nothing in your hands, nothing in your hooves, hold 'em high, float away like a balloon after the fact, after the body falls to earth.

They got your damn car on TV! There you are, I told him, your face big as life on TV so he steals the TV that jails his face in pixels and curved glass. Now he's doing a three-year bit, he got 14 years, involuntary, got bigamy, got Parkinson's, got covid, got paroled after six months, 24 years for murder, got free cable for one month.

Remember those happy days cutting drugs in the kitchen? Working naked you can't steal product. We were slinging good stuff, we bashed it and it was still strong. Blue said, You don't want to kill all your customers. Maybe just a few.

This was direct from Afghanistan, from Mexico, Columbia, Chicago. Blue flew it into Lee Harvey Oswald Airport, Centavo stamped right on the bags. That blast was famous with the fiends on King Street where jump-out squads jump out and ghost cars chase their ghosts.

Can I borrow your prisoner for a chat, a fast knee to the thigh, an embolism traveling to seize the heart? Hell, they don't want to talk. Let her stew. Let her go. Hold him for 48, hose down the pavement with 99 cent cola, hum 99 Luftballons, steal a G pack from H.

Blue didn't text, didn't show up, so I took off. Blue jumped the wall, got the bug, got sick, got well, hit the jackpot at the casino.

We're very sorry for your loss, the bowtie detective says, your bag a day need. The dead fiends envy the new fiends, such big blue veins! The opposite of seniors' discount.

Five-oh takes pictures for evidence, they talk and talk and their camera shoots a cold body in a coded landscape, a white sheet on the man, but the man's two hands and a foot visible. We know him, why take so long, why leave our good friend lying in the street like that?

It was fun at first, there was a beef, they drew down, a bullet in the rain on his birthday.

He never made it to Paris in a blue balloon, rain blurs such things, but man I'm not so bad as those fiends at the free clinic, arms all swollen to hell.

I just drove them, that's all.

Money was the triggerman. We rode to Montreal, to Monaco, got super baked. Get rid of this, Blue said, I got rid of it. We didn't kill nobody, Boss; we're not dumb. You don't light up folks who are good to you.

The old man took 4 bullets at 5 a.m. Six kids going out to the schoolbus found him. Some velvet morning, a moaning foghorn morning, that dredger clanking offshore, navy ships crawling the fog, my old man at Pearl Harbour when the Zeros hit like Zeus and the sky was falling.

I didn't mean to kill the naked prisoner. He was a barber, he was afraid of dogs. I can't sleep. It's been eating me alive. You don't shoot children. Blue said he wouldn't make his next birthday.

EMS, what is your questionable address, your dreary emergency, your views on gentrification, on shooting children from choppers, on the sneaky Japs bombing Bagdad?

Bow-tie detective says, We raid these houses again and again, we raid these shithole countries, and for what?

Can you tell her family I absolutely did not mean this to happen, didn't mean to invade Iraq, I mean Iran, Iranistan. He'd give you a free haircut, the shirt off his back, lend you twenty if you needed a blast, a bottle cap lifted on tiny flame. We miss him every day.

Assault, stolen car, here's your boy, son of a preacher man, she was pregnant and that one's a gazelle, Boss, good luck catching him. He was the best father. They hit the wrong guy, the wrong country.

The mother and kids let go dollar store balloons from a modest shrine by the sidewalk. The city flickers on a flame, a doppelganger city floats up to coax itself into charcoal clouds and incense. Will the family's colored balloons stick in

an elm or touch down on a distant city's cruddy avenue? Where are the balloons, and where is the Shah's golden carriage now, and where have all the soldiers gone?

Back in the day we cut product naked in the old kitchen, ghost kitchens and ghost cars and ghost barbers, we had no issues, no union, no pension plan, no second body. I warned him, Blue warned him, kids meeting the schoolbus found him.

After 9-11 Blue joined the porch pirates trailing the UPS driver to steal packages. Back in the day we had cars the size of battleships and jet-setter budgets, we shot up Saturns and satellites with high hopes; that world floated away and our smiling children floated away.

Very sorry for your loss, says a third body hidden like ballast in the stone wall.

A fourth body lolls, happily peaking on a sofa behind the body shop. Five-oh shoots film in the cellar, six of us rolled around in the Buick on flat tires, no lie GI, we sped in a Humvee with sandbags on the floor, rockabilly on the boombox, and hillbilly armour on our doors.

On the seventh day we were really baked, it was late, it was early, I won't lie to you, I drove, but all of us left before it all went down, we went home, melted away with the Kurds and their collections of scratched vinyl.

Now Blue hides in the Disney trees and wonders, Do the dollar store balloons fly up forever or become more anonymous detritus? Blue sees the balloons as his friends' big funny faces struggling higher and higher for that stellar view, lost souls escaping the street's pull to rise and mingle in ether limbos with the antique satellites.

When they're running him down and he has no home left in this world, Blue is happy to think of his old pals gathered, floating high with the steampunk sputniks and scuds and Mohawks that refuse to fall to earth.

from Anything's Better Than Dying

Tony Fabijančić

John Marcher looked around. The driveway on which he was parked was a few hundred metres from the beach road. Too close for comfort. Too many people. He backed out and drove in the direction of town, then took a right towards a backcountry region called Pleasant Valley. It was a network of gravel roads strung along with bungalows, not especially pleasant and not much of a valley. He knew some isolated spots up in the hills where few people went. That was the right place for him now. The washboard road rattled the car and flung up the same white dust as the beach road, leaving a trail long after he'd passed, exactly what he'd wanted to avoid. He took another right on a road that led farther into the hills. A white wooden farmhouse stood near the fork, he'd forgotten it was there, and he could see the yard cluttered with machinery and the barn bursting with new hay, and he could smell manure through the open window. No one was around, no one to see him, no pickup trucks in the yard at least, so he drove past slowly, swearing at himself for turning there in the first place. The road steepened as it cut into the side of a big hill, which was covered by ragged, anemic evergreens and the occasional oak and poplar. The nervy pounding of his heart abated the farther he drove into the wild country. Chunky gravel made the car shudder. Logging trucks and ATVs handled this surface better than his car, and he knew he'd better stop soon because a flat would screw him over completely.

The abandoned house was just farther on. He knew it from having been up here the last three Decembers looking for a Christmas tree, with that combination of happiness that came from being out in the wild again, and apprehension that he'd be caught, along with, as usual, the added worry at the back of his mind about his wife's disappointment and her inevitable irritation with the tree he had brought back; surely of all the millions of trees he could have found one that had nicer branches on the bottom, that didn't look like all the animals had peed on it, etc.

The house was suddenly there. A small wooden one-bedroom with two windows and a sagging roof. There was space behind where he could park and not be noticed. He could even go inside if the doors were open and if the building looked safe. The man who'd built the house was long dead, 30 years or more now, a lightning rod installer, they say, who'd got himself into some sort of trouble, and decided to live out here. Or maybe the deciding happened before.

Marcher had heard the story from someone at the Triangle Tavern a few years ago, the basic outlines of it; there were even rumours about a special gift the guy had. Anticipating a strike before it happened. The story flashed through his mind while he sat in the car. It made sense to him that he thought of the story now because he was, in a weird way, connected with the guy, both of them hunted.

As he sat there he went over the story again, not for the first time, having written over the original telling a few times so that it had become more his own. The temperature of his own blood seemed to fall when the last pictures faded out, after the last violent revengeful crash from above, the old priest struck down. With the end of the story came an end of the tension he had felt on the drive up here – the obsequy to the powers over him, whatever they were, which now took the shape of the guy on the other end of his cell phone who was coming after him. The story had had that calming effect.

He pushed his seatback into a reclining position and stretched out his legs. Trees and bushes surrounded the car, protecting it from the sun. He closed his eyes. The wind through the branches, the sound of birds out there, some place, all soothed him. He kept his eyes closed. Just a little longer, he thought, before he would have to start figuring out what to do....

When he opened his eyes again, the light had changed, a slight lowering of sun-intensity which told him that time had passed. He got out of the car, went to the back door of the house. It was part open; the screen door had swung to one side and was rusted into place, and the mesh long gone. The door was rusted also, so that when he pushed at it to go inside it creaked and groaned. Inside, his eyes adjusting to the dark, he made out a dirt-coated wooden floor, missing boards in places, a few stones, probably that someone had thrown through a window, two upside down blue milk crates, and crumpled Keith's cans rusted almost beyond recognition. In the other room, an iron carcass of a single bed was against the wall.

There was a scraping sound coming from somewhere, something against the side of the house or the roof, then he realized it was the branches of the trees and bushes. He took a last look around. In the main room, near the back door he noticed an iron coil on the floor, and when he nudged it with his foot, when some of the dirt was brushed aside, he saw a seam about a metre-long perpendicular to the floor boards. He reached down, pulled at the coil, and lifted a section of the floor. A trap door. It came up easily on its hinges. There was just enough light through the back door for him to see three steps going down into a rudimentary cellar or crawl space, roughly hacked out of the ground. It was pitch black down there. He poked his head inside, thought he saw the cellar extend a few metres around; it was hard to be sure. He never kept a flashlight in his own car, and he didn't think there was one in the Subaru, he didn't bother to check, so he put his shoulder into the back door of the house and pushed it open wider, the noon light slanting into the house rectangularly, and diving into the cellar a little distance and then grainily petering out. But he could see more.

The room was small, low-ceilinged, maybe five feet high, the floors and walls all dirt, and empty, almost empty. Something was stacked against a wall, he was pretty sure it was equipment from a still, or that was his first thought, what else would make sense, he asked himself. For sure by now scavengers had emptied this place of anything valuable. It had been decades since anyone had lived here. He stood quietly, thinking for a moment. The branches scraped against the house. Something else crept along the roof, probably a bird. A wind blew strongly through the door. Whatever the objects were in the cellar they were only a few metres from the steps, He was afraid of heights, and dark enclosed spaces also, but he thought he could manage it, his curiosity overcame his good sense, and then he was descending the stairs and stepping tentatively across the rough floor, bent over, until he reached the objects. Five or six were stacked together, longish and rough in his hands.

He held one and was about to go back when the cellar door slammed shut. Something had blown it down. The wind, probably it was the wind, he thought. Or maybe he hadn't lifted the door all the way up. He held onto one of the objects and carefully with arms extended found the stairs again. His heart was beating heavily; his only thought was to get up and out as fast as he could. He found the stairs, stepped onto the first one and pushed on the door, his arms above his head. The door didn't budge. He thought at first it was because he'd pushed on the wrong side, so he climbed farther up the stairs, to the top, and heaved against the door with his back, using his legs to shove upwards, but the door didn't move, the thing wouldn't open. "Jesus Christ, open up," he screamed, "open *up*!" He tried again, then again, ramming his back and head against the door. It seemed to lift a smidgeon, but wouldn't open. "Holy shit, holy shit," he screamed. "You idiot, you stupid idiot, now you're fucked, really really fucked!" In the pitch-black cellar, his screams were snuffed out almost immediately. No one was going to hear him, no one could hear him, and his car was hidden behind the bushes of the house, and it wasn't even his car. He was erasing himself more and more with each of his decisions, totally disappearing, deleting himself; it wasn't much different than swimming out in the ocean or jumping off a ferry in the black night with no one to see, to know. He punched at the door. The seal was tight, the door tamped down, so no light shone through. This was real darkness.

He ran his fingers along the edge of the trapdoor at the hinges to clean out some of the debris, whatever he could, to clean out the seam and maybe open the door. He rammed his back against it again and again. Nothing. It was stuck, stuck for good. His desperate fingers clawed at the wood. He kept ramming his back against the door. He did it over and over until he started to hyperventilate. He sat back on the stairs trying to get his breath. How much air was down here anyway, he wondered. The door was sealed tight so there wasn't any air coming through it, and the rest of the room looked pretty closed off, even the beams above were sealed; otherwise he would have seen some light. So there wasn't that much air, and the more he tried to open the door, the harder he went at it, the worse it actually was for him. It was best if he did nothing, sat here doing nothing, to stretch out the amount of available air as much as he could. If he wanted to live longer he had to do nothing.

Tears of remorse and self-pity popped into his eyes. Thoughts about the world out there ran through him. The one he'd just left. He imagined the fields outside this house, the fresh air, the birds singing, a sweet sound of summer, now a threnody for himself; he saw the beaches and the sea around the county and the rest of the world where he'd been, felt the cool salty waves on his summer hot skin, he saw himself as the boy long ago running through ravines and sling-shooting pellets at houses and passing cars, just being free and not thinking about it, taking it all for granted because he didn't expect to end up in a cellar in an abandoned house somewhere in the middle of nowhere, how could he have imagined or predicted it, no one can. Other pictures came to him all jumbled together with different feelings. He saw himself with all the girls he would come to know. He saw himself and his young wife before they

were married, a dark beauty with black shock of hair and haughty expression, how they went up into the hills to an oak forest, the sun shafts golden and beautiful pouring down. Surely now after a few hours she had begun to wonder where he was, despite everything, and maybe had begun a search for him, called the police in, he could hope, and now he hoped they were on his trail just as before he'd wanted to disappear, fly under the radar and fly out of her life forever, but now he was ready to countermand it all and call out to her, scream her name, which he did, uselessly he knew, even as he knew it was a waste of breath, was in fact wasting the air in this place, this grave, and actually speeding up his death.

That was when he heard the scraping sound from before, which he'd thought was on the roof. Now it was over his head, on the floor of the room above, on the trap door, not a scraping actually, but the unmistakable shifting of feet. He froze. Someone was there. Someone had been standing on the trap door; the weight of the body must have prevented him from opening it. Then the door suddenly lifted. A shower of dust and light fell on his upturned face. He couldn't see anyone. But he saw the way up. He scrambled up the stairs and climbed into the room. Through squinting eyes he noticed that the light had changed. The sun no longer came through the back door, and the room was darker than before.

There was a man in the room. He stood in the middle of it, having backed off from the trapdoor. The man was thin, with a lined severe face and black eyes. He wore a denim shirt and jeans, faded but perfectly clean, and black scuffed work boots that looked too big for his feet. His hands hung stiffly at his side off his thin arms, hung there awkwardly as though he didn't know what to do with them when they weren't working, moving.

The men looked at each other.

Finally, Marcher said, "thanks for letting me out. I couldn't do it on my own."

The man didn't answer. His face had the expression of someone looking at a wall with nothing on it.

"I guess you must have seen me come up the road. I didn't hear your car, but obviously I was down there."

The man didn't answer. He stood with his arms at his side, hands motionless except for an almost unnoticeable chafing of left index finger and thumb. When the man finally talked, his words didn't fill the quiet room as a normal living voice would; instead, the voice whispered inside John Marcher's own head, its texture a little roughened like an old recording, or a tinny scratchy minister's sermon on an A.M. channel on a Sunday morning as he drove across the empty prairies....

"You have no right to be here," the voice said.

"Sorry, I didn't think I would do any harm," he answered.

"You have no right to be here," the voice repeated. "All of you coming here with your drink and your talk, your town chatter, I have seen you all year after year, always the same."

"I have never been here before," he assured the man.

The cold, raw acetic voice went on. "I lived the clean and narrow, never abased myself to their level, never stooped. They are all still there, one generation after the next, always new and always the same. I hated them for a time. But when I came here, again, afterwards, I saw them anew. I even pitied them. They had a wisdom I did not understand at first. And so, I learned. And I showed how I learned when I gave you life again. I taught you, and then I gave you life."

The voice went up an octave, hissing: "I coulda left you in that hole, fucker, and listened to you die, I had the power. But I taught you instead. And then I gave you life." He stood looking at Marcher for a second, then said, "Now you will go back there and live your future days with this new message in the heart of you and you will do what you can, even if it is meaningless and empty as you people are. Anything's better than dying."

He didn't answer the man. They stood facing each other, and then the scene went albescent and grey, died out, and he went outside again into the day, found himself in the car, leaned back on the reclining seat, just as he'd left it, feeling his skin start to warm up....

He jerked up out of his seat and looked around. He wasn't shaking anymore. The light had changed again, that much he noticed before he checked the cell phone, 3:14, and the side of the house, earlier covered by shade, was lit by the hot bright sun, but the car itself in the bosquet was still in the blue-green shade. There was no sign of anyone around. The door of the house was ajar as it had been before. A bit of a breeze lightly shivered the leaves and a churr of insects out there some place reached his ears through the open windows.

Sharply awake now, he started to go through the avenues of possible actions in front of him, thinking through to the end, the ends, the message of the haunting voice at the back of it all guiding him, or if not guiding him then setting up a sequence of directions enfilade-like through which he could walk and get out on the other side untouched, unharmed, more or less intact as the person he had been or had wanted to be, but had lost over the years. The words came back to him, the crackling A.M. voice fighting through bad interference, sermonizing again, telling him something, something outside or beyond the words themselves, or underneath them, waiting for the full strike of their power to hit home. He sat a few minutes longer. The object beside him propped on the passenger seat was one of the objects he'd found in the crawl space below the house, and which, somehow, he had kept hold of as he stepped back into the house. It was about a metre long, narrow, with a thinnish point. The copper had oxidized over time so, of a greenish hue, it lay there undeniable and unequivocal, a lightning rod.

Contributor Biographies

Lindsay Bird is a poet and documentary producer. Her first poetry collection, *Boom Time* (Gaspereau Press, 2019), was shortlisted for the Newfoundland Book Awards and the ReLit Award. Her poetry has appeared in many Canadian literary journals, including *The Fiddlehead*, *Riddle Fence*, and *Event*. She lives in Corner Brook, Newfoundland with her family.

Ian Colford is the author of two collections of short fiction and two novels. In 2022, his unpublished manuscript *The Confessions of Joseph Blanchard* was awarded the Guernica Prize. A collection of stories, *Witness*, will be published by Porcupine's Quill in 2023. He lives in Halifax.

Mary Dalton is Professor Emerita of English at the Memorial University of Newfoundland. She is also currently Poet Laureate of the City of St. John's and host of Flahoolic, a poetry podcast. Among her books of poetry are *Merrybegot*, *Red Ledger*, and *Hooking: A Book of Centos*; she has also published a prose collection, a miscellany entitled *Edge: Essays, Reviews, Interviews*.

Robin Durnford was born in St. John's and then grew up on the West Coast of Newfoundland. She is the author of four books of poetry: *A Lovely Gutting* (McGill-Queen's 2012), *Fog of the Outport* (Jackpine 2013), *Half Rock* (Gaspereau 2016), and *Gap Toothed* (Gaspereau 2020). She has read her work to audiences in Wales, Ireland, India, Quebec, and Newfoundland. She holds a Ph.D. in English Literature from The University of Alberta. She currently lives in Montreal.

Nathan Elliott lives in Montreal, where he spends much of his time writing and teaching. He defended his Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Notre Dame in 2006, and he won the Lawrence Jackson Award for nonfiction in 2016. He's hoping something truly spectacular will happen in 2026.

Tony Fabijančić is Professor of English at Grenfell Campus, Memorial University of Newfoundland. He is the author of three books: *Croatia: Travels in Undiscovered Country* (University of Alberta Press, 2003), *Bosnia: In the Footsteps of Gavrilo Princip* (University of Alberta Press, 2009), and *Drink in the Summer: A Memoir of Croatia* (Athabasca University Press, 2023). His other publications include scholarly articles, travel essays, personal essays, political essays, short fiction and photographs in venues such as the *University of Toronto Quarterly*, *The Globe and Mail*, *Calgary Herald* and *The Antigonish Review*.

Adrian Fowler's poetry has appeared in literary magazines in Canada as diverse as *The Pottersfield Portfolio*, *Poetry Canada Review*, *Tickleace*, and *Inkpot*. It has been anthologized in *31 Newfoundland Poets*; *The Atlantic Anthology*; *Wild on the Crest*; *The Backyards of Heaven*; *Land, Sea and Time*; *Savoury on the Tongue*; and *The March Hare Anthology*. His poetry has also been featured in the Metroverse Project in St. John's and the Footpress and Poetry Walk Project in Corner Brook, and the subject of readings in both cities. His work in progress is a collection titled *Letting Go*.

Shoshannah Ganz is an associate professor of Canadian literature at Grenfell Campus. She has co-edited a collection of essays on the poet Al Purdy and published a monograph entitled *Eastern Encounters*. Shoshannah is revising a creative/academic manuscript for McGill Queen's University Press. An active poet, she has published her work in journals and collections in Canada, the US, and Japan.

Matthew Hollett is a writer and photographer in St. John's, Newfoundland (Ktaqmkuk). His work explores landscape and memory through photography, writing and walking. *Optic Nerve*, a collection of

poems about photography and visual perception, is forthcoming from Brick Books in 2023. His first book, *Album Rock* (2018), is a work of creative nonfiction and poetry investigating a curious photograph taken in Newfoundland in the 1850s. He won the 2020 CBC Poetry Prize for “Tickling the Scar,” a poem about walking the Lachine Canal during the early days of the pandemic.

Mark Anthony Jarman is the author of *Touch Anywhere to Begin*, *Czech Techno*, *Knife Party at the Hotel Europa*, *My White Planet*, *19 Knives*, *New Orleans Is Sinking*, *Dancing Nightly in the Tavern*, and the travel book *Ireland’s Eye*. His novel, *Salvage King Ya!*, is on Amazon.ca’s list of 50 Essential Canadian Books and is the number one book on Amazon’s list of best hockey fiction. His *Selected Stories* is forthcoming from Biblioasis Press. He won a Gold National Magazine Award in nonfiction, has twice won the Maclean-Hunter Endowment Award, won the Jack Hodgins Fiction Prize, was shortlisted for an Atlantic Book Award, the Alistair MacLeod Prize, the Thomas Raddall Prize, was included in *The Journey Prize Anthology* and *Best Canadian Stories*, and short-listed for *Best American Essays* and the O. Henry Prize. He has published in *Walrus*, *Canadian Geographic*, *Brick*, *American Short Story*, *The Georgia Review*, *The Missouri Review*, *Hobart*, *The Barcelona Review*, *Literatura Na Swiecie (Poland)*, *Bombay Review*, *Queen’s Quarterly*, *The Hong Kong Review*, *Vrij Nederland*, and reviews for *The Globe & Mail*. He is a graduate of The Iowa Writers’ Workshop, a Yaddo fellow, has taught at the University of Victoria, the Banff Centre for the Arts, and the University of New Brunswick where he is fiction editor of *The Fiddlehead* literary journal.

Shelly Kawaja is the author of *The Raw Light of Morning*. Her work has appeared in several literary magazines such as *The Humber Literary Review*, *The Dalhousie Review*, *PACE*, and *Word Magazine*. She was longlisted for the Bridge Prize, the Writer’s Alliance of Newfoundland and Labrador’s Percy Jane’s First Novel Award, and won the GritLIT 2020 short fiction contest. Shelly is a creative writing student in the University of British Columbia’s MFA program, and a graduate of The Humber School for Writers, Memorial University of Newfoundland, and Sir Wilfred Grenfell College.

Randall Maggs is a writer and wood craftsman. He was born in Vancouver, but has lived for nearly 40 years on the west coast of Newfoundland. After leaving the Canadian Air Force, he earned graduate degrees in English at Dalhousie and the University of New Brunswick, and in 1977 became a member of the faculty at Sir Wilfred Grenfell College, focussing mainly on Canadian Literature and Creative Writing. He also played an active part in Newfoundland’s March Hare Literary Festival in its 25 year run, acting for ten years as its artistic director. As well, he has always been active in the outdoors world, skiing and backpacking in the high country of Western Newfoundland. His last book, a collection of poetry entitled *Night Work: The Sawchuk Poems*, was a *Globe and Mail* “Top 100 Book” in 2008 and won the Winterset Award, the Pratt Poetry Prize, and the Kobzar Literary Award. In 2018, Brick Books brought out an enhanced ten-year anniversary edition of *Night Work* in anticipation of the release of a feature length film based on that work.

Leo McKay Jr's best-known book is the novel *Twenty-six*, which depicted a fictionalized account of the Westray mine explosion that killed twenty-six miners in Pictou County Nova Scotia in 1992. That book won the Dartmouth Book Award for fiction and was selected as the inaugural title of the One Book Nova Scotia event. His first book, *Like This*, a collection of stories, also won the Dartmouth Book Award, and was a finalist for the Giller Prize. *What Comes Echoing Back*, a novel, is forthcoming with Vagrant Press in the spring of 2023. He lives in Mi'kma'ki, the unceded ancestral home of the Mi'kmaq people, where he has been a high school teacher for almost 30 years.

Dan Murphy is an educator, author, and poet who lives in Newfoundland and Labrador. His poetry has appeared in journals, anthologies, and online in Canada, the United States of America, Ireland, and Great Britain. He has been writing poetry daily for over twenty years.

Shane Neilson is a poet, physician, and critic from New Brunswick. His work has appeared in *Poetry Magazine*, *The Manhattan Review*, and *Literature and Medicine*. His most recent book is *You May Not Take the Sad and Angry Consolations* (Goose Lane Editions, 2022).

Sabrina Pinksen is a writer and painter from Wild Cove, White Bay. She has won the Arts & Letters 2022 Poetry Award and was runner-up in the 2022 *Riddle Fence* fiction contest. She is a Creative Writing MFA Candidate at the University of Guelph.

Aley Waterman is a writer who teaches English full time at Grenfell Campus, MUNL in Corner Brook, Newfoundland. She has had stories, talks, and poems featured on the Trampoline Hall Podcast, and in *Riddle Fence*, *Hart House Review*, *Bad Nudes Magazine*, *Metatron Omega*, and elsewhere. Forthcoming, she will have a piece of fiction entitled "Metric Birthday" published in the *Brooklyn Review* in Winter of 2022. Her first novel, *Mudflowers*, was mentored by Sheila Heti, and will be published by Dundurn Press's fiction imprint Rare Machines in September of 2023. "Garbage Baby" and "New Sincerity" are part of a larger collection of flash fiction that Aley hopes to publish in the near future.

Bernard Wills is an associate professor at Grenfell Campus Memorial University in Corner Brook Newfoundland. He has a doctorate in Religious Studies from McMaster University and a Master's in Classics from Dalhousie University. His published poems have appeared in *Event*, *Vallum*, *Nashwaak Review*, *Antigonish Review*, and *Paper Mill Press*.