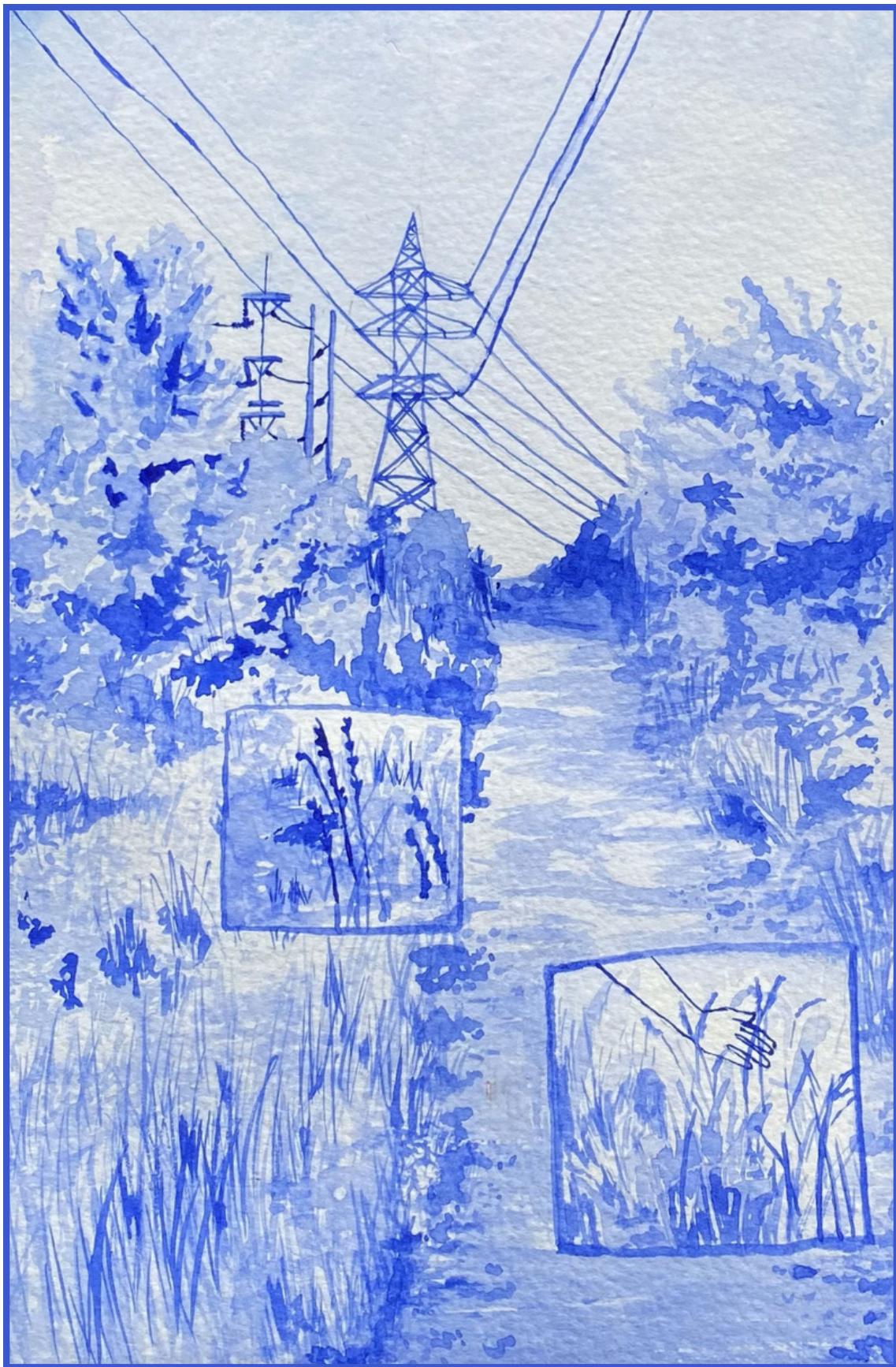


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ISSUE 03 | WINTER 2025

bare

COVER ART
Kaya Davies

EDITORS
Alyssa Sequeira
Gabrielle Cole
Lauren Bullock
Suzanna Graham

A NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

Dear Reader,

For our latest issue, we asked you to be bare. To bare your teeth and your soul. After combing through (a record-breaking number of!) submissions, we've put together a collection of works that fit our vision for *chouette*'s first themed issue. In these pages you will find vulnerability and the sentimentalism of hard Canadian winters. We want to thank all our contributors for being so open with us. And we want to thank you, our readers, who hold our hearts in your hands.

We hope that as you flip through this issue, you feel inspired to let yourself and your emotions go.

Love,



There were gardens

(After *La Jetée*)

Smudged fingerprints on enclosure glass

Peer in at formaldehyde-soaked skins.

Only here, only now, referent remains—strung up, unblinking.

Now echo. Now index.

Only thumb-shaped purple blossoms bruising.

Now buried bulbs. Only hazy golden light

Setting the morning frost aglow.

In this memory, they are unbothered with traces.

Just shivering in the early spring chill—

Slick fur twitching sleepily; thick lashes blinking hello

To the pale, hallowed sun.

Lifted as though by a puppeteer's strings.

ANAHI PELLATHY

My Mother's Tears Oil My Hair

by Sabahat Ali Wani

It was one of the bitterly cold nights of *Chilai Kalaan*.¹ The kitchen's crumbling walls appeared daunting, as if the chilly winds blowing outside had penetrated them and turned them into ghosts. I sat in a corner while *Mouj*² lay a few feet away. She was dead-still, but not dead. Her irregular breathing, periodic sniffles and warm piss that seeped through her *shalwar*³ and covered the grey cement floor hinted that she was still alive. On nights like these, at times, her piss blended with her blood and painted the floor with translucent streams of pale red and yellow hues. Her tears, blood, and piss left her body but I, her youngest daughter, never did. I stayed with her.

The cold night fell on our bodies, and I neared her shivering self to lay beside her. Neither did I lend my warmth, nor did I seek hers. To a mother's misery, I merely offered a daughter's company. I didn't look at her, my eyes were shut. But moments later, a lump of flesh landed on my face. I detached my eyes from the darkness and opened them, only to realise it was her hand. Surprisingly, her hand did not feel cold. It was warm like the *kabwi*⁴ she prepared. The texture of her hand was grainy, and when she pressed it onto my right cheek, I flinched a little. She pulled her hand back, neared my face and started blowing cool air on my cheek.

After some time, the soothing air on my cheek was replaced by a sudden wetness. Drops—drops and drops of my mother's tears came down on my face. Dropping down, straight onto my right cheek,

¹A forty-day period (21 December to 29 January) of harsh winters in Kashmir.

²Mother.

³Wide trousers.

⁴A Kashmiri aromatic tea.

the tears breached the bridge of my crooked nose and flooded over to the left side of my face. Some invading tears reached my chapped lips, slithered through the gaps between my teeth and entered my mouth. My parched tongue tasted their salt and oozed with the waters of its own. Like a voracious predator, I was consuming my mother's tears. Slowly, and then, all at once, the tears began to flow into my mouth like young, restless rivers in search of a much calmer, parent sea. But I was no guardian sea. I was a violent one. Deep down, within the bones of my gaunt body, I was brewing a storm from her tears. A storm that kept on chanting: *Remember. Remember. Remember.*

Later that night, when most of her tears had dried up on my face, she placed her head sideways on my forehead and—the oiling began. Warm and salty tears departed from her eyes and fell onto the thick mass of my jet-black hair. Gradually, they crept around the roots of my hair and dove in. In a few seconds, the scalp and the root ends of my hair were wet. The wetness was not static, its presence was kinetic. Her tears crawled over my scalp like poisonous reptiles, and their movements became nimbler with every passing second. Upon sensing the presence of enough oil, *Mouj* placed her hand on my head and, with her frail fingers, started massaging it in. Till mid-scalp, her digits maintained a steady pace, but as her index finger touched upon the soaked crown, she jerked her hand away. It was too wet. Excess of oil and glut of oiling caused an infection. It did not make the mother-daughter bond stronger. It only closed the daughter's hair follicles, depriving her of absorbing her mother's guidance and learning from her mistakes.

Mouj wiped her wet fingers on her frock's sleeve and turned away. With her back facing me, I could make out the outline of her shoulder blades. She always complained about the ache she felt there, but as time passed, she stopped. We all thought that the pain was gone, but one day, when she was planting chilli in her beloved kitchen garden, I saw her clutching her shoulders, groaning in pain and cursing the day she was born. I wanted to go and pick the baby chilli plants from the bucket and help her, but I didn't. For me, all praised acts of a woman's selflessness and self-sacrifice needed self-harm. A woman, especially a mother, had to harm and hurt herself to keep a household alive.

I sat up and looked at the clock. It was 10 p.m. already. *Abu*⁵ was not back from work, and dinner was still to be prepared. The kitchen sink was full of unclean utensils, and the countertops were a mess. I was hungry but too tired to cook and clean. I opened my mouth to call *Mama*, but no sound, no words came out. My tongue, like a blob of useless flesh, was stuck to the roof of my mouth, and after several attempts, I wasn't able to move it to access my voice. Panicked, I looked towards my mother to ask for help but found the place empty. I heard the clanking sound of utensils, and as I turned around, I saw her. She was washing utensils with a steel scrubber, and her eyes and hands were focused on removing the stubborn food stains. I loaded my tongue with words to call her again, but this time, before I could open my lips, a teardrop of hers slid down my temple like a sweatdrop of mine. I wiped it with my hand and stood up. I neared my mother. Voiceless, I waited for her to notice me. When she did, I took a stunned step backwards. I saw myself. Not in her eyes, but in her.

SABAHAT ALI WANI

⁵Father.



Learning to hold your own hand, Lina Züchner

Watching a Whale Explode

I took you down here to see snow fall over the face of the deep.
A stranded whale is about to explode.

You wipe your philtrum,
ask if it smells and I tell you it does.
Spit.

Breathe fog into my collarbones
I trace rib divots over cotton,
slip cold hands under the fabric
shriek,

I pull you by bare skin until
the whale bursts,
double over and vomit water and porridge.

Wipe your mouth on my sleeve and hold canvas
You've left oats on my wrist

and I eat them.
I taste your stomach, rolling acid over teeth until you're gone.

Apologetically,
tear me by the sleeve, washing feverishly
make me naked with your shame.

Pink mist settles over snow,
dyes the foam
and ebbs.

Wabi-Sabi

by Julie Paul

Two months in, Marlee gives me a card with a mirror inside. *Look at yourself with glasses on*, the card instructs me. *Then take them off and look again*. It pronounces: *Your life is about to change. Your vision will be fixed this year.*

I look into the rectangular mirror and see a woman with black-framed glasses. I remove the glasses and look again. Same same, but different: a fuzzy, distant me.

I pull a business card from the envelope. *West Coast Laser. Call for Consultation.*

We've just begun conversations about a tandem vacation; we've only cooked dinner together five times. But Marlee has family money: she's on a mission to launder her father's cash earned from stocks in socially abysmal companies.

I've never imagined life without glasses. For over twenty years, they've kept my hands busy, cleaning them, de-fogging them, pushing them back up my nose after their trip down the slope. Plus, my scar from a car accident at the age of four is nearly hidden by my frames. Both glasses and scar are part of me: they match my vocation as a barista, my public image as a pensive intellectual, and I'm content to let these things rest. But Marlee, it seems, has other plans for me.

I make the call.

*

I don't mind the ragged ears of T-shirts protruding from my shelves, or the scent of chicken curry saturating the dusty air, or the bedside book

stacks, but the first time Marlee slept over—a terrible sleep, thanks to my flea-rich tomcat, Perk—I could tell that she did mind.

“What you need,” she began, while I held a coffee cup to her lips and encouraged sips of my secret blend until the morning seemed approachable. “What you need,” she repeated after breathing in the shade-grown smelling salts, her small hand on my arm in a mixed gesture of fondness and plea, her pink nails buffed to a modest shine, “is a little organization. Have you never heard of feng shui?”

“Everyone’s heard of feng shui,” I said. “I’m a disciple of wabi-sabi.”

“You can’t call a dusty Jagermeister bottle and stacks of old magazines examples of the beautiful disorder in the universe,” she said.

She knew the difference between wasabi and wabi-sabi.

I smiled my Walmart Buddha smile. “Ah, but one never knows another’s sense of wabi-sabi.”

We ended up rolling out of bed to make intricate, perfect sushi rolls with dangerous quantities of wasabi. My eyes watered until my cheeks were wet. Marlee, a self-proclaimed Japanophile, simply looked as if her nostrils were turning inside out, which made her the sexiest thing alive. We carried on our sushi rolling back in bed.

Before long, I was vacuuming for Marlee, emptying the trash, windexing. She is a study in balance and purpose, everything placed precisely in the correct position—matching socks and earrings, refined colours, pleats exactly over her hip bones. A sleek brown bob with bobby pins angled at thirty degrees up from each apricot ear.

It’s no wonder she wants me to ditch my glasses. They’re messing up my face. Cluttering things. Blocking the incoming light.

*

The accident was dramatic, cinematic, or so they tell me: we went off the road, sailed through the air and landed on a pile of rocks at a ravine's edge. The car was literally tipping back and forth; my mother told me she was afraid even to breathe. Slowly, slowly, she crawled up the seat and opened the door. My father was in the front, not moving. I was bleeding from the head.

Mom had to get us out of there. If we'd waited in the car for rescue, we wouldn't have made it. As soon as we left the car, it flipped into the water, my father with it.

At the side of the road, Mom flagged down a car, and they took us to the hospital. My only memory: the apple-green blanket they wrapped me in, the applesauce with pills in it. I don't remember the car, or the tantrum I had in the back seat just before we hit black ice. I don't remember the last words my father said to me.

*

Being born into a wealthy family makes some people lazy, greedy, or selfish. Marlee puts these people to shame. She is a girl with ambition, and believes she was born to spend her money on things that make her parents freak. For example, fixing my eyes, when her parents have only met me once at an awkward brunch where I embarrassed them by kissing Marlee at the table. They knew she was "going with girls," but they weren't ready for anything so public.

Marlee donates regularly to PETA and a needle exchange downtown. She adopts greyhounds from the track and pays people to look after them. Her mother wants her to go to therapy, but Marlee was already in therapy for years, as a teen, to help her overcome her

compulsions. As she sees it, she is simply giving the world a healthy sense of order.

*

My father surfaces only in my dreams. In them, he comes out of the ravine covered in ice but still smiling, like he's gone ice-fishing and caught us a giant trout. I try to pick up the car, like Hercules, and fling it up onto the road, but if it ever makes it, he's not in there when I open the door.

*

After my surgery, Marlee says I look like a cult initiate. The guru behind the softly-closing doors has altered me forever. Like each of his patients, I am now at his command, all of us in black plastic orthopaedic glasses, clutching our chaperones' arms.

Nervous and excited, I let Marlee steer me from the recovery room. Behind the glasses, my eyes are running with yellow exudate, patches of it caught in my eyelashes. The sunlight hurts. The traffic sounds too harsh, the exhaust sickens me. I'm as delicate as a freshly-hatched bird. I walk slowly, uncertainly, hovering near Marlee's elbow. We leave the building, supply bag firmly in hand, but I am carrying more than a nylon zippered pouch. I have a mission: to see the world again, free of prosthetics. To *see* as if for the very first time.

My mother would be happy, if this ends up working. She always blamed herself for my bad eyes. As if genes could be controlled as they compiled themselves. As if she knew what she was doing, and then did it anyway.

*

Because Marlee hates driving, and I must be back at the clinic in the

morning, we decide to stay at a nearby hotel and have dinner with her friend Lara, whom I've never met. Out of necessity, I find myself forming my first impressions on voice and preferences.

"Let's order Thai food," Lara suggests as soon as we get to her third floor apartment. I picture a blonde braid, bright cheeks, a long flowing skirt.

"Too messy," Marlee says. "She'll get rice all over the place."

"We'll take turns feeding her," Lara says, in her yellow-green, hammocky voice. "Come on, I've been waiting for you to come to town so we could order from this place. It's true Thai. I feel like I'm surrounded by elephants when I eat it."

"Have you ever ridden one?" I ask.

"Oh yes," Lara says. "I stayed in a village that had an artist's colony for elephants in Thailand. They paint with their trunks and feet. I'll show you the pictures." Then she realizes her mistake. "Oh, sorry. I mean, next time, I'll show you."

"Okay," says Marlee. "Who wants what?"

The two of them sort it out, what level of spiciness, which kind of prawns. My senses are on red alert. The menu flutters from the oscillating fan, which keeps blowing the tip of my shirt collar onto my neck with every sweep. The vanilla-scented candles. The hum of Lara's laptop behind me. Periodically, while we wait for our food, one of them nudges my arm with a bowl of tortilla chips. When the doorbell rings, although they both insist on footing the bill, I hear only one set of footsteps going towards the door to pay the delivery person. Apparently, Marlee's money did not win out this time.

A hand materializes on my thigh. It rises in a gentle sweep, from

belly to chest to my face, where it traces my scar from top to bottom before rubbing gentle circles over my temples.

“Mmm,” I say. “That feels so good.”

Now fingers are at my lips. I open my mouth. I start sucking the salt from under the nails, like a baby goat. The nails are smooth little capped heads, atop slender necks.

The top has just been cut off my eyes, a circular incision, then lifted by a miniature spatula before suction was applied to the eyeball and my eye was reshaped by a beam of light. Drops of various consistencies are regularly being slobbered into my eyes. I am wearing plastic glasses as big as a windshield. I am about as sexy as a blister. Sex is the last thing that should be on my mind. Yet here I am.

“Girl,” I say quietly, reaching up to take her fingers out of my mouth so I can kiss her, “Be careful. You’re turning me on.” I push the hand down to my breasts and a mouth is presented to mine: open, warm, wet, and tasting of beer. I hear the apartment door slam closed. We kiss for one and a half seconds before it hits me: Marlee doesn’t drink beer.

I work my thickly coated eyelids open. By the time I’ve unstuck the lashes, both Lara, suddenly a blue-haired woman wearing an “I Love Cats” T-shirt, and Marlee, her arms full of brown-bagged Thai food, make it through the blur of eye gel at the same time.

“Don’t open your eyes!” Marlee yells. “You’ll ruin it!”

“Let me take that from you,” Lara offers, reaching for the food. “I’ll go get us some plates.”

“Don’t even,” she tells her. “We’re out of here.”

Then, before anyone can say anything else, both women look at

me, because I'm laughing.

"Amazing," I say, looking back and forth, from one to the other.

Already, I can see better than I have in years.

*

Do not look away from the light. That was the most important part of the whole process, maintaining contact with that blurry green blob of light. One wrong move and the laser might destroy the wrong part of the eye. Of course, that would never really happen, right? Machines can be calibrated to stop before any real damage is done.

*

"It was an honest mistake," I say in the hallway, once Marlee has closed Lara's door behind us. "I thought it was you."

"Since when have I ever kissed you like that in front of other people?"

"It was a new side to you. I liked it."

"After all I've given you," she growl-whispers as she pushes me towards the elevator, through the smelly canned cat food and burnt toast scent of the hallway. Since we didn't get to eat, I am hungry enough to think it is appetizing. "How could you do that to me?"

I am at her mercy. She paid for this operation. She holds the schedule for my sight-saving drops, and she knows which ones are which. She could leave me here, right now, a blind person on a corner, holding out care instructions. Or not. But she is forgetting one thing.

"Your friend is a vulture, preying on me like that."

"Friend," Marlee says, then sniffs. The elevator drops us to the ground.

My eyes suddenly feel like they're full of cement dust. Once I'm in

the passenger seat, she yanks off my glasses, levers the seat back to recline, then pries my lower lid open and squirts tear gel into my eye like it's toothpaste.

"Ahh, moisture," I say. "Thank you."

"Maybe you should cry all night instead," she says. "I'm getting sick of this."

"I'm sorry," I say.

"You couldn't even recognize that they weren't my fingers."

"I can't see," I tell her, weakly.

"Well, I can. And I can see you'll need some Botox for that scar above your eyebrow."

*

It's a good thing to know I'm flawed, I think, to have something so obvious to remind me. The young and hip, who buy their coffee and carbs from me without saying thank you, live in a dream world, believing their haircuts and sweater brands automatically make them desirable, which, in their eyes, means perfect. They resist admitting the one thing that is ignored in the university they stagger to, burning their hands on my secret java blend: they're human.

What I should tell them is... what they need to hear is... what might save them—No. Nothing that I know or believe will make a whit of difference. The beautiful and damned, as Fitzgerald said. One and the same. My rescue plans would end in disaster. Because when something is rescued, saved, protected, made better, there is always a corresponding loss.

The road less taken gets taken and strewn with trash, the animals who feed us suffer and die, the rainforest is eaten up by our greed for

coffee, our toilet paper is bright and white, the rivers, brown. My father drowned at the bottom of a ravine because I made it, thanks to my mother, out alive.

*

Wabi really means the misery of living alone in nature, far from society. *Sabi* means withered, lean, cold. Gradually these meanings have shifted, and joined, to become a modern decorating choice. Just look at the trend towards matte finishes, the magazines say. Muted colours are all the rage. A weathered piece of furniture is naturally more appreciated than the unblemished, even if it's been newly distressed.

Of course, what Marlee has inadvertently done—or paid for—is a form of *kintsugi*: putting a broken thing back together with a precious metal, highlighting the scars. I'm not mended with gold, but the rest holds true. My scar makes me special, and thanks to Marlee, it's out there for all the world to see.

And yet laser surgery won't give me ideal vision forever, since they say I'll probably need reading glasses by the time I'm forty, and then my scar will find cover once again.

*

Marlee is gone now, flown to Asia, and her parents won't tell me where. Project Fix-Girlfriend's-eyes is over. Never again will she need to see my messy bedroom, my scarred old cat, my marked-up face.

Should our paths ever cross again, I would like to tell Marlee that I am perfectly, imperfectly happy in my chaos. That mess is a sign of a creative mind. But what I really want is to show her my new talents. To read her a menu, watch her face for signs of forgiveness, identify a seagull from afar. I want to thank her again for the new eyes. Like

FICTION

everything I love, their perfection will, eventually, fade to black.

JULIE PAUL

Cleanup

If we could clear the house—
piled-up appeals, blocking the tabletop;
put-off repairs, sprouting to trip us;
weeds capsizing brick
and drips loosing the ceiling;
irritations, light bulbs that flick
out with a ping, one at a time,
and stick inside the sockets;
nattering words, swimming in tiny circles
in the drains, in punctured tires;
all the unsuitable gifts
we've given one another
and cannot return—
if we could swing
to right and left and knock
out everything but
love

KRISTIN CAMITTA ZIMET



Ramblings, Catherine Chen

East Skillhorn Rd.

white kids at bush parties get off on country and
heiling, one hand in the air while the other works
frantically at belts and buttons. their red cheeks

make cherubs among the gaunt metal carcasses—
eulogies of backroads no longer driven. they know
each other from school, from work at the mine, the

sawmill, the pipeline pumping thick oil. without
mentioning the chill, they rub dirt into eyes and grip
faces with calloused fingers. hisses and slivers slip

between crooked teeth. they know God is watching
so they make it quick, spilling onto denim and
Carhartt like a battered Bud Light. there is no

relief in the depth of winter. there is no climax at
the top of the world. farm kids and hicks drive
home in drunken hoards as red and blue blind eyes
flicker into oblivion—

ELLA BACHRACH

The Embankment

by Salma Galal

“Calling it. Declaring it. Yep. This is the longest it’s ever taken.”

Petra stared at him. “It’s been five minutes.”

“Yeah, five *whole* minutes, though, right? Usually when people say ‘it’ll take five minutes,’ it actually takes two. ‘Cause five minutes is actually a lot longer than you think. And *this*,” Giovanni jabbed a finger at the screen. “This is... oh fuck, it just changed. *God.*” He groaned, tipping his head back, shadows dipping to the hollow of his throat.

Irritation buzzed the back of Petra’s neck. That swarm had been dormant for the past few days. The same amount of time since she last smiled.

“Will you shut up? It’s fine. We’re just gonna have to wait a little longer. Every second isn’t an invitation for you to talk.”

Giovanni snapped his mouth shut and stared ahead, jaw muscle pulsing.

They were standing at the stop in front of school. It was snowing. There was an overhang right behind them. They stood out in the fall, together, banks forming on their heads.

Silent.

What the hell do I say? What can I say? She’d said it all, already. He knew. But there was a boundary drawn in the distance, and no matter what they did, or how he wanted to dig his heels in, they were moving towards it. Nothing would change their speed.

Petra sidled closer, then poked the side of her boot against his.

He jolted, then held still.

Giovanni shifted against her. “You know how Claude kept using ‘exacerbated’ today in class?”

“Yeah.”

“Either he has no idea what it means, or he just learned it.”

“Give him a break, you ass. It’s his second language.”

“Nope. He’s an anglo-québécois. And I bet a lot of English-speakers don’t know the meaning anyway.”

“That’s true.” Petra smiled. “But I think it was an appropriate word for the context.”

“I could agree. I guess mine isn’t very classroom appropriate.”

“Your what?”

“My word of choice. ‘Colossally-fucked-up’?”

“That’s not a word.” Petra chuckled. “Plus, ‘exacerbated’ is more making something worse. ‘Colosally-fucked-up’ is a one-and-done deal. You need something that shows...”

“Nuance?”

“Degrees.”

“How about...” He stuck a tongue in his cheek, creating an olive-skinned hill. “Entropying?”

A pause. Petra doubled over laughing.

“What?” She wiped her tears, warm against frozen fingers, and Giovanni was smiling.

“Degrees! Not as in *temperature!* In, like, levels!”

“Oh fuck, right. Wait, shh! Let me think!” He was laughing, too, trying to shush her, grabbing at her shoulders. “Hmm... wait, wait, I’m right on the cusp of it.”

She quieted, his hand still on her shoulder.
He squinted. “*Worsening*,” he said, stamping the word into the night.

“That’s the best you can do?”

“Show me better, then.”

She clicked her tongue. Her voice went soft: “Ruining.”

Giovanni didn’t answer. She didn’t turn back to him.

Her ears began to ache. She breathed out, thinking of the dawning sun soon to be grasped in her hands. She thought of how the warmth would thaw her skin, and that deeper part, too.

“Your skin is super red.” Giovanni muttered. She wove her hands up and couldn’t feel her ears. “Come on, it’s not gonna show.”

“We can walk?”

“Are you out of your mind? We’ll freeze. Let’s take the metro.”

“By the time we walk over to the metro we would have been able to use that same time to walk to yours. It’s way too far.”

“...mine? You want to come over?”

“No, but I can wait for the bus from there.”

“If it’s not showing at this prime location here, why would it show over there?”

“You can just tell me you’d rather I not,” Petra snapped.

“I didn’t say that. You could stay over, you don’t have to take the bus. We could talk.”

“There’s nothing to talk about. I told you I decided.”

“You haven’t gotten the plane tickets yet.”

“You don’t want to talk, Giovanni, you want to *convince*, and it won’t work.”

“You told me that leaving home was impulsive,” he turned to her, “That you made your decision too fast. But based on the application process, you waited, you *had months*, and you still choose to come here.”

Petra wasn’t looking at him. A couple of students stumbled out of the pub across the street. She focused on their jumbled words.

“And you decided this only weeks ago.” His tone had dropped, and ironically, how quiet it was managed to snag her attention. She turned. He was staring at her boots, salt-bitten. “Tell me, *what’s* impulsive?”

Silent, Petra kicked some powder and turned away.

After a couple muffled footfalls, he called after her. “Where are you going?”

“I’m walking.”

“*Seriously?*”

“At least it gets the blood flowing.”

“Petra, stop. Seriously, it’s dangerous.”

She ignored him.

“Can you even feel your ears?” The earth sagged beneath steps, right behind her. She sped up.

“Come on, the metro—”

“Fuck it, then.” She wheeled around, brushing past him. She planted herself right back before the booth. “I’ll wait.”

“What about walking?”

“I changed my mind.”

“You do that a lot, huh?” He snarked, stalking back over.

“If you don’t wanna wait with me, you aren’t—”

“I don’t *want* you to freeze to death. Let’s at least go into the pub where it’s warm.”

“We might miss it.”

“We can see the bus from there!”

“I’m staying here.”

“But you’re *not*!”

The only sound was the muted fall of snow.

Petra walked away.

“Where are you going?”

Nothing.

“That’s not even the direction of home!”

Home.

“Or school! *Petra*—”

“I just need a second.”

“Please, it’s cold, let’s just—”

“Just a second. Please.” She dropped her voice so he couldn’t hear it break.

She disappeared into the lightless landscape, carrying a mountain on her head.

There were woods behind campus. Black trunks loomed on every side of her. She’d since wandered off the pathway that led to the park, and now her shoes were sinking into endless muck that was more heard than seen.

Petra squatted on the soggy floor, hands folded beneath her torso. She wondered if she’d lose her fingers. Or feel her ears again.

She murmured these questions to the sacred bark of the forked trees, before biting her tongue. *No use.* They were dead. Had been dead

from plummeting temperatures, and even though it was technically spring, they were still dead.

How can anything live here?

Somewhere, deeper in the distance, the faintest trickle of water told her.

Fire was eating away at her skin. She knew she was being a stubborn-ass, refusing to go inside. So, naturally, she stayed planted.

That was just how it went. One pig-headed decision after another.

Nothing left for me here.

Want to live somewhere else once in my life.

Think I can make a home here.

And she had: in a crumbling bed, stuffy classrooms, and against the narrow chest of someone she loved, in a way she had never loved before.

Home. A home, but not... home.

As the answer to a prayer, a deer came out of the underbrush, a couple yards ahead.

It was a doe, wide-eyed and shaking from the cold. It turned to Petra and froze. She stayed stone-still, eyes wide in turn.

They regarded each other, both trembling. On its withers, Petra saw the fur was slightly creased from where she'd laid down. She smiled and her teeth stopped chattering.

She hadn't seen a deer in over a year. A herd lived right beneath the swollen belly of home's hill.

Home, she stands beneath blue sky, and right by the cherry blossom tree, still, so as not to break the delicate sacredness of a deer's gaze. Her sneakers press soft against the earth, a hug, and her traveled feet, which

have a thin thread that weaves right up her chest to the place the soul is, vow with tender mouth: I'm leaving.

There was a thunderous snap from behind, and with the rustle of familiar footfalls, the deer shivered one last time and bolted away into the dark.

Petra sighed. Giovanni crouched next to her. He sighed, too, and at the end it snagged and tore.

Petra tilted her head back, biting her cheek. As her eyes had adjusted, she could just make out the faint glow of the moon, held by the bow of gnarled limbs above.

“The clouds cleared up.”

Nothing. So she waited.

Giovanni shifted. “About time.” Another pause. “I told you, spring’s on its way.”

“Mmm.”

Petra thought of their first conversation. They waited at the same bus stop, on the heels of the first clear sky she’d seen all winter.

“It was nice we got some actual sun today. The sunset today was purple. I’ve seen it be orange and red, but never purple. It always seems to skip that. I haven’t seen that shade until today.”

“I bet it was purple,” he told her, “It’s been purple. We just didn’t notice it. People don’t notice a lot of things in front of them.”

In a way, he’d always known.

She faced him. Those new-moon eyes were glued ahead. Her foot shifted, tugging on that link, and her chest ached. “Do you remember when I called you over the summer?”

One eye crinkled. “Sure. During your road trip, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Which time?”

“The first.” She tilted her cheek onto her knee. “Do you know where I called you from?”

He finally met her eye. After a couple breaths, something fell away in his features. His head shook, eyes fond.

Her own mouth curved up. “It was from a payphone. A *payphone*. I never knew those still existed. And...” She squeezed her coat, hands feeble.

“And there were these huge stretches of green... California’s the most populous state, but gosh, we have so much open space. I never knew that, either. And in New Mexico... I always thought that was just arid land and desert, but there are hills. When I was on the phone with you, I took off my shoes and socks, and there was so much grass, the earth felt bouncy.”

By the call, she had known.

“I asked you if you were happy,” Giovanni whispered. His voice was so soft he might’ve just been moving his lips, and her brain was filling in known spaces. “You told me you were happy.”

“I was! I am. I love my life here. There’s so much to love about it.” Her voice dropped, too. She couldn’t lift her face, so she leaned her shoulder against his. “I just don’t think it’s where I belong.”

He took a deep breath, in and out, and she swayed with the movement. He dropped his cheek against her head. The thing in her chest grew feathers, and lifted.

“I don’t think I believe in belonging somewhere at all.” She continued, delicately, not to break what was already cracking, but

could never shatter. “‘Belonging somewhere’ implies there’s a place you’re meant to be. Like a place that’s perfect for you, all its edges molded to fit you. But people are always changing. And so are places. I mean, how often do they really line up? I do believe places can complement where someone is in their life at a certain time, and maybe for a long time, if they’re lucky, but... the world moves too much for things to be meant for each other.”

She said this to the trees, and Giovanni listened to the water in the distance for some advice.

“Well, I’m not too sure if I believe in belonging somewhere, either,” he said. Petra looked at him, saw the gears turning.

“You don’t?” She grinned. “*Really*. You, Mr. ‘Everything Happens for a Reason?’”

The corner of his mouth quirked up. A small victory.

“I mean... I think it’s more about finding somewhere that makes you happy. If you find somewhere you feel safe, where you have a lot of people that care for you and a lot of things you enjoy doing... I just think, why not stay? Why not make that home?”

“So, you’re saying it’s a choice?” Giovanni nodded, the smile still there. He talked into the dark, slow and careful: “And... if you have somewhere you’re happier..?”

“I do.” Petra whispered.

“... you should go back. It’s the right thing to do. And I understand.” He turned to her at last, eyes swimming.

Somehow, Petra’s numb hand found his, and though she could barely feel it, there was a message in that pulse, beating to the rhythm of: *Love you. Love you. Love you.*

Her eyes burned, and she shook her head. “I’m just greedy, love.”

“You’re not greedy. If it—if it doesn’t work, it doesn’t. I just thought it did.”

“It did. It always will, in a way.” A pause. “Would you ever leave Montréal?”

“...I don’t know. I’m happy here.”

“Cause it’s home. It’s where you belong. Where you choose to be.”

“Yeah. This isn’t where you belong, though, is it? It’s not where you choose to be.”

“Doesn’t look like it... no. I’ll write to you. You’ll write to me. We can stay connected. If you want to, of course. I also understand if you hate my guts. I’ll visit you, you can visit me. It’s just not gonna be the same. I think we both know that.”

“I don’t think I could ever hate you.”

“Even breaking your heart?”

“Nope. ‘Cause you’re... you.”

“Giovanni... if it really is that bad... if you *ask* me, I’ll stay.”

“Oh, I’d never ask you that. You know that, you foul, perfect fucking genius.” She had. That’s why she offered.

“You could make it easier. You could be more of an asshole.”

“Yeah, well, sorry to disappoint.”

“You didn’t. You aren’t. You never, ever have. If anything, you’ve dazzled.”

He snorted. “*Dazzled?*” Then his face broke open and he pulled her into a hug.

They tugged each other to numb legs, shuffling back to the bus

stop. They waited leaning together, ice-fingers massaging hands and ears and cheeks.

Petra regarded the overhang she'd stood under thousands of times. How she smiled at first, thrilled with public transport, before some classmate she didn't know the name of yet sauntered over to complain about how late the bus was.

She got the sense that what she'd always been waiting for had never shown up. Wouldn't ever show up. Because it was waiting, too.

As if the moon had risen directly behind them, they were bathed in a white glow.

On the bus, they wedged themselves into the same seat, which they'd never done before, legs tangled up, massaging blood flow back into each other's hands.

Quiet.

"Do you have a ride to the airport?"

"Well, I was gonna take the bus."

One started smiling, so the other did, too.

"Let me drive you."

"Okay." She held tight. "It's okay."

Outside, the last of the clouds burnt away, and the moon and stars made even the darkest parts of the night glow.

SALMA GALAL



Soirée sans voix, JC Alfier

Yours faithfully,

Kayaking in a Thunderstorm

It came up quick,
and we fast-paddled
through gusts, water
washing our feet.

I thought of people
touched by lightning
trees growing on their backs
new life seeded within,
if they make it.

I thought of fish
killed by lightning
floating to the surface,
and wondered how many.
Not the whole pond's worth,
but within 5 feet of me, 10?

I thought of the unlikelihood
of being hit by lightning,
how it's a marker of distinction,
a lottery-winner, struck twice—
what are the chances.

When we pulled the boats
up onto land, soaked,
we laughed in breezy relief.
The shore's solid safety.
But I felt something like
disappointment.

SARA EDDY

In My Partner's Body: Inside the Mind of a Substack Writer

by Sophie Gallaher

I'm sorry I love you forgive me

Is there a way to make them stop speaking in first-person narrative? What if I tell them? That their art is bad and no one cares. Would that be a lie? I suppose.

Let me show you.

Last year, I wrote (*no, I emailed, but let me lie, for effect*) a Toronto novelist. Torontonian novelist. He had webbed hands, but his feet worked fine. Not sure how he really wrote me the letter now that I think of it. Must have been speech-to-text. Or he had a scribe.

My dad had a scribe for his Honours Philosophy and Literature BA. They wouldn't let him write his own exams because the professors couldn't read his handwriting. It was too scrawly, like a widow spider's web when it eats its Toyboy. He would speak so fast that they got him a little turtle to hold, which helped.

Oops, I've already let myself be carried away by the sea of my own words.

Back to the novelist. He was oddly serious for a satirist and kind in a way that made me think he was misogynistic. I had written an essay about noise. He was mildly helpful, and on my part, maybe I was too nice (I was told that this past summer by an ex's new girlfriend; she claims it's why he left me). So, I think he felt bad about saying the paper was shit and instead resorted to a sentence or two about how good it feels to have someone read your work in depth. I guess I did

choose to. But I also had to get an A, or they'd kick me out of my program, and my ego would deflate like a needle hitting a pink balloon.

Oh, and by the way, isn't the world a really fucked up place? All of that death and famine and stuff. Don't worry, we only have control over our own lives. So, let me keep writing.

Is it too serious? Oh shit, I need a joke.

I used to like to tell people my dad is an Orthodox priest to see their eyes light up with fear. Not for long. Catholicism's coming back in style. It must be the apocalyptic stuff. It works well alongside the war and the way the planet's about to explode. Turning and turning etc. *Not that I pay attention.* I like church because of the food. Eucharist is actually really tasty, you know? We don't call it that, but I wanted to adapt to the culture. We say communion.

My best friend and I used to count our money baskets after the collection. Whoever won would get the bigger piece of prosphora. If I was a Russian doll, I think I'd be the second to smallest. I'd like to be the heart and cuddle up inside like a joey. My mum said she wished she had a pouch to carry us all in.

I probably should title this so it brings all these ideas together.

Something to do with flesh, because of the bit about Jesus and sex and also the idea of childbirth and stuff. It's kinda gross, don't you think? Well, no, I don't think so. I watched videos on our old Mac of mothers giving birth because it's a natural thing, you know. I have a lot of friends who are scared to have a baby, like physically speaking. I'm scared because my body isn't elastic. I think I'm quite a shallow person.

Oh, that novelist, *fucks sake I'm bad at this.* Well, he said he liked drone stuff. That shit that pulses through your body like a helicopter

wing does. But it's from a speaker, so it's not a plane or anything. Bukowski once said that planes are like the souls of minotaurs. Or maybe centaurs. Something horse-like. I had a best friend once who liked Bukowski. The first edition of the lit magazine I write for said he was an underground writer in 2008. I'll research that when I'm working at that pizza shop. Gonna have to lie about speaking French.

My professor, the one who liked my noise paper, hated it when poets used "oh." He thought it was a lazy filler. But the writer that he selected for some local prize and included in our course used it and she was a real poet, like a proper one. Apparently, there aren't many of those around now.

I know a lot of really good chefs. But it's like a secret talent they pluck out after you've chatted with them at parties for a few months. Suddenly, you're sitting in a dingy man's apartment, which has paintings of flowers on the walls and a whiteboard with a Venn diagram of girls they're seeing (there was a section for nice ass and also traditionalism). Yeah, so you're sitting at a little glass table, and the chef guy, he puts down some plates, and it's all stuff with like strawberry purée and balsamic vinegar, and then there's another dish full of some sort of ribbed meat and it's so fucking good. And there's a gay vicar next to you in a vest and dress shirt, while the dude across from him is saying slavery could be considered good labour. Damn. Such philosophy. Such talent. It reminds me of that scene in *Fathers and Sons*, no Children, when they have that party and the guy has a lamp on his head and Basarov is talking about dissecting a woman. Maybe I'm confused. But the salad is amazing, and, oh (*there I go again*), it's all infused with weed. It's legal here, so it's okay—not an addiction until it

makes for good creative non-fiction.

I once slept with a guy who asked me if I knew any good places to get “food bud.” Genuinely had to urban dictionary it. Then told him that the barber shop in town is meant to be a front. He’d already got his hair cut.

If my best friend found out I wrote about her in one of these, she’d be pissed off. She says she feels like a spectacle. I’m sorry I love you forgive me.

That noise professor, he always talks about the ethics of fiction. How real people write about real people and then lie and say it’s a coincidence. I’ve started thinking that I lack talent cus I just steal people’s stories. I might say that here, though, and then I’ll keep going. I’ll write an article about a girl I met with these crazy eyes or a firefighter I made out with once at the bar and how every time I hear a fire truck here, I think Tony will appear (*his name was more Québécois in real life, actually I’d probably include that*). Do I need to stop stealing people’s stories? Or is it okay because I throw in some exaggeration and quote Foucault?

I got a poem published. It’s not out yet. It’s a shitty website. I realised I called my friend an alcoholic. Well, I implied it. And then I wrote some weird shit about having dinner in our heads, and I’m worried he’s gonna think I’m in love with him. He’s a poet too, and we met because he came to the store a lot. Last time I was home, we went for a drink at a pub, the same one my ex-boyfriend brought me to after he dumped me and I cried the whole time and ate a single fry and then he sat there like stone and took a menu to bring back to his flatmates later, and we walked along the quay, passed the house his son lives in.

They don't speak anymore. His daughters are twins. He really misses his niece. I won't expand. I'm sorry I love you, it's true, but not like that, forgive me.

My therapist said—*yeah, you thought I wouldn't bring one up*—my therapist said that I'm too influenced by other people's opinions. When I was seven, my best friend asked me if I liked her favourite band, and I asked her what she thought and then said the same. One time, someone asked if I liked a made-up name for a chocolate bar, and I said I did. Most recently, a girl asked if I knew the poet she was writing her thesis on, and I nodded; now I know, but not because I asked. I'm not a liar; I just don't want to be seen like I don't have a phone or a computer or a car or a TV. We're not poor, my parents are just weird. I think they're enlightened. In some aspects. Now I think I'm plenty cool, or I did, before I came here.

My roommate's boyfriend has really good lungs. He doesn't breathe in the air of other people's minds. If I say this is satire, will it empty me of sin? Leave me a vessel of my own self.

I don't want to upset people but I can't seem to help hungering for a gravestone that gets visited for at least a few hundred years. My mother says you take yourself with you everywhere. So I can't just pack up and move away to Thailand, I guess.

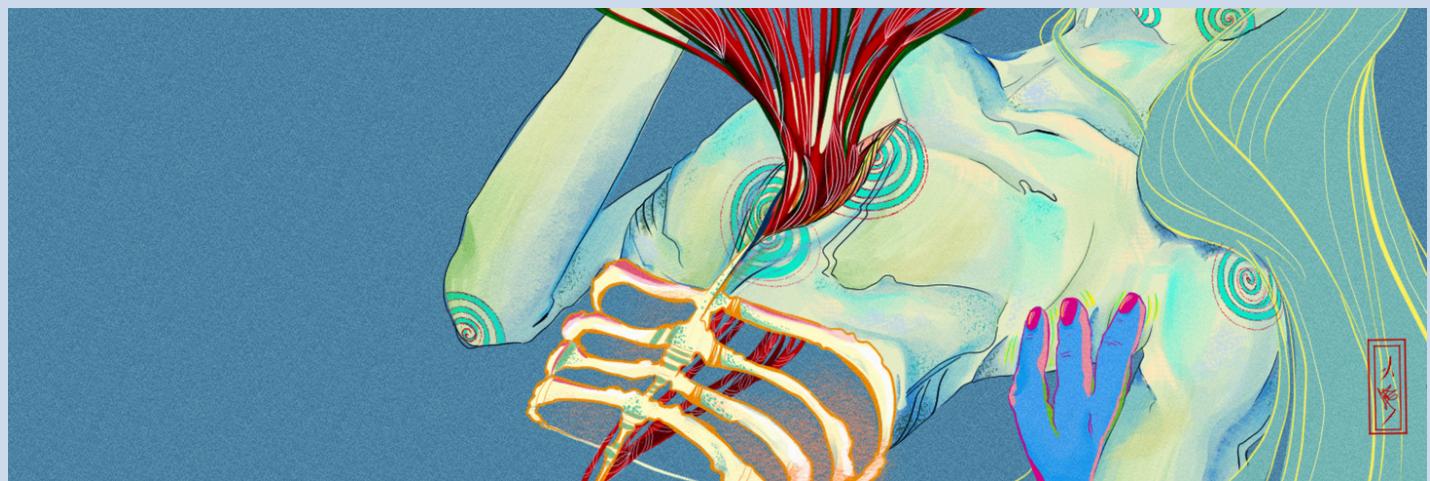
Editing would make this better, but I'm not gonna. I'm in my Virginia Woolf phase. Let me go read about Yeats and Pound and how he ate tulips at the dinner table. *You have to know the rules to break them.*

I had an idea for the first time in ages. A story about being stuck in my partner's body. Not physically. Well, not literally. But, so I'm, like,

in his mind. But I can feel what it is to be him. Like, feel his thoughts and his reactions to stuff. Like if a bird flew past, would I notice it the same way? Or if I saw myself, would I feel in love? I think I would. Because he said, if he was in my body, that is, not in a sexual manner, he'd have a relaxing day burrowed under layers of wool spreads, drink a nice hot chocolate, and tuck me into bed. *Oh, how lucky I am.*

Probably makes my writing worse.

SOPHIE GALLAHER



Disengaging, Krista Smylie

Naked in the Bath

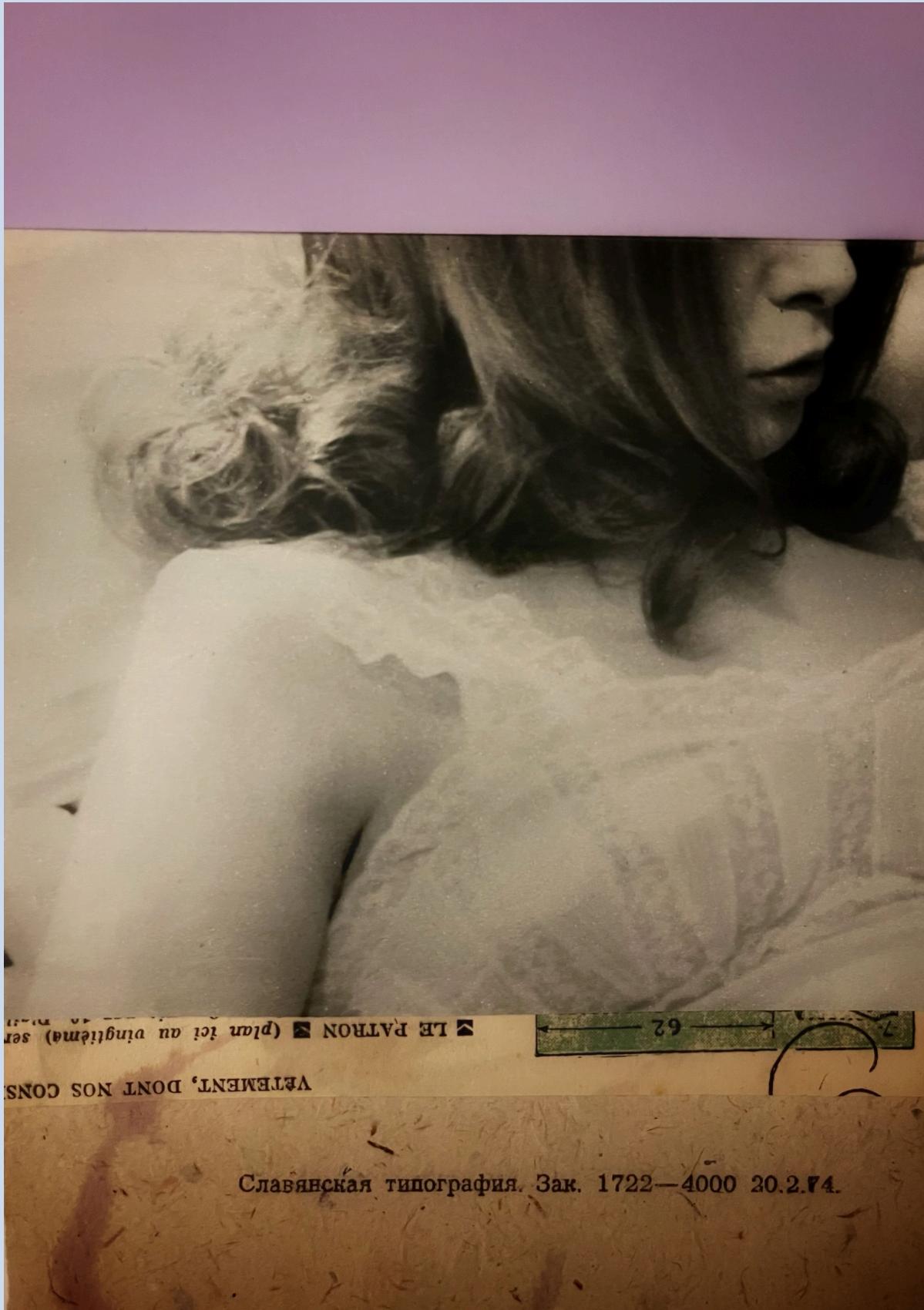
I can feel you down lower
when my fingers move a little slower
because I know how much you like
to take your time
and darling, so do I. I like to tip
my head back
in the bath. I like to curl my toes
around the edge. I like savoring
my sweet slow burn. I wonder
if you feel it too: the rhythm
of my fingers splashing, the squeeze
of my sacral. The water is warm
and my hair drips wet. I am alive,
still blushing, still yearning, still twisting
over a tease, so I celebrate it. I tremble
over the thought of you. I trip and tremble
over bad memories too. I reach
towards the trauma stored
inside my body. I stroke it
and kiss it softly. I shun
no part of myself. In the bath, I am naked
and I take this seriously. Naked
means naked. I want to be clean

and dirty all at once, and so I am. I shampoo
my hair and soak. I trace soft circles
across my thighs and praise myself, the way
you would. I say thank you to myself,
for the praise, for the touch, for the bath. I rinse
in cold water, then dry myself off, towel
hugging me close.

SUNNY HILL

pinene

under cutout stars, a body falls asleep one appendage at a time; first, its feet lose their will to transport, toe by toe. basil bathes the body in its vegetal earth-oils. next, rosemary is wrapped around wrists, ankles, throat; the float of brain losing track of limbs floods from fingertips inward. once it reaches its destination, pine boughs cradle a heart which races in perpetuity—its aromatics remind of christmas tree season and splinters from plywood, but still, there is something in the needles that quiets the boom of over active ventricles; still something to ground.



Славянская типография. Зак. 1722—4000 20.2.74.

Jeune femme, sois jolie, JC Alfier

November

by Catherine Austen

“They let me go,” Ethan says when I open the door. He’s barely recognizable but for his eyes, pale blue and heavy-lidded, almost bulging from their sockets. He wears a garbage bag with holes for his head and arms. The sleeves of his sweatshirt are soaked through. “I knew you’d still be here. Can I come in? I’d love a glass of wine.”

I back away without thinking and he walks over the threshold and takes off his shoes. His feet are bare. No socks in November. I figure he’s run away. I close the door behind him. “You’re too young for wine,” I say as he removes his makeshift poncho.

“I’m almost eighteen.” He pulls me into a hug.

His body is cold and musty and shockingly large. My memory holds him at age eleven, crying in his backyard, wet with blood but not this wet. His hair soaks the side of my face and I recoil. “I’ll get you a towel.”

There’s a puddle on the foyer floor when I return. I hand him one towel and throw the other down.

“It’s been so long since I’ve seen you,” he says.

I keep my eyes lowered, shoving the towel around with one foot. “They said I shouldn’t visit.” That was true at first. “But I’ve stayed informed.” I look up and fake a smile.

He runs a hand over his sopping hair. “I knew you’d still be here,” he repeats.

“I’m locked into the mortgage.” I know, even as I’m saying it, how stupid it sounds, but it’s always on my mind, how I can’t afford to live

anywhere else now. My parents helped me buy the house a few years before Covid. A duplex. A steal. The only problem was the neighbours: the timid woman and needy child, the creepy dad who'd drop by drunk, the cops who'd haul him away, the fear that their violence might spill over the fence.

"Can we have some wine now?" Ethan asks.

"I guess?" I lead him into the kitchen and open the fridge.

He stands perfectly straight with his back grazing the wall, hands clasped in front of him. "For days I've thought about coming here and having a glass of wine with you," he says loudly, as though he practiced it. "I wanted to see you because I'm getting better and you were always so close to my mother."

There's a bottle of Prosecco I was saving for something special. I pull it out. "Actually, I didn't know your mother very well."

"She said I could trust you in an emergency. You were her friend."

"I liked her, for sure, but she was a lot older than me." I set the wine on the counter and look for glasses in all the wrong cupboards.

He shrinks a little. His hands fall apart. "I always thought it was you who was close to my mother."

"Not really."

"Yes, it was you! She took me to your house when she was crying. I remember that. You cried, too, and you patted her back. I know that's true." He nods his head repeatedly.

I don't see the point of explaining that his mother would have gone to any woman who lived next door that night, and that any woman would have held her and cried.

"You were very close." He smiles. His eyes blaze. "You brought her

tomatoes. You let me help.”

I smile a little, too, as I set down stemless glasses. “I forgot about that. You loved gardening.” I look him in the eye as I ask, “Do you work in the garden at your treatment centre?”

“You gave the first tomatoes to my mother. And she gave you a bottle of wine.”

“Okay, yeah. I remember that.”

“You were very close.”

I look away, toward my phone on the table. It’s not late. It just feels that way because of the weather.

Ethan watches me pour the wine.

“It’s bubbly. Sorry. It’s all I have.”

He holds out his hand and smiles shyly. “You let me play in your yard. With a birdie.”

I laugh, one sharp bark. “Badminton. Yeah. You were pretty good.”

He holds his glass in both hands. “You always let me help in your garden.”

His fingernails are filthy. The towel slides off his shoulders and he doesn’t seem to notice. “Did they really let you go?” I ask.

“I have a question.” His voice accelerates. He stares at me and speaks so fast I can barely follow. “If you loved someone and they died, and you met their twin, their identical twin, I think you would love the twin too, just automatically, don’t you think?”

“Maybe?”

He nods. “So, if you met someone like that, and you loved them, would that be betrayal or loyalty?” I pause so long that he repeats, “If

you loved someone and they died and you loved someone else just like them, would that be right or wrong?”

“I don’t think it would be wrong but—”

“Me neither.” He smiles happily.

“You know I’m not your mother, right, Ethan? I’m not like your mother.”

“I didn’t say that! That’s not my question anyway.” He looks at the bottle on the counter, at the computer on the table, the light fixture in the ceiling. “You’re good, though,” he says. “My mother was good.”

I step back, nodding. “She was, yes. A lovely person. And she loved you very much.”

“She killed herself,” he whispers. “It was a murder-suicide.”

“No!” I know I should be careful, but the word erupts before I think it through. “I’m so sorry, Ethan, but no, your father killed your mother.”

“Oh, I know that,” he says softly, almost casually. “I remember him. He wasn’t a good person.”

I nod and take a sip of wine—but just a sip, because I’m going to have to drive this kid home. Not next door, thank god, but to his new home. He belongs in someone’s care.

“And you killed him,” he says with a smile.

I spill the wine down my chin in surprise. “No! God, no. He killed himself. The same night.” I wipe my face with my bare arm and set my glass on the table. My laptop lies sleeping beside it. “Do you need to sit down?”

He slumps against the wall, staring into me. “But I remember you. You were there.”

“I found you,” I explain. “I came over and found you and took you out to the yard.”

“Oh. Okay. I remember now. You were bringing tomatoes.”

“No. I heard the shots.”

“Oh.” He nods several times. “I thought it was you who killed him. Afterwards.”

“No.”

“You used to play with me, though,” he says, like a challenge.

“Yes. We were friends.” I pick up my phone and add, “I think we should call your doctor.”

“You were friends with my mother.”

“Yes,” I say. “She was lovely.”

He holds up the wine and smiles.

It’s sad, of course it’s sad, but we’re not responsible for other people’s illusions of who we are.

“Is this the wine she gave you?” he asks.

I nod as I dial. “It is. Yes.” And I think: *There was something odd about him even at eleven.*

“It’s good,” he says.

“It is.”

I turn my back on Ethan as I arrange for him to be collected. I stare at his reflection in the window, barely recognizable but for his eyes. Outside in the darkness, my garden is covered in fallen leaves. The temperature is dropping and soon the rain will turn to snow.

CATHERINE AUSTEN

Choking in the Walk-in Fridge

by M.F. Sutherland

The blue-rare scrap of bavette steak slides down my throat the wrong way and I'm choking pre-service, plate with a spiral of portioned butter patties and twigs of thyme in one hand, my other grasping at tubs of prepped sauces, caramelized onions, and bar mix along the racks of the walk-in fridge which, I believe for a moment, will tragically be my place of death.

Back-of-house—tongs in hand, calling for hands—will find me, splayed and purpled on the metal-grooved, slightly sticky floor next to kegs of IPA and buckets of mayonnaise. The person who discovers me will chain smoke for the next week, eventually quit, and go back to school for a trade where the chances of finding a bartender asphyxiated on the steakhouse fridge floor will be minimal.

I don't want to be buried in this city in motion, something glib like "Good Writer" on my gravestone, perpetually trapped in this place because I was too busy writing everything but a witnessed will, and I don't want to haunt this restaurant's fridge, forever witnessing the movement of rushes and micro-dramas of the humans that come here to eat and work, with their complaints and cakes, kisses and spills.

My becalmed, macabre meditations come to an end as the chunk of meat mercifully continues its migration down my gullet, and I breathe and heave amongst the racks of eggs and marinades, blinking under the

chilled fluorescents.

“HANDS, PLEASE!”

The pass continues calling.

M.F. SUTHERLAND

6 Years Out

There's a gable-line stain on the roof,
where moss clings and leaves gather.
I'll have to deal with that, I think,
but a year goes by, and another. One child
begins transition, the other
takes up climbing. I get promoted,

I dig a new flower bed. Once in a while
I notice that stain and remember to worry
in my bloodstream, where lymphatic twinges live,
and lumps. I get a new used car.
Take out the trash. The stain is still there.
I start tapping the sugar maples.

I cook elaborate meals to last all week.
My doctor retires, the new one is distracted.
The stain persists. The younger child
is a level 6 climber, now, and the older
has settled into his new body
and happy life. Finally I find a guy

to look at the roof. He says it's nothing,
just a moss stain, treat it gently
with soap or ignore it, no difference.

SARA EDDY



Bouquet, Kaya Davies

Sleep

Driving while sleeping
or sleeping while driving.

I watched those hungry commuters contend for the shortcut
behind an ambulance.

Passed a sign that read
adapt to changing road conditions.

Despite the highway signs—

Exit 170 Route 1 Hope

Sortie 73 Christophe-Colomb

Canso Causeway

—there has been no indication
as to where I've been going.

Every bridge crossed led to another.

I filed every dream in the flakes of
the snowglobe on the dash.

All of them posed the pointless question
Of “what if?”

I know now
they were only ever destinations
summing up twenty years
in a log book or two.

And what did you learn?

Mostly I just want to sleep in a warm bed.

Mostly I just want a cool glass of water
for when I wake.

Things My Mother Gave Me

by Erin Vosters

One morning after losing a tooth, I awoke to find the baby powder on my bedroom floor intact. There was a loonie under my pillow and the tooth was gone, but the tiny footprints that the tooth fairy usually left behind were missing.

I went downstairs. My mom was in the living room, in her spot, the one beside the phone.

“Hi, honey. How did you sleep?”

She must have said something like that. She called everyone ‘honey’ or ‘sweetie’ or ‘sweetheart.’ She would use ‘rascal’ if she wanted to pretend that we were being naughty. If we really needed scolding, she’d call us by our first and middle names. *Erin Marie, Megan Helene, Breda Louise*. Then again, she also used those out of fondness.

“Good,” I might have said. “Mommy, there are no footprints. How did the tooth fairy get my tooth?”

Did I go up to where she was sitting on the couch? Were we in the kitchen? Was it breakfast time, or had she already gone to work when I got out of bed? Was it later in the day? Did I tell my dad first, or one of my sisters? Was it snowing or sunny or spring or fall? My memory hasn’t kept those details. I reconstruct it after the fact. It has to be her I talk to first, then, even if it wasn’t, because this story is about her.

She probably hemmed and hawed and made something up. I don’t know. I remember that I thought about it afterward. The missing footprints.

When did they start that? They must have done it all along, from

the first time I lost a tooth. They would sprinkle a six-inch strip of baby powder on the bedroom floor, in the door frame.

I picture my smaller self, sitting up in bed, watching,

“Now you can see her footprints in the morning!”

It felt very sneaky, almost transgressive. Making the tooth fairy reveal herself to us.

They would wait until we were sleeping, and they would come in with the loonie, switch it out for the tooth under the pillow. They would use their fingertips to make tiny fairy footprints in the powder at the door: one set going in, another going out.

Maybe they were tired that night. Maybe they'd had an argument, as Damian and I sometimes do after the kids go to bed. Maybe they'd had a much-needed date night. Whoever switched out the tooth for the loonie had forgotten to make footprints.

I thought about it often until I lost my next tooth. My parents went through the usual routine that night. I got in my pyjamas, put the tooth under my pillow, and watched my mom tap the white plastic bottle against her palm, making it snow on my bedroom floor.

*

I think a lot about all the things that my mother went through, to arrive at a stable adulthood. To become the kind of mother she was. Her parents both drank. Her mother spent several years mired in severe addiction, compounded by depression, before she died suddenly when my mom was twelve years old. By then, my grandfather had taken the kids and moved to a new city—the city that became my beloved home—to keep them safe from their mother.

My mom told me once that this was why she cared so much

about keeping us all together. We lived a few blocks away from three of her four siblings, and we were close with our cousins. She never had that kind of closeness with extended family. She knew what it meant, to lose those broader connections. It rankled her when my sisters and I fought, even though we knew she'd had plenty of childhood friction with her own sisters.

"You girls need to take care of each other," she said. "You're going to need each other someday."

When I was sixteen, I worked at a family friend's shop over the holidays. I was training for an upcoming water polo camp, spending hours in the pool most days. I'd go to Judy's boutique shop in Osborne Village for a few hours each afternoon. I felt tired and put-upon, all wrapped up in the largeness of my self-regard, and I wished I could just lounge and relax the way I always had during previous school breaks.

On Christmas Eve, my mom came to the shop to pick me up after a shift. I was worn out by the constant stream of customers. My mom chatted with Judy and another woman, a friend of hers, who was in to pick up some last-minute gifts. She had a lot of friends. I stood beside her, impatient, until we finally left the shop.

It was just past five and it was dark outside. It was cold the way it almost always is at Christmas in Winnipeg, the kind of cold that pulls every drop of water from your skin and the air and leaves the world crystalline and glittering. From the car, I could see condensation inside the shop windows, frost outside, holding the light from the incandescent bulbs and making them into flames.

"Brr!" My mom got into the driver's seat and started the car, reaching out toward the vents to wait for the warm air. She shivered,

exaggerated, grinning, laughing.

I was silent.

“How was your day?” She looked over at me, still smiling.

“Fine.” I was quiet for a minute, looking in at the bustling store. I was tired; impatient; full of self-pity. I didn’t think before I said it.

“This is the worst Christmas ever.”

My mom was quiet for a moment. Even so, I could feel it coming. We called it her teacher voice, the one she used when we were really being jerks. It was more than just her voice, though. Her face would go still. Her eyes would sharpen, and she would barely blink.

I looked at her and looked away. Teacher voice, incoming.

“You have no idea what a bad Christmas would be like,” she said. Her voice was quiet. I could feel it coming off her. Rage, hot and controlled. “You have no idea, and I hope you never know.”

I didn’t look at her. I opened my eyes wide to try to keep from crying, because crying right then would be so stupid.

She’d never talked about bad Christmases. She never talked about any of it—her mom’s bad years—except obliquely.

I didn’t try to conjure those bad years up just then. I was still thinking about myself.

She scoffed, shifted the car into reverse. Backed up, shifted again, waited for a break in the traffic. Drove me out to Oma and Opa’s house —my dad’s parents, the ones my mom had taken on as her own after her father died when she was just twenty.

*

My mom loved to run. It was a habit she cultivated after she had heart surgery in her early thirties. She had a myxoma, a benign heart

tumour, in one of her atria. It was the size of a grapefruit, stretching out her heart's walls and distorting the valves. After it was removed, she saw a cardiologist regularly for the rest of her life. She probably would have needed more surgery somewhere down the line, if she had survived.

She ran half-marathons and coordinated a running club at each elementary school she taught at. She jogged with friends, alone, with us, with my dad. She would return aglow with sweat in the summer; dripping with frost from her own breath in the winter. When it was cold enough, she slicked her skin with Vaseline to keep it from freezing.

Her father was sober for three good years before he died. That's what my aunt tells me. That's why we made it out as well as we did, she says. Those three years were what saved us. Otherwise, who knows.

She doesn't have to specify the alternative. We both know what it is. My uncle, their eldest sibling, died by suicide in 2005 after decades struggling with his own alcoholism. Before that, he lost relationships, became estranged from his kids for long stretches, and was homeless at times.

My mom didn't have to get sober. We don't have to lean on a fragile three good years. She built us a beautiful life, from the start. She did so intentionally, peopling our world with others who would be there to love us in case something happened to her. We have a phalanx of other mothers, women who collectively work to fill the space she left behind.

After he got sober, their dad started running marathons. There's a photo somewhere of him standing with my mom and one of my aunts at the end of a race. It's soft in the way of photographs of the early eighties, the colours leaning into each other. His daughters have their

arms around him, and he's grinning broadly. Their edges are hard to define.

He died suddenly when my mom was just twenty years old. He was jogging at the side of the road when he was struck by a passing truck.

My mother was never hit by a truck while running.

"If you can't talk, you're running too fast," she said, and we bobbed along together, just barely faster than we'd walk.

I don't run now, because of some physical limitations. I never liked it much. I crave it, though, thinking about my mother and her turtle's pace, her toes tapping as she warmed up, her iron calves when she rode her bike. I want to jog slowly and remind myself to keep the pace. Slow enough that I can talk, but not so slow that I can sing. That, she told me, would be too slow.

*

I found the note from the tooth fairy—the one that had appeared the next time I'd lost a tooth—in a drawer in my old bedroom one day in early 2016. My mom had planned an Easter scavenger hunt for me and my sisters. I was twenty-nine at the time; my youngest sister was twenty-five. Even when we were grown, she wanted to make things magical for us.

The morning after that next lost tooth, twenty or so years earlier, there were footprints in the door frame. There was a loonie under my pillow. There was also this note:

Dear Erin,

I flew last time. Your teeth
are always perfect.

The tooth fairy

*

A few months after Easter in 2016, my parents separated in a way that was startling and traumatic for my mom. It was, she said, the biggest loss she had ever suffered. She was devastated.

In 2020, a few months into the pandemic, my mother died. She had a brain aneurysm that ruptured. She died of surgical complications.

She had just started to seem more like her old self. Things were still hard, but she had a sense of purpose. She helped get technology to low-income students in Winnipeg's North End so that they could attend classes. She jogged with her friends on the widest sidewalks in the city, social distancing. She went golfing with other parents from our old water polo team just days before she went into the hospital for the last time. She was feeling better that day; the terrible headache that had taken her to the emergency room twice already stepped back for a brief reprieve. After decades with my dad, she was trying to build something new for herself.

I gave birth to my twins in December of 2021. We'd told my mom, in January of 2020, that we were going to start trying in the summer. So, at least she knew, I thought, and she had a chance to dream about it.

I wish she could have had a new generation to make magic for.

*

The metaphor I reflexively reach for when I think about the life my mother made for us is that of a fortress, but that's wrong. What she gave us was an open field, fallow and fertile, the soil structure strong with years of deep roots. What she gave us was a place to put our hands in the earth so that we could plant what we wanted and watch it grow. Nurture it the way she nurtured her gorgeous life.

*

After my mom died, we found a small silver box in her dresser drawer. Inside it there were three small teeth, yellowed with the decades, still grisled at their roots where they'd come away inside our mouths.

ERIN VOSTERS



Pink Face, Lina Züchner

Wash Line

I'm hauling in the line
of pillowcase and sheets,
full after sailing sideways
on the wind all night,
scented with owl-call
and the lilac ghosting up
under my window.

I'm hauling in the nightdress
loosened by dancing
with absent lovers.

I'm paying out a lightened
line of pegs.

KRISTIN CAMITTA ZIMET

Untitled

I wake as purple fades—
this morning, winter turns to spring
through an openness in the air.

I keep my room dark, quiet.
I make it the inside of a church:
hands, knees, and a single object.
I'm not sure if I am praying;
I'm never sure what counts.

SASCHA MORGAN

CONTRIBUTORS

JC Alfier's (they/them) most recent book of poetry, *The Shadow Field*, was published by Louisiana Literature Press. Journal credits include *Faultline*, *New York Quarterly*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Penn Review*, *River Styx*, and *Vassar Review*. They are also a collage artist whose work is informed by Toshiko Okanoue, Francesca Woodman, Deborah Turbeville, and especially Katrien De Blauwer.

Catherine Austen writes books for children, short stories for adults, and reports for corporate clients. Her novels have won the Canadian Library Association's Young Adult Book Award and the Quebec Writers' Federation Prize for Children's Literature. Her stories have appeared in literary journals including *The Fiddlehead*, *The New Quarterly*, and *The Humber Literary Review*. She lives in Gatineau, Quebec.

Ella Bachrach is from northern British Columbia and now studies in Montreal. Her work can be found in *Crab Apple Literary*, *Aôthen*, and *Mai/son*.

Catherine Chen is an artist and designer based in Montreal. She's been making art since she can remember and has been working digitally for over four years now. As her art style has evolved throughout the years, the one thing that's stayed constant is that she creates what she sees. Many of her recent pieces include depictions of her day-to-day life with a bit of a whimsical twist. Catherine loves playing with color, texture, and has lately been exploring digital collages that mix organic and inorganic mediums. She hopes you like what you see!

Kaya Davies (b. 2002) is an artist who would like to keep learning new things forever. Her art practice takes many forms, including painting, graphic design, writing, and comics. Guided by her curiosity and her desire to understand what she does not, she seeks to create work that is sincere, evocative, and honest. Her inspirations are ever-evolving, but her love for the natural world and the people around her remains a grounding force in her work. She is located in Vancouver, BC, and Montreal, QC—for now.

CONTRIBUTORS

Sara Eddy's second full-length poetry collection, *How to Wash a Rabbit*, is forthcoming from Cornerstone Press. She is also author of *Ordinary Fissures* (2024), and two chapbooks: *Full Mouth* (2020), and *Tell the Bees* (2019). Her poems have appeared in many online and print journals, including *Threepenny Review*, *Raleigh Review*, *Sky Island*, and *Baltimore Review*, among others. She lives in Amherst, Massachusetts, in a house built by Emily Dickinson's cousin.

Salma Galal was born in California. She is a current undergraduate student at McGill University, where she double majors in Psychology and English Literature. Her favorite things to write are character studies and the nuances of multi-cultural interactions.

Sophie Gallaher is a Montreal-born, currently Montreal-based student who was raised in the UK. She hopes to have more time to work on her prose and poetry after graduation.

Sunny Hill (they/she/he/xe) is a queer disabled poet from New Jersey. They have been previously published in publications such as *Camp Hiawatha*, *redrosethorns* journal, and *Cosmic Daffodil Journal*. They read tarot cards and post poetry on Instagram @fromsunnyhill.

Dietrich Miller is a poet and musician based in Montréal. Through blue collar voices, his work explores themes of memory, loss, addiction and hope. Based in Montréal, Dietrich is also the lead of the band Foxtrot and a carpenter.

Sascha Morgan is trans; a woodworker, a musician, and a writer. They enjoy simplicity and finding beauty in raw feelings.

Pip Morrison is an unemployed man from British Columbia. He's usually something like a janitor or clerk—he was also, at one point, a guest lecturer at McGill University. You may find his work in *Stimulant Volume 2*.

CONTRIBUTORS

Julie Paul has recently moved to Montreal from Victoria, BC. She's published three books of short fiction and two poetry collections, most recently *Whiny Baby* (MQUP 2024). When she's not writing she works as a Registered Massage Therapist.

Anahi Pellathy is a second year Cultural Studies student at McGill University who grew up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and London, England. Her passion for cultural analysis and critique spans journalism, the arts, and social justice. She is deeply invested in all forms of writing as a means of investigating and interpreting the amorphous, fluid experience of living.

nat raum is the poet laureate of the void; their corporeal form lives in Baltimore. They're the author of *this book will not save you, random access memory, fruits of the valley*, and many others. Find them online at natraum.com or astral projecting inside a Royal Farms.

Krista Smylie is a Bachelor of Arts graduate with a love for all art mediums. As a first generation immigrant her art often reflects the identity crisis and guilt over the complexities of living. Using art as an outlet in hopes of connecting with others, Krista aims to bring light to sensitive topics with a gentle but clear approach. More of Krista's work can be found at xokxxo.carrd.co and commissions can be found at coneykisa.carrd.co.

M.F. Sutherland is a writer and editor living in Peterborough, Ontario. She enjoys honest conversation, finding moments of magic in the mundane, and has nothing but respect for the service industry. Sutherland has most recently been published in SQUID Literary & Arts Magazine. Follow her writing on Instagram at: @megs.dregs.

Erin Vosters is a midwife and aspiring writer from Winnipeg, Manitoba, Treaty 1 territory. They currently live in Shanghai, China. They have previously published poetry in the University of Winnipeg's literary journal, *Juice*, and most recently in *Poetry Lab Shanghai*'s online publication.

CONTRIBUTORS

Sabahat Ali Wani is a researcher, writer and artist from Kashmir. Currently, she is a Fellow in Ideas at Harrison Middleton University and also runs a small literary and cultural magazine, *Maaje Zevwe*.

Kristin Camitta Zimet is the author of *Take in My Arms the Dark*, a collection of poems; the co-author of *A Tender Time*, a nonfiction book about aging with grace; and the long-time editor of *The Sow's Ear Poetry Review*. Her poetry has been published in journals and anthologies in eight countries and performed in venues from concert hall to arboretum.

Lina Züchner is a Montréal-based artist and writer with a passion for all things quirked-up, whimsical, and bizarre. Her works are a portal into her mind palace, a space teeming with vibrant, playful characters, bold visuals, and an absurdity that demands to be externalized. Inspired by childhood, humor, neurodivergence, and the horrors and delights of daily life, she experiments across styles and media in attempts to capture ephemeral thoughts and experiences, access the Self, and engage with the world around her. More of Lina's work can be found @thumblife on Instagram.

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