# ARCHETYPE

A LITERARY JOURNAL

*Issue Four*

Christopher Sturdy
E.G. Shields
Court Ludwick
Mikaela Osler
David C.C. Bourgeois
Alexandra G. McKay
Kristin Camitta Zimet
Kasey Butcher Santana
Sam Mueller
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Spring 2024
Issue 04

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*Archetype* is published twice a year.

Costs per back issue (includes postage, shipping, and handling)
$32 Canada | $40 US | $50 International

Subscriptions (includes postage, shipping, and handling)
$47 Canada | $55 US | $65 International

See our website archetypemag.com or contact editor@archetypemag.com if you have any questions about subscriptions, purchasing, or shipping.

ISSN 2816-4334 (Print)
ISSN 2816-4342 (Online)

Printed in Canada by Copywell.
Original layout design by Mark Byk.

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"...to have pain is to have certainty; to hear that another person has pain is to have doubt."

—Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain*



How does one enjoy ageing? Such a natural, universal process has come to be regarded as a negative, something to be ignored, denied, or fought off instead of enjoyed. Young people in the city can't imagine life beyond thirty-five. The body wrinkles, the sunscreen lathered on, the botox injected, the moisturizer applied. The skin is stretched and adjusted, but the body continues to degrade. We can try all we can to keep the body healthy and vibrant, but the flesh sags, the joints ache, the movements slow, and everything we do takes a bit more time—becomes a bit harder to do. As much as we may fight time, the wheel keeps turning, the earth keeps spinning, and our body keeps the score.

The authors in this issue pay close attention to the body. While it can often be taken for granted, the body plays an important role in a person's life. Of course it does. We can easily forget what is right there. We move through our house. The body is there. We navigate our city. The body is there. We experience loneliness or alienation. The body is there.

*Bodies bodies bodies*. It was exciting to see this theme surface naturally as we accepted the pieces for this issue. It's true what they say: wherever you go, there you are. Daily life is a steady rhythm of familiar sounds and sensations. Sometimes, that rhythm is upended suddenly. We move on, but the body remembers. So many of these pieces, whether they meant it or not, made us return to the body. It stores every emotion and memory in every cell, tissue, and organ within it. It's all there, if only we'd take a moment to notice.

As always, we want to express our immense gratitude to our dedicated Archetype team and to our amazing authors. We're also incredibly grateful for the record-breaking number of submissions we received for this issue. It's been an incredible journey building this magazine and each step of the way continues to happily surprise us. And lastly, thank you, dear reader, for joining us on this journey. As we step back and reflect on this issue—reflect on the body and what makes one whole—we are left to appreciate what we have and what we've built.

—Ali Taha and Melissa Barrientos

*My Father's Spine*

**Court Ludwick**

They cut muscle from the bone. They tear away the flesh. They remove parts of the body that are broken and no longer alive. Skin is stretched. Skin is pulled apart. Organs are moved around. Sometimes, they never return to where they once were. They reach into the body. And they cut and tear and strip and burn the muscle, the flesh, the bone, the nerve, before putting it all back together again. The muscle remembers. The bone remembers. The body does too.

The spine remembers most of all. The spine remembers the nights when the neck fell asleep funny, the days when the back carried too much weight, the weeks when bones inside the body became slowly crushed, compressed, compacted, broken. My father's spine had nights like that, underwater, sleeping in a small submarine bed. My father's spine had days like that, standing too tall in a place where there wasn't any room to stand. My father's spine had weeks, months, years like that, slowly crushed, slowly broken in an underwater place that liked to break everything. My father's spine, cut and changed and made more broken before becoming more fixed, remembers it all.

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My sister is in medical school, so she told me how it would go. The first cut would be on the back, over one of the vertebrae. Black marker sketched onto flesh might guide the surgeon's hands, but it might not. The muscle and fat would need to be moved away, torn apart from bone and ligament, sinew and nerve. Cold metal clamps would split the back in two. And the bone would be white, under red blood and orange fat. A scalpel would remove the lamina, a kind of organic tissue. Then parts of the spine would be removed, milk bone taken from the body.

Our father would be placed in a bowl, a basin, a bag all sealed up. Outside of the body, our father was only medical waste. Outside of the body, the spine was only collagen and compacted mineral. Our father's stolen spine was only bone, already changing into dust. Those bones would be taken away, and gloved hands would replace stolen father with cold metal and stranger-hip. The gloved hands would screw in rods where calcified, shattered disk used to be. The gloved hands would soak up the blood and sew up the muscle and stitch up the skin.

Hours later, the needles would be taken out, the anesthesiologist's timecard would be punched, and the penny-sized holes wouldn't close up for days. Hours later, the father-pieces would be long gone, crammed into red-plastic sealed-shut bags, and incinerated. Alongside a grandmother's liver tumor and a child's severed leg, the father-pieces would be made into ash. The bone would become dust much too soon. And on a windy day in the middle of March, cars on I-35 would smell burning plastic, pieces of our father melting in blue flame.

Once the gloved hands stitched up our father's back, the body would begin to heal. The blood would clot, and the nerves would kiss. His skin would slowly rejoin, puckered and mad. But there would always be a scar. My sister told me it would fade, but it would never go away. I tried to picture it, in those terms, bloody and red and raw, as my sister spoke. I couldn't.

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*"For a second, we were back in easy childhoods, before any hard falls. He said goodbye like he meant it. He said goodbye like it was something we had to hold onto—hold onto tight—before saying it back or before letting it go."*

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When I was younger, I used to go through my father's closet. I don't know what I expected to find then, but I do know what was always there. His old Navy uniforms, hanging straight, sullen in their neat rows. The white one he wore to marry our mother, next to the faded blues. Medals stitched onto the fabric. Patches of color I had no meanings for.

I used to ask what they meant. But he would never really answer.

"Where I've been," he'd say. "What I've done. Who I used to be."

I'd nod, not really knowing what that meant either. Sometimes I'd pause or walk away. I had to be content with nothing, content with his frown.

But sometimes I'd try again.

"Where *have* you been?" I'd ask. "What have you done? Who did you used to be?"

"It's not important," he'd say. And then, if I hadn't already run off in the way children do, "I'll tell you when you're older."

---

Before they took him to the operating room, before they wheeled his bed away, there was no joy in his face. The thin gown he wore barely covered his shoulders as he rested on his stomach. The black marker drawn along his spine bled through its seams. The gown was closed with white string, and he said goodbye to us like he used to. He said goodbye to us like he was about to go underwater for months, instead of under anesthesia for hours.



For a second, we were back in early morning airports and liminal color. He stood tall and straight, and his curled, dark hair was cut down to the skin. Our mother still smiled then—our mother wasn't drunk and angry then—and we still held onto her legs and onto her skirts. For a second, we were back in easy childhoods, before any hard falls. He said goodbye like he meant it. He said goodbye like it was something we had to hold onto—hold onto tight—before saying it back or before letting it go.

---

There are things in hospitals that I've never heard or tasted or smelled anywhere else. Strange noises in a room full of strange people. You have never seen them before, and you will never see them again. Antiseptic and cold coffee and stale food. Unwrapped and half-sipped and never thrown away. Magazine pages flipped from a few chairs over. The pages are from years ago, and they are never really read. Automatic sliding doors and yells from outside. Automatic sliding doors, now shut, and those yells now from the halls. Everything is white or beige or gray or pale yellow. Everything is sterile and stinking of soap and sad people and death. When the yells begin and the automatic sliding doors open, close, my sister stops talking. It isn't our father's yells, our father's spine then, but she stops talking all the same.

My sister stops talking, and I stop listening. We stare at nothing. We stare at plastic wall and sterilized window. We stare at each other, unsmiling sisters with twin frowns. We stare at the grainy television, playing reruns of some shitty show. Until the automatic doors open again, and the yelling fades and completely stops, we stare at nothing. We stare at wall.

I think of hospitals. I think of submarines. I think of strange noises in a strange place, full of strange people. I think that submarines and hospitals must be sort of the same. I think that my father must be feeling sort of the same now, just as he did then. I tell my sister this. I ask her if she thinks these things too. She says that she tries not to think of it at all.

The same day, after surgery, we leave. Our father is half-asleep, high on pain medication, and a nurse helps him to the car, giving us instructions on how to take care of him for the few days he'd need help after. My sister is driving and talking again, about x-ray photographs and spine memories and submarine hollows. And I am daydreaming on the ride back to our childhood home. Red brick and grass now dead, we wouldn't hear yells. We wouldn't taste cherry licorice, medicine thick and hot. We wouldn't smell cold coffee and orange-scented floors, not anymore.

---

I walked through the front door, and nobody was there. Outside, it was spring, muted pinks and orange sky. But inside, the windows were closed, and it was

easy to see that my mother had been gone a long time. Cobwebs floated down around high-ceiling corners. My father couldn't reach them. Stained glasses sat untouched and unclean. Our father could barely walk.

Outside, my sister helped our father walk slowly—I could see them through back door slats—and I tried not to imagine metal inside of the body. I tried not to picture how the bone was taken from the flesh. I tried to forget shattered vertebrae and the harsh lines on an x-ray page. The images my sister talked of were bloody and red and haunting. The images my sister talked of were orange-scented and stank of automatic sliding doors and ugly yellow walls.

I tried not to think of my father going under—underwater then, under now. And I tried not to think of the spine with all that remembering, with all that memory. Instead, I tried to think of the weeks to come, the weeks where I would work and go to school online from my childhood home, the weeks where my sister would help clean up the cobwebs until our father could reach dusty corners again, the weeks where our father would heal, the weeks where we all might start to heal.

---

Days later, he walked through the front door. It wasn't raining then, but it could have been. How easy a memory can be changed. How quick it can be gone—how fast it can be made new. He carried grocery bags to the kitchen, and the limp that was there before was almost gone. I could almost imagine that it was never there.

I watched his body stand tall, taller than it used to—his spine changed and unbent. His smile was back then, and I thought about all the cobwebs that would soon be gone. I thought about all the glasses that would soon be washed, changed in their small way too.

"Are you okay?"

It's the only thing anyone could ask. It's the only thing anyone had asked for weeks, months.

"I'm fine."

My sister didn't look convinced.

"Are you sure?" I don't think I was either.

"I'll tell you when you're older."

---

Years ago, I asked him what it was like under the ocean. I asked him what it was like when he lived with only a few others aboard a submarine. I asked him what happened, down where it was dark and blue. I asked him what they spoke of, down where it was only cold and blank. I asked him what he felt when he first went down. I asked what he felt when he first came up. I asked him why he ever left, why he decided to never go back, why he decided to stay and go and allow his body to break easy like a child's, even though it would never heal like it might have when he actually was one.



I asked him these things as a child. Sometimes, my older sister listened. Sometimes, our mother listened too. Back then, I thought they knew everything—more than me, more than anyone. They never asked all the questions I did. They never asked anything. I thought they knew everything. But, they did listen. And now, looking back, I remember how they would lean in, move closer, hold their breaths, and wait for my father's slow reply.

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*"Now, I ask him if I am older. I ask him if I am old enough. He has a thousand stories. A million rememberings. He has a body that breaks much too easily, a spine that remembers it all."*

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Now, I ask him if I am older. I ask him if I am old *enough*. He has a thousand stories. A million rememberings. He has a body that breaks much too easily, a spine that remembers it all. I ask if I am older, and he says that I am. My sister asks if he wants to remember, if he wants to go back. She says my questions and his stories can wait if he doesn't.

But he says that he does. He says that doctors have taken pieces of him away. He says that he wants to answer all of my questions, give us all of his stories, before they take away any more.

---

*You know you're breathing. You're breathing air. You're feeling air go into your lungs, go out. You know you're breathing. You breathe in,then breathe out. But the moment you go down, the moment everyone and everything goes under, it feels like you've taken a big breath, a huge breath, and it sits there. You take a huge breath, and it sits there, trapped in your lungs.*

*You're underwater for thirty days, sixty days, ninety days and it's hard to exhale. You've been underwater for ninety days, and you know you're breathing. You know you've been breathing this whole time. You know because you're the person who makes sure everyone can breathe. You know because you're the one who makes sure everything works. You're the one who makes sure everyone can exhale. But still, it feels like you've taken a big breath, a huge breath, and you're holding it until you come back up, come back up from all that dark and all that blue. It feels like the pressure might make you explode.*

*You don't think about the sun until days after you've first gone under. You think light bulbs are fine. You think blue light and artificial stars will be*

*okay. You think and think and think—it's your job to think, it's your job to solve problems—but after you're under, after you've been under for weeks, you miss the sun. But suns aren't there. When you're that low, when you go underwater like that, when you go so deep where only inhuman eyes can see, the sun doesn't reach you. There are only light bulbs.*

*You don't think about the night sky until you first come up too. Down below, there are too many men and too many fake suns and not enough space for it all. Underwater, you know it's breakfast time when the cook gives you pancakes on your plate. You only know the stars are out when you're eating leftovers from lunch. When you first come up, all those breaths, all the pressure, all the time spent underwater in a strange place, in a strange world, collapses. And there are too many stars in the sky when before there was only dull metal ceiling holding out tons of ocean water and death.*

I tell him that humans aren't meant to hold a breath for so long. I tell him that humans aren't meant to be in the dark for so long. I tell him that humans aren't meant to look at dull ceilings when stars are in the sky. And I tell him that he didn't talk about missing me or my sister or our mother.

I tell him that I think hospitals and submarines are sort of the same. I tell him that he went under again, and I tell him that we were scared. I tell him that he's not in a submarine underwater anymore and he's not in charge of making sure everyone can breathe anymore but he is still making everything work and we're still here and we still need him to come back up, we still need him to help us make everything work. As I tell him these things, I am a young girl again. As I tell him these things, my sister and I are back in the airport—we are the same, except there is no mother to say everything will be okay. There is only our father, constant as always.

*"His hands press into healing scar tissue. And I think that bodies heal so easily. I think of all the other stuff, all the stuff that is so much harder to stitch up, and cover with a bandage."*

He doesn't answer for a long time. I have not asked any questions. He stretches out his legs. He flexes his feet. He rolls his neck to one side. Then the other. He massages his back, and his hands press into father-spine and stranger-hip. His hands press into healing scar tissue. And I think that bodies heal so easily. I think of all the other stuff, all the stuff that is so much harder to stitch up, and cover with a bandage.

I have not asked any questions, but he speaks.



*You don't think about that kind of stuff at all. Once you go down, you don't think about what you're leaving behind if you never come back up.*

*You don't think about your daughters, four and nine, waving goodbye. You don't think about your wife, leaving her all alone, leaving your best friend. You don't think about making sure everything works at home because you have to think about making sure everything works hundreds of feet down.*

*You signed up for this. You signed up for this when you were young and you may not like it all the time and you may have some regrets but you have always done the things you signed up for and you will do this too. You will do this, and you will try not to think of your wife, your daughters, four and nine. You will do this, and you will think of stars instead.*

Our father stops speaking. Our father, constant as always. I ask him if suns are easier to miss. My sister leans in. We are children. He says yes.

*Live Catch*

**Mikaela Osler**

Something was wrong with Christine Blasey Ford's voice. Maybe she sounded too young. She should've been in her early fifties; she'd been in high school in 1982. I did the math as she requested "some caffeine." Maybe it was the inflection, the valley-girl lilt. Maybe it was the inappropriately complex words, multisyllabic monstrosities like "indelible on the hippocampus."

I knew her voice wasn't the only problem with her Senate testimony, but I didn't know what to do with what she was saying. I wouldn't have anyone to help me process it for several days. I was two thousand miles into a thru-hike of the Continental Divide Trail (CDT), which runs from Canada to Mexico through the Rockies. As I listened to the confirmation hearing recap on the *New York Times*' "The Daily," I was hiking out of Lake City, Colorado, into the San Juan mountains. For 120 miles—four or five days—the trail would be more than eleven thousand feet above sea level. The few roads it crossed were unlikely to have traffic and bailing down a side trail would involve hiking ten or fifteen miles off course, an almost unthinkably inconvenient detour.

The San Juans were the crux of the CDT. Northbound hikers often arrived before the snow melted and postholed up to their hips for days. Southbound hikers like me raced to make it before the winter weather. I understood I would soon discover if I'd lost the race. It was Sunday, September 30, 2018, and precipitation was in the forecast.

As Christine spoke, I watched the sky. Yesterday, the clouds had been gauzy streaks. Today, they were round and lumpy, tiny but numerous. The breeze occasionally whipped into a cold, wet wind. For days, I'd been waking up to chunks of ice in my water bottle and a scrim of frost on my sleeping bag.

I thought of the women I lived with before the trail. One had an enormous poncho she made from a teddy-bear-print blanket. In my imagination, her poncho-clad arms reached far enough to encircle all of us. I could feel the fine yarn fringe, the crumbs in the big red couch cushions, my friends' squishy bellies. Pressed together, we'd share the vulnerability. We'd sit with the horror of Kavanaugh's attack, its arbitrariness. We would sit together. It would be okay.

No poncho hugs awaited me on the CDT, no big red couch. I was hiking into the San Juans with a group: Groucho, Huck, Hot Legs, Didjeridoo, Teddy

Bear, and Quadzilla. Years later, I learned that Groucho was nonbinary, but at the time I perceived all my companions as men—six men, and me.

A full senate vote on the confirmation was expected as early as Tuesday. By Tuesday, the weather was predicted to arrive. I left my headphones in as the credits finished; the muffled landscape seemed peaceful. Yellow autumn grass, a wrinkle of trail winding to the horizon. I passed an abandoned mine. A stream flowed from the mouth. I was low on water, but I didn't drink for fear it was contaminated.

———

You usually get your trail name at the beginning of your first hike. Hot Legs wore flame-print gaiters. Dij carried a didgeridoo. Quadzilla was named for his huge quads. Huck ate a lot of huckleberries. Groucho was a Marx Brothers fan. Teddy Bear said his name "just came along," which I took to mean he'd named himself. Naming yourself wasn't against the rules, but his unwillingness to say he'd done it made me feel uncomfortable and mean. I wondered, even then, if my discomfort was just an evil part of me that saw someone more insecure than me in their belonging and couldn't help hating their insecurity.

I named myself too, in a way. I pulled big days, twenty-five or thirty miles, at the start of my first thru-hike on the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT). Another hiker tried to call me Flyby when a fighter jet flew so close we could feel the sound in our molars. I liked the idea of associating myself with the power of the jet, but I didn't know how I felt about defining myself by speed. It felt immodest. A few days later, a different hiker forgot I was from Vermont and called me Sweet Virginia. He was flirting and I was flattered, so I let it stick.

I loved the PCT, but afterwards I felt I had unfinished business. It had something to do with the cloying femininity of Sweet Virginia. When I decided to do the CDT two years later, I decided to stop being modest. I would be independent and proud of my strength. I would be Flyby.

My independence lasted ten days. On the PCT, I'd seen at least four or five other thru-hikers daily, not to mention the day hikers and weekenders and scout troops. During my first week on the CDT, I saw nobody—not a single person—for three days in a row. One night, frantic with loneliness, I convinced myself a deer outside my tent was a grizzly bear; I lay awake for hours imagining a six-hundred-pound animal slashing through the flimsy fabric above my head. A few nights later, I made camp in an unlocked cabin.

When I turned off my headlamp, a metallic scraping echoed across the plywood floor. An elk skull cast eerie shadows across shelves of expired canned goods. What could the sound be? Why wasn't the cabin locked? I remembered a story about a motel with a floor that lowered guests into a serial killer's den and I barely slept that night. In the morning, I found the sound's source: a mouse in a live-catch trap. I thought of the thousands of miles ahead, and I thought about quitting.



Two days later, I met Quadzilla. When we reached the San Juans, we'd been hiking together for a little over fifteen hundred miles. He was an excellent trail partner. He openly admitted he was grateful not to have to camp alone; I didn't feel like I was burdening him. Once, he said he'd be down if I ever wanted to cuddle, but when I said no, he never hit on me again.

I didn't meet the rest of the group until shortly before Lake City, and our status as a group of seven was new and fragile. Hot Legs and Dij had been best friends for a decade; they'd done the PCT together. Groucho and Huck met during a previous year on the PCT. Teddy Bear was solo; the CDT was his first big walk. We'd all been seeing each other in town for a few weeks, but when we got to Lake City, we all agreed that if we were going to attempt the San Juans with weather coming, we should do it as a group.

But we didn't stay together. For two days, the weather had been mild. Groucho strayed ahead and Huck hurried to catch up. Teddy Bear lagged and nobody waited. I hiked fast with Hot Legs and Dij all day, and Quadzilla caught up at night. Hiking apart was normal for me and Quadzilla, but with other people in the mix, it felt awkward.

———

On Monday, rain came in spurts long enough apart that our socks dried in between. Late in the afternoon, Hot Legs, Dij, and I reached a valley low enough in elevation that orange aspen quivered anxiously among the beetle-kill. Quadzilla and Teddy Bear were behind, Groucho and Huck ahead. It was ten or so miles to the next water source, up and over an exposed ridge. Hot Legs smoked a Marlboro Red as we weighed our options. We didn't want to lose daylight by staying in the valley. The weather hadn't been bad all day. If we pushed, we reasoned, we might make it to Pagosa by Wednesday morning. Tobacco smoke mixed with wet bark. I left a note for Quadzilla. At the last minute, I added Teddy Bear's name.

Following Hot Legs and Dij across the marshy valley, I wondered if it would be safe for Quadzilla to follow. But he was a confident night hiker; he'd done huge portions of the Appalachian Trail in the dark. I figured he'd be okay.

Shortly before sunset, we emerged from the trees into a thicket of thin-leafed, waist-high bushes, all orange and scratchy. I looked for Groucho and Huck, but no figures moved in the distance. Rain—or maybe, I hoped, just fog—descended from the clouds in streaky talons. The trail was hemmed in; we couldn't camp. I wasn't worried. My socks were still dry.

Then, the rain hit like a wall. My pants soaked through immediately. Wind cut into the wet fabric, snapping it around my legs, but I still thought I'd dry out before we camped.

Dij got cold first. This was strange; he was a ferociously warm person. He stopped to layer up. Hot Legs and I kept walking, assuming he'd be behind. Hot Legs says he remembers the rain turning to snow, but I don't. I

probably didn't notice because I was finally comprehending that the weather had arrived. I was not going to dry out. I would wear my wet clothes to bed and then the temperature would drop below freezing—and bed was still a few miles away, up and over the ridge in the storm and the dark.

"Are you okay?" Hot Legs asked.

"I'm just scared," I said. I did the math: two miles to the ridge. Another mile past that to camp. An hour of walking if we were fast, maybe an hour and a half if the storm stayed this bad.

We reached a trail junction and Dij hadn't caught up. Wet wisps of hair stuck to our faces. We stamped our feet and strained our eyes. Where was Dij? We could only see twenty or thirty feet around. Had he fallen? Was he hurt? What would we do if he was? Camp here, in the wind and the ice? Try to move him? Hot Legs, I knew, was low on water. He hadn't wanted to carry more than strictly necessary. If we camped here, he'd be out by morning.

"Do you want to go back?" I asked.

He peered into the rain. The bushes and cairns were shadowy and smudged.

"You don't have to come."

"I'm not going to keep going alone."

We turned around.

---

*"Even back then, if I'd been guiding a trip, I would never have gone into unfamiliar mountain terrain with a storm in the forecast. If I had been alone, I never would have gone."*

---

I knew better than to go into the San Juans; I knew better than to push miles that evening. I knew that mountain weather could change quickly. I knew a risky decision endangered not only me, but a rescue team. Even back then, if I'd been guiding a trip, I would never have gone into unfamiliar mountain terrain with a storm in the forecast. If I had been alone, I never would have gone.

But when I was young, I loved stories about girls who pretended to be boys so they could be squires and then knights, cabin boys and then pirates. I devoured books like *The Woman Who Rides Like a Man* by Tamora Pierce and *Bloody Jack* by L.A. Meyer. The books were meant to be empowering, and I suppose they were: they taught me I could do anything. On the other hand, they also taught me that the things most worth doing were the things men did, and if there's one thing men on long trails did consistently, it was making wildly irresponsible choices—swimming swollen rivers with



sleeping pads or bear canisters as flotation devices; crossing private property in the gun-toting rural West; traversing exposed ridges in thunderstorms. I knew a few guys who'd paid dearly for their decisions. One had skipped bear spray to save weight and had to jump off a cliff to escape a juvenile grizzly; another broke his hip when he slipped crossing a snowfield without an ice ax. But mostly, they seemed to get away with their risks. Quadzilla slept with his food all through grizzly country and didn't get attacked; Hot Legs didn't filter his water and didn't get sick. Huck smoked so much weed one day he forgot his phone on a break and didn't notice for eight miles; he jogged back, got his phone, and caught us the next day.

I didn't think they were smart, exactly. But I thought they could probably make it through the night alone in a cabin without convincing themselves they were about to get butchered by a serial killer. Something felt off about my perceptions of danger. So, in Lake City, when the guys were all acting like the San Juans were a reasonable risk, I didn't talk about how unprepared I felt. I hardly even let myself think about it. I wanted their fearlessness. I traded my water filter, which would break if it froze, for chlorine tablets. I downloaded extra maps. I brought bread bags to cover my hands. I didn't mention how nervous I was to not have rain pants, or that the zipper of my rain jacket was busted and repaired with dental floss. I didn't talk about how I was wearing only sneakers. Why should I when we all were?

---

Dij had left his pit zips open. It had taken him a long time to change into his fleece. Hot Legs reached him just ahead of me, and when they materialized, they were huddled over Dij's phone. They looked warm and calm. I felt flimsy. I wanted to keep moving.

"So, Fuh-ly-by." Hot Legs said my name like bad news was coming. "We could camp here, or we could go over the ridge to the lake. It'll be lower."

Why was he asking? I knew he wanted to keep going. There were good reasons not to stop. We were exposed. There was no drinking water. Hot Legs and Dij would have trouble pitching their tarps without trees. There were bad reasons, too, which felt like good reasons at the time. We weren't considering backtracking or taking an alternate, so the closer we got to our next town stop in Pagosa Springs, the safer we'd be. We'd already hiked this far, so if we didn't keep going, we might as well have stayed in the valley. And I was cold. I couldn't stand still much longer; I didn't care if onwards was ultimately more dangerous.

But it was two and a half miles, at least an hour more. I didn't want to walk another hour. My legs stung and ached. My shirt was wicking water onto my belly. I didn't let myself name the dangers, but I can now: someone could fall, someone could get cold, we could lose the trail. It would only take

the tiniest bit of bad luck—an unnoticed rock in the path, a moment when fog obscured the cairns—to create a life-or-death situation. If I were alone, I would've camped. But I wouldn't have come up there alone. I would've stayed in the valley. I wouldn't even have come into the San Juans.

I know now that they were asking me because they respected my opinion. If I'd told them I wanted to camp, they would've joined me. And regardless, I could've set up my shelter and made ramen and gone to sleep alone. Instead, I said, "Let's keep going."

"Are you sure?" Hot Legs asked.

"I'm just scared," I said. I turned and led the way.

---

When I was in seventh grade, a University of Vermont student named Michelle Gardner-Quinn left a bar and never made it back to her dorm. Disappearances like this were uncommon in Vermont, and Michelle's had the right features to go viral, or at least as viral as things could go back when most of the state was still on dial-up. She was white and middle- or upper-class enough to be going to college. Her face was everywhere.

The search meandered east for a week until they found her body near a swimming hole in the town next to mine. She'd been raped, beaten, and strangled. They arrested a man who'd been caught on video walking with her up Main Street in Burlington the night she went missing. All the evidence indicated that she'd borrowed his cell phone and that she'd let him walk her home.

That's how it begins, and then you're in drivers' ed and your teacher is showing you how she slots her keys between her knuckles so she can poke would-be carjackers in the eyes. You make key-claws, too. You don't bat an eye at the spike tampons or the nail polish that changes color if your drink has been drugged; you get used to the handheld mace, the *call me when you get home* and the *text me when you're leaving*. Always, in the back of your mind, you're conducting a forensic investigation, preparing for your disappearance: the last cell tower you pinged, the last person you passed, your last trail register entry. Make sure someone you trust knows your location; lie to someone you don't know that your husband is ahead, that you're turning at the next junction. Statistically, you should be most cautious in your own home, around your intimate partners, but you're not. What you fear most is being a woman in transit.

By the time I was on the CDT, I understood the real world wasn't like my lady-knight books. There weren't explicit rules saying women couldn't do things. But in the four months I spent on that hike, I met only four other women doing the full trail, all with boyfriends or husbands. Something was keeping us from thru-hiking alone, and it had to do with the stories we whispered at slumber parties about uncles and stepbrothers and neighbour kids, with the self-defense keychains we got for Christmas, with the way I knew—because we all knew—that Chanel Miller's cardigan was beige and



Christine Blasey Ford drank one beer. You have a fundamentally different relationship to risk when you've been taught since childhood that you can be blamed for the worst possible thing that might happen to you.

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*"You don't bat an eye at the spike tampons or the nail polish that changes color if your drink has been drugged; you get used to the handheld mace, the call me when you get home and the text me when you're leaving."*

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Hypothermia dulls the mind. Racing up the ridge with Hot Legs and Dij, my thoughts collapsed around one idea: *get to the lake*. Cold water squelched under my soles. *Get to the lake*. Pain radiated in dull circles from my nose ring and earrings. *Get to the lake*. It was nearly too dark to see. *Get to the lake*. We were still climbing, switchbacking up something steep. Surely we'd reach the top soon. The wind kept changing directions, slamming me into the mountainside and then pushing me toward the abyss. Were we on the edge of a cliff? *Get to the lake*, I thought. I didn't talk.

When I had been silent a long time, Dij said, "I'm worried about her."

I'm not sure how I heard. He and Hot Legs were far; they sometimes disappeared into the fog. I'm not sure what worried Dij either. He couldn't have seen me shivering. It could be that I was small, or that my pants had wet through, or—though I hate imagining this about my friend—that I was a woman. Whatever it was, something within me settled. I was determined not to be restricted by fear, but if my body was shutting down enough for Dij to notice, that was a valid limit.

I slowed to let them catch up. We were descending. Hot Legs lit the way with a tiny handheld flashlight.

"Dij," I said. "Can I sleep under your tarp?" It was big enough for three.

"Yeah," he said, as though I'd asked something obvious, like, "Dij, is it raining?"

We found a gap in the bushes by a marsh with a drinkable pool. Hot Legs helped Dij pitch his tarp. I wanted to help—I was good at tarps—but the guylines didn't make sense. I paced until Dij gave me his ground sheet and told me to lay it out and get in my sleeping bag.

I couldn't stop shivering. Normally, I would have been decisive and quick. In minutes, I'd be out of my wet clothes and in my sleeping bag, making a hot meal. Instead, I thought about changing clothes, then looked at my stove and considered cooking dinner. All those steps though, and did I have enough water? I ate cheese off the block. Fat would keep me warm. I shivered. I remembered my clothes were soaked and replaced my shorts

with long johns. Should I make dinner? I was shivering too hard to screw my stove onto the fuel canister.

Dij had been boiling water. He handed me a small, warm Nalgene bottle.

"No, you," I said, but I took it and put it against my belly.

"You guys," someone yelled outside. "That was so scary."

Quadzilla had followed. He was shouting. We were all shouting. His glasses had iced over. He'd almost walked off the cliff. I could only see his bare legs. All his hair was standing up.

Soon, he was in his sleeping bag beside me. I loved being wedged between my two friends. I couldn't stop shivering, but now it was hilarious. A wave of violent tremors descended on me, and Quadzilla, laughing, still inside his sleeping bag, rolled on top of me. He rubbed my arms until the shaking slowed, then rolled away. We were thrilled. We were safe. We were so stupid to go out there. We loved being stupid.

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*"And yet, "I'm just scared," I kept saying, all up and down that ridge, in the ice and the dark, as though my fear was entirely irrelevant. In a way, it was."*

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I was seventeen the first time I led a backpacking trip. I went to a high school with a wilderness program and, apparently, a disregard for litigation culture. I was set loose in Ghost Ranch, New Mexico, with eight other teenagers, a set of thirty-year-old-maps, a walkie-talkie that should have been able to reach an adult but turned out to be broken, and an eighteen-year-old co-leader, Ethan Fields.

It went all right until the last day when we were supposed to follow a drainage cross-country from a dirt road to a huge canyon. Mid-morning, Ethan announced we were at the gully. I pretended to peer at the map to double-check, but I was bad at spatial reasoning and Ethan seemed so confident. If I had bothered to count the contour lines, I might have noticed the drainage was too small—and if I had bothered to orient the map, I might have noticed it wasn't going the right way, but instead I just followed.

I might never have noticed we were lost. But a few hours later, Ethan figured out we'd been heading southwest instead of northwest. He climbed out of our drainage and triangulated our location while I cooked hashbrowns and tended to the blisters and sore knees, and he led us along a bearing to our destination.

Eight years separated me from that trip when I hiked into the San Juans; I'd walked over five thousand miles and had worked for four years at my



college outdoors program. I felt far away from the girl who didn't believe she had anything to contribute in the presence of a confident, outdoorsy man. For one thing, if Hot Legs or Quadzilla had started leading us down the wrong drainage, I wouldn't have hesitated to speak up.

And yet, "I'm just scared," I kept saying, all up and down that ridge, in the ice and the dark, as though my fear was entirely irrelevant. In a way, it was. I understood that living as a woman had made my perceptions of danger go a little haywire. I found it impossible to feel safe when traveling alone, and I was jealous of the men around me who seemed to feel differently.

Camped by the swamp, laughing hysterically, grateful to be safe and warm and among friends, grateful for that little taste of nature's immensity and indifference, it seemed I had been right to be jealous. It felt good to prove that I could hang with the guys. It felt like confirmation of something I'd long suspected: that women were missing out, that growing up in a violent world kept us too afraid to access a certain type of self-actualization, a certain contact with the sublime. There, I thought, at the edge of safety and comfort, the thru-hike did its most important work, making me braver, stronger, cooler.

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We dilly-dallied in camp on Tuesday, but eventually there was nothing left to do but hike. The rain had dwindled. Mist rose off the ponds and wove among the orange and maroon bushes; the landscape smelled clean. I felt optimistic, and proud I hadn't quit.

After a few miles, we crested another ridge, and a salvo of raindrops smacked our jackets. The mountain had been protecting us, but now nothing separated us from the weather. We were again in the belly of the storm.

I put bread bags over my gloves and hiked with my hands in fists. To keep the water out of the open bag ends, I held my arms aloft across my chest. Each time I reached for my water bottle or adjusted my jacket, droplets slithered down my wrists.

"We should stick together now," somebody said.

We walked one mile, maybe two, maybe three. I'd given up on my wind pants and was wearing shorts. The rain became stinging slivers of ice. The stinging grew into burning, and then the burning became deep pain. Green veins branched on my purple thighs.

Hot Legs and Dij fell behind. Quadzilla and I kept moving to keep warm. I held my mouth shut to keep the water out. I half-turned every few hundred feet, arms still crossed, legs still walking, to check on Quadzilla. The fog around us snapped open and shut.

I turned to check on Quadzilla and he wasn't there. I didn't stop.

*Should I wait?* The question came slowly. The trail was just a smear in the grass. Cairns marked the way, but often they were too far apart to see

in the mist. Ahead, I glimpsed a post marking a trail junction. I would stop there, I decided.

At the post, I shivered and stomped. It was ten in the morning. I had two map sets on my phone. I looked as I waited. I told myself I was just researching options, not looking to bail. The trail that intersected the CDT led east off the ridge. It appeared to connect to a road that led to a highway, but the intersection was in a blurry space between the maps. It would be a risk to take an unknown trail. Was it more of a risk than staying on the ridge? I couldn't tell. I wanted someone else to decide.

Quadzilla caught up. He'd gotten a cramp in his hamstring and had been unable to walk. I told him about the trail off the ridge.

"I don't mind that idea," he said. "This is getting a little too intense for me."

But he wanted to wait for Hot Legs and Dij. By the time they arrived, my lips felt stiff, and my cheeks were sore. My explanation was half-hearted and uncertain.

"I don't know if I'm ready to bail yet," Dij said.

Hot Legs asked to see the map. I showed him the blurry space where we might have to bushwhack.

"Let's go up the trail, out of the wind, then decide," he said.

I could've argued. I could've said, "But the junction is here." Instead, I crossed my bread-bagged hands across my chest and led the way.

I'd been colder in my life. Growing up, I regularly waited for the school bus in below-zero weather. But this was different. I didn't know if the temperature would drop or if the trail ahead was more exposed. I didn't know if I'd be able to keep warm that night. The laughter under Dij's tarp felt far away; the anticipation I felt in Lake City was gone. That dream of keeping up with the guys, of being the toughest and most confident, badass person in the mountains was gone. I was scared, and I was ashamed. Was I really the weakest one out here?

*You will probably not die*, I told myself. I did the math: thirty-seven miles to Pagosa Springs. Eight more hours of daylight today, six to eight tomorrow, then town. I decided I would survive fifteen minutes at a time, but fifteen minutes felt unfathomably long. Ten seconds at a time, then. I counted to ten. *You will probably not die*. I cried tiny sobs. I didn't want my shoulders to shake. I didn't want the guys to see.

Even then, even as I was calculating the odds of my survival, I didn't trust my fear. I kept leading the way, as though it was my choice. I wanted it to be my choice. But every step felt like a negation of myself. All at once I understood I'd consented to something I didn't actually want.

I spun. "Quadzilla, will you bail with me?"

He did, and he's never seemed to resent it. The wind calmed as soon as we got off the ridge. For a while we were still engulfed in fog, but we could hear elk bugling below. We dropped out of the storm into a scorched valley.



The trail hadn't been maintained since the burn, but it was easy enough to follow. Sometimes the clouds parted and for a moment we were in sun—actual sun!

Quadzilla and I ran into Teddy Bear in Creede; he'd descended Monday night. On Wednesday, we all hitched to Pagosa Springs, where we found Groucho and Huck. They'd left the CDT Tuesday morning. We dried our gear, ate French fries, drank whiskey. In the company of so many others who'd made the same choice, I began to feel okay about bailing.

Hot Legs and Dij arrived that evening. On Tuesday night, as Quadzilla and I blasted the heat at our motel room in Creede and I read the latest news on the Kavanaugh hearings, Hot Legs opened his pack and discovered his down quilt was soaked. If he'd been alone, he would've had to walk all night to stay alive. Instead, he borrowed Dij's stove and heated water once every hour to keep warm and somehow shivered until morning.

Mostly I'm glad that I bailed. Mostly I'm grateful to be alive to write about it. But Hot Legs and Dij told us something else when they made it to Pagosa: on Wednesday, they awoke and the storm had broken. This, still, is hard to tolerate. They survived and they were out there, on the edges of things, in a landscape reborn, sparkling and harsh. I let them have all that to themselves.

## *Body Remembers*

**Kristin Camitta Zimet**

Body remembers better than Mind.
Shakes its head if you take off the collar,
pointing its muzzle back at the loop.

Pushes stiff hind legs to get up on
the couch, stays there months, years,
waiting for his key to scrape the lock.

Burrows back of the curtain, fogs
the glass that opens on the driveway,
fixed on the space of his sold-off car.

Pulls the leash, insists on going left
where he last shuffled the street,
one mailbox, two, squeezing the cane.

Smells every clod for a molecule
of him. Stops. Plants feet at the bend,
looks back in case he follows.

Body remembers, curls in bed
around the old concavity, keeps
one leg where his legs lay.

Body tracks the days. Fetches
what Mind refuses to remember,
the birthday in a wheelchair,

the day he fell, the day hundreds
of not-him gathered in a room where
they made his voice sing but he was not.

And other days, buried deeper
in the backyard, in the boneyard.
Him singing at the seal pond,

crying on the train to Brooklyn
practicing wedding vows out loud,
holding a baby like a prize pumpkin,

labouring up the Great Wall of China,
across Patagonia, Laos, anywhere,
everywhere, holding out his arms

to catch, to comfort, to show how
much he loved, to give whoever
he met on earth unfailing home.

Body remembers even as Mind
performs feedings, empties drawers
and accounts, finalizes the estate.

And listens. Listens. Not to
the recording that still plays
on the answering machine.

No, to the Original Voice. Body
needs that message. *Good girl*,
it says. Just that. *Good*.

*The Clearing*

**Alexandra G. McKay**

I first noticed the clearing of my skin not halfway through my second pregnancy. It did not bring with it the magical properties one might associate with such an event: a bright, dewy complexion; the freedom of mind and spirit from vanity's previous deceit; the lightening of one's makeup bag, now saved from the added weight of concealers and creamy, skin-like concoctions. No, the clarity of my skin was just that: see-through, transparent, clear in the way that water is clear. I was becoming transparent before my eyes (or rather, *not* before my eyes), and the only certainty about it was that the feeling of my body remained despite its disturbing proximity to complete disappearance.

In the beginning of The Clearing, I was able to continue my daily activity without disruption. As the mother of one, my day-to-day tasks were, by and large, physical ones, and so it is worth noting that a disappearing life can continue to be a productive one. With invisible hands I could still wash the dishes, allowing the soapsuds to build up in towers on my wrists. I could fold the laundry, if a little clumsily, and put away the linens in neat stacks in the bedroom, hallway closet, and basement. I could apply ointment to an ailing toddler's rash-riddled skin and do so tenderly, careful to fasten their diaper in place and pat them on the bum to signal the completion of this task. I could scrub the baseboards and the surfaces inlaid with their typical smattering of dirt and stains—thanks, of course, to a little elbow grease.

At this time, in the first few months, it was fine. No one else seemed to notice that I was disappearing but me. When The Clearing began in my feet, I questioned my ability to walk or even to put on socks and shoes. But I was, and I did. I walked to the grocery store with the toddler in tow and even managed to maintain my balance despite the growing distance between how my feet operated in relation to my body and what it meant to *see* them operate in relation to my body. It was at this time that I was grateful for having purchased a stroller with all-wheel terrain.

I won't say it wasn't a troubling experience. I was not immune to feeling uneasy during this period. I had grown prone to distress since becoming a mother. I often felt constrained, unprepared for the demands of domesticity. Before this, I was not defined by my work in the home. I was a woman in

the world, equal if not in pay but in showing up. I had inherent value in the things that comprised my mind. I was not a body fulfilling wakings, feedings, cleanings—demanded of understanding all feelings of all people at all times. I just *was*, and that was enough.

Perhaps, I thought, my hands and feet had felt overwhelmed, too, but they had the gumption that I did not to say *to hell with it* and abandon ship. Like them, I felt that this was a ship that I could not right. Still, I had to find it in myself to dive in completely, to sink myself into the sensation of guiding another to grow. But, in the process, I suppose I felt much like soil does to a plant: sodden, rotten, impure if still necessary.

A few weeks after The Clearing began, I decided to ask my husband if he'd noticed anything different about me. By then, my elbows were nearly gone, and while my mobility persisted, I felt odd, somewhat unable to move as freely as I liked. I'm afraid I wasn't surprised when he batted the problem away, insisting I was imagining things and that *of course, dear*, I was not becoming physically invisible. What a preposterous idea it was—to feel a sensation and to question it. Never mind, I concluded it impossible for him to comprehend, even if it were happening right before his eyes. I mean, how many times had I asked him to pass me something from the fridge, only to have to follow with a prescriptive "It's in the top left corner near the yogurt"? The man so full of foresight and a preternatural preparedness for things like winter tire replacement and fantasy team-building did not possess the vision required for finding the eggs in the carton in the same place they always were!

By the time my torso started to go, I became increasingly concerned about the status of my womb. The scans all showed a baby ripening in due time and course, steadily growing, with no concerns from the doctors about size or shape. She was breech, which I thought funny because, well, wasn't inhabiting someone else's body in breach of some greater human contract? Are we not obliged to the right to our own bodies from birth to death?

How strange it was to cease while another thrived, all under the same house of flesh. And yet, we were two unfinished beings, one on the uptick of existence and the other in a more questionable state. Because while I had not been prodded by doctors for anything save my pregnancy, I continued to experience The Clearing. When I looked in the mirror, I did not see myself reflected at me, but rather something more of a shadow. When I looked at my body beneath me, I encountered much of the same: bits of floating pieces I could only somewhat put together to form a shape, but not one I recognized.

When the toddler, flailing mid-tantrum and inconsolable, needed to be held, I used this newfound form to hold and comfort her. I lived in awe of her fullness, the completeness she embodied, however small her body was in proportion to the body I once had. While there was something paranormal at play for what had come for me, admiring her as she came into being was certainly its own kind of magic. How she grew to know her existence, to use it



forcefully and forge her own way, was a testament to the strength of both the human body and its mind.

Together, a couple of half-formed humans, she, still young enough to be shaped by the world, and I, becoming dimmer by the day, we ventured into different territories with as much self-possession as we could. She was content in her stroller as I hobbled along with too few limbs and any great number of bags and necessities on board. We made our weekly journey to the local deli. She was satiated by a stick of bread and butter, and I, a cheese and turkey sandwich on rye. It was our jovial day when the question of existence was tucked so far back into my mind that I almost remembered what it was like to feel whole again. She did have that power, the toddler. I could forget myself in favour of our togetherness. But on this day, I was crudely reminded of the reality of my wants and needs when I arrived home with a soured child in her soiled seat and, later, welcomed to rest by a turkey sandwich made without its meat. And so, too, even the things that should have filled me disappeared out from under me. Or simply did not exist in the first place.

When the second child finally came knocking at the door of my body, hoping to exit it into the wider world, I was relieved at the sensation of pain that struck me. While I had been experiencing The Clearing, I could not rely on my fullness as a human to guide me through what was required of me as a body in this state. Though technically, my feelings and abilities were still there, the disconnect between my mind and body had become so great that there were no firm truths to which I could cling. Everything around me and inside of me felt like a floating reality that I wished desperately would release me from its grasp.

Now outside of me and visibly separate, the baby wailed and screamed to be held, to be fed, to find a place that felt like somewhere sturdy where she could rest. I looked on as her limbs trembled and spiked in different directions against her will—for, of course, it was a body that she did not understand or even knew was a part of her. Empathy, as a mother, is its own extremity: one that rises within you like a pillar of stone, tearing its way through your gut, bypassing the heart and the throat and stiffening in place, obstructing all other systems housed within the body.

I instinctively flinched at her cry and brought her close to the only part of me that remained visible since The Clearing. She rested her tiny hand on my chest and brought her mouth to feed. Holding her now, I knew nothing else to be real or true or possible for me hereafter. What I did know for certain was that I could will her to live for as long as my breast was intact and in sight.

*Staircase*

**Sam Mueller**

Two weeks after our first date, Cate asks me to help her move out of her apartment.

I promised myself I wouldn't. I need to draw the line somewhere and things are already moving too quickly for my liking. But she texts me the night before, "My coworkers bailed haha."

It's the hottest day on record. We both come within spitting distance of heat stroke and her two cats lay panting on the sticky hardwood floor. I get stung by one of the wasps that live under the patio stairs—angry at our tromping up and down from the U-Haul. After that, we take refuge in my car, air-conditioning blasting as we share a wilting salad from the restaurant down the street. I hold a rapidly melting ice cube to the welt on my ankle. We're both exhausted and barely speak.

"If we knew each other better this would probably be going a lot worse," I say.

Cate looks at me a little perplexed, then decides to laugh.

Later on, an old woman drives by and rolls down her window to fuss over us as we load the last few boxes. Standing on the sidewalk, I shield my eyes, feeling flattened between the sun and the heat of the pavement. The woman asks if she can bring us anything, her face full of the cheap sympathy the elderly reserve for young couples.

We decline, casting glances at each other. I can tell Cate feels it too—this simple trick we've played. She's standing inside the U-Haul, leaning on the frame. She thanks the woman again, and in her white t-shirt, sweat sparkling on her nose and hairline, I think she is unbearably handsome.

---

That Friday I go on a second date with Noah. I matched with him on Tinder at the same time as Cate, but it took him weeks to ask me out—his messages always a little shy, halting. Tonight, we're meeting his roommates in the university district for bar hopping.

"My buddies are bringing Tinder dates, too," he says on the drive over, glancing at me. Even with his thick beard his face is boyish, and he's ever so slightly shorter than me. "I hope that's okay."

It turns out that we're the only two who have met before. The bar is busy, full of Friday night college student fervor. Even though it's well dark now, heat rolls in through the open garage front. My thighs stick to the plastic booth. Sandwiched between Noah and his friend's date, I take advantage of the anonymity. I sip whiskey and watch the group, chiming in with a smile or laugh when necessary, relishing the way Noah's dark eyes flicker back to me.

We stumble into the chaos of an arcade bar and the night turns hazy, dream-vague, amongst the flashing lights and tinny 8-bit music. We play pinball, *Pac-Man*, *Street Fighter*. For a while Noah disappears in search of more drinks and I end up across from one of the Tinder girls at an air hockey table. She's a loud, extravagant drunk. She groans with obnoxious frustration every time I score a goal and tosses the puck to her date and pouts after I win. I wonder if he likes this side of her, if he minds the way she keeps slipping her hand into his back pocket and whispering in his ear.

Eventually I forfeit my puck to Noah's friend and sit back against the wall. Suddenly the third Tinder girl is at my side.

"So?" she grins at me, leaning a little too close in conspiratorial drunkenness. "You getting lucky tonight?"

I know she doesn't care about my answer; she just wants me to ask her the same question. I shrug. "Dunno. You?"

As we leave, I'm amused by the motherly way Noah herds everyone into his massive SUV, which is comically large on the narrow city streets. He opens the passenger door and puts his hand on the small of my back as I get in. I look back at him, surprised. His eyes are steady, unguarded.

In the car he makes good-natured conversation with the drunken chorus in the backseats. There's a hard hat by my feet and dirt crusted into the floor mats. He keeps an easy hand on my thigh as we wind out of the bar streets and into the neighbourhoods.

In his bed I struggle not to offer explanations or apologies. I'd forgotten how broad men are, the texture of their hands. When we're done he falls asleep on top of me and I lie awake staring at the ceiling, sweat pooling behind my knees. Around 3 a.m., I extract myself and he blearily insists on walking me out.

"This is kind of a power move," he says. Again, that shy, boyish smile.

"No sleepovers," I say. "House rules."

—

I knew Cate and her ex-girlfriend were still living together. She brought it up quickly, to her credit, barely fifteen minutes into our first date.

"It's complicated," she'd said. "She's straight now."

They were together for seven years.

Our respective living situations cause problems for a while. At the time, I was an unwilling tenant of my parents' basement. I woke up each morning surrounded by artifacts of my childhood and ate breakfast at a table where my feet once dangled off the floor.



We fuck in the park once, her car twice, and once on a coworker's couch while she house-sits. Their home is stunning, a cedar A-frame with windows from floor to ceiling. I cook her dinner on a gas stove, squeezing lemon juice into a pan as she sidles up behind me, fingers into belt loops, lips lazy on my neck. We eat in the back garden under liquid gold sunlight and I close my eyes, trying to imagine that I live here.

I smile to myself.

"What?" she asks.

"We're playing house."

When the ex-girlfriend leaves and I'm allowed into the apartment, I find there's only one bed. I think this should bother me, but it doesn't. It sits dejected on the floor—a casualty of the moving process, along with all of the wine glasses and the kitchen table.

We sit on the rumpled sheets and kiss so slowly I feel like I'm spinning.

"You make me dizzy," I say.

"It's the heat," she says.

When I leave I notice a makeup compact on the nightstand.

"That's hers," she says. "You can have it if you want."

—

I logged their similarities in the back of my mind with tally marks.

Both of them liked pineapple on pizza.

Both of them had double-jointed thumbs.

Both of them brought peaches to the tiny lake by my parent's house, usually too cold for swimming, where we floated aimlessly in the green-black water.

Both of them called me "good girl."

—

Noah went to school for architecture and now he builds houses. Sometimes I notice pale brown smudges of dirt at his hairline or on his biceps. Shoved into a corner of his room is a model building made from cardboard and popsicle sticks, like an elementary school art project except it's beautiful. A sloped ceiling cut through with skylights. A tiny, immaculate staircase. I imagine it could be a museum, a concert hall, a courthouse.

We're lying half-naked on his double bed. The heat is abominable, and his house, like most in the city, has no air-conditioning. A useless box fan drones by the window. I ask him questions about buildings and half-listen to the answers. He describes cantilevers, egresses, fenestration—I can't picture it at all. My head fills with abstract shapes and empty doorways.

He tells me his favorite style of architecture is brutalism because of its honesty. "It's just material," he says. "Math and material."

I wonder what it's like to have such a clear vision, to see something inside yourself and make it real. He talks with his hands and when he spreads his fingers I'm reminded of church rafters. I trace the soft valleys of his ribs. We discussed at one point what level of intimacy we were comfortable with—no cuddling, no sleepovers, no good-morning texts. But this isn't intimacy, just idleness.

"Light is a material too," he says. "People forget that. You can control where it falls, the shape of the shadows, how a room feels at noon or at sunset. It's all part of the design."

I close my eyes and imagine I'm inside the model building; barcodes of light travel across the floor with the arc of the sun.

"My friend is house-sitting at this gorgeous place south of the city," I whisper into the heat of his neck. "You'd love it."

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There were others along the way.

A girl with dark skin and slim wrists. She made me lasagna from scratch in her tiny studio apartment. She didn't measure anything and laid slices of swiss cheese on the final layer with a kind of reverence. When we kissed there was no feeling, like her body was hollow.

A boy with cigarette burns up his arms. He wore his hair in French braids and his sweaters were all frayed at the cuffs. We talked about his ex and the music they used to make together. He was one of the most beautiful people I'd ever seen and he wouldn't look me in the eyes. Kissing him felt like pressing my lips to an open wound.

"When are you going to tell Cate and Noah?" my friend asked over a video call one night. I was sitting on the carpeted floor of my childhood bedroom, legs akimbo, painting my toenails baby pink.

"It's too soon." I said, without looking up.

"You're playing with fire."

"My profile says I'm not looking for anything serious."

My friend shook her head and looked away. I blithely ignored the sideways comments she made over our next few calls, and eventually stopped telling her much altogether, because even I couldn't explain my urge to push things to an edge. I mentioned Cate to Noah, and vice versa, as frequently as I dared, burying the lede and leaving out names. I gauged their reactions with cold interest.

Half of me believed it was all a dream. I never had the looks or the social currency in college to be choosy about who I dated, let alone carry on with two people at once. I'd watched my friends drift in and out of ephemeral romantic trysts with bewilderment. To them it was easy. I always ended up stuck on someone. I was a notorious serial monogamist, never seen without my other half.

This new attention felt intoxicating. I'd always played it safe, been good. Didn't I deserve a bit of indulgence? Wasn't I supposed to want a catalogue of lovers? All of us restless twenty-somethings, burying ourselves in each other. I could feel it in the air along with the heat—the city sinking with the weight of our desperation as we crowded the bars, scrolled the apps, tumbled into strangers' beds in apartments we could barely afford.



One choice or another, what did it matter? None of it was real.

The summer felt infinite ahead of me.

---

"You're kind of hard to read," Cate tells me.

We spent the evening getting high and playing video games in her new apartment, nestled among boxes and packing paper. I'm sitting between her legs as she holds the controller in my hands and guides me through the levels, but I'm spectacularly bad and can't stop laughing every time I send the character tumbling into pits of blue lava.

I give up and lay with my head on her lap and watch the lights play across her face, noticing how she purses her lips when she concentrates. She's cute when she's high, and has a habit of twirling her hair. Her statement makes me blink.

"How so?"

"I don't know," she says. The character dies again and she tosses the controller aside. "I was honestly surprised when you asked me out again."

I try to think back to our first date, dinner in the park by her place—no, that was someone else. We went...—what did we—

"Your body language was totally cold," she says with a laugh. "Like you didn't want to touch me."

We got coffee at the boardwalk downtown. I remember the way she smiled at me when I walked up, so open and disarming. *She thought I was cold?*

"I can be shy," I say.

She smirks a little, "At first."

"At first."

I think about what she said for the rest of the night, playing over and over the day we met. I think about Noah, and the others, picturing my body from all angles.

*Where should I have put my hands?*

*How should I have smiled?*

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The night Noah finds out, some friends of mine from school come to visit. They're the kind I know I won't keep in touch with much longer. The four of them decided to stay in our college town after graduation and get a house together. I watch them through social media as they decorate the living room, collect mismatched glasses and silverware, and watch *90 Day Fiancé* on their Goodwill couch. I'm jealous, though I don't want to be. I know the house is falling apart. I know Amy is a control freak and the other three already secretly hate her.

From the dark of my parents' basement, these feel like small prices to pay for something resembling real life.

Someone's boyfriend's brother is in a local band, so I meet them at a restaurant nearby and then head to the dingy community centre for the gig.

I text him, "I'm in your neighbourhood lol. Drinks?"

I give my friends a clipped version of the story over dinner, leaving out the less flattering details, skewing timelines in my favour. Leaning in around the table, their wide eyes make me bold. I wonder when I got so comfortable with lying. They gasp at all the right details and shower me in girlish, gossipy interest.

"It's *so* not like you."

"And you haven't told them?"

Noah texts back, "Sure. Meet you at hazlewood?"

I make some pale excuses and leave my friends at the show. Already tipsy, I head towards Francis Street. The night and the heat and the fading sounds of the band fill my chest. I wish I could always be here, in a moment between moments—leaving one place, on my way to somewhere else, another lover waiting in some other corner of the city.

I don't remember how the conversation starts. In the same bar where we had our first date, we sit at one of the high tops. The decorative candle on the table is starting to sputter. We drink gin and tonics and I tell exaggerated stories about the girls. I don't remember what he asks. I don't know why I feel compelled to answer, why I choose this moment out of all the others. None of it is real, anyway.

"I'm seeing other people."

For a moment I'm right. It doesn't matter.

He laughs. I think I try to say something reassuring. The conversation moves on and he orders us shots of whiskey and by the time we're walking back to his house I'm properly drunk. The peak of the night crowd has passed but a few rowdy groups are still meandering down the sidewalk and I feel a kind of camaraderie with them.

It isn't until we're back in his room and I try to kiss him that I realize my mistake. He holds me at arm's length with a hard grip.

"She's a woman," I say, "if that matters."

I watch him take in the information, watch his eyes as they don't look at me, the light moving behind them as he thinks.

That night we fuck harder than usual. His bites leave bruises. I think this should bother me, but it doesn't.

———

I dress silently, sweat slick on my back. He opens his phone and I steal glances at his face in the blue light, but there's nothing for me to find there.

"Should I text you?" I ask.

"Probably not."

I leave his house unobserved, walking back through the neighbourhood to my car, still parked at the community centre. Sitting behind the wheel in the dark I try to convince myself I have some kind of dignity to salvage in this.



The smell of him lingers on me, and my mouth tastes like whiskey and sex and I know it would be absolutely idiotic if I started crying, but I do anyway. I drive back to my parents' house in silence, the stoplights washing me red, green, yellow—a useless baptism.

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Around August the temperature finally peaks and breaks like a fever. Everyone seems to forget almost instantly. My parents comment on what a beautiful summer it's been. Kids set off fireworks after midnight. The yellow grass by the lake and the singed pine leaves linger like omens. Smoke from the forest fires will roll in soon, driving us all back inside, but for now the parks are crowded, restaurants bustling and leaking laughter well into the bright evenings.

Cate and I drift slowly apart. I want to blame it on the change in temperature, on her job, on lingering issues with her ex—but I know none of those variables are the cause. Even in the casual closeness of her apartment, the soft moments where we brush hands or she strokes my hair, I feel we are playing pretend. I want to apologize but I'm not sure what for. When she tells me she's leaving for a two-week trip to Ireland, I take that as my exit cue. I end it over text message. Her response is chilly, respectful, and better than I deserve.

I never tell her the other half of the story.

———

In the months after, I have the same dream again and again.

I'm wandering through the garden of her coworker's house and everything is over-sized—or maybe I'm just very small. I'm carrying boxes piled full of dishes, clothes, lamps, and they feel impossibly large in my arms. But I don't mind. The late summer air is clear and warm, my bare feet sink into the grass as I walk through corridors of wildflowers—lavender bulbs the size of my face, towering daisies casting long, skinny shadows.

I round a corner and the model building is there waiting for me, enormous and more beautiful than I could ever imagine. A set of broad, shallow stairs lead up to a facade of windows beneath smooth, maple beams. The glass flashes blindingly in the afternoon light.

I live here. I know I do. But I can't find the door.

The sun sets and I walk in circles with my boxes and there is nothing but windows and walls. No way in; no way out.

When it's fully dark, the building lights up from within and I slump wearily onto the steps, my worldly possessions scattered in the grass like a shipwreck. I stare through the impenetrable windows at the hardwood floors and the beautiful empty space waiting for me to fill it.

I can see the staircase clearly inside, winding gently upwards to some height I can't fathom.

## *An Unzipped Mouse: Grotesque Imagery in the Poetry of Roo Borson*

**Sean Wayman**

*"By the word* grottesco *the Renaissance […] understood not only something playfully gay and carelessly fantastic, but also something ominous and sinister in the face of a world totally different from the familiar one—a world in which the realm of inanimate things is no longer separated from those of plants, animals, and human beings."*
— Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* (1966)

While Roo Borson has enjoyed much acclaim from early in her career, some critics have inevitably expressed reservations about her work. After noting Borson's observant eye and her deft handling of free verse, Canadian poet Patience Wheatley added, "If there is any criticism of Borson's poetry, it might be that it is too beautiful, too cloying, perfect, and unreal." In a much more critical piece, the poet and scholar Professor Eric Ormsby claimed that Borson's poetry is focused on happiness, transience, and spontaneity, which sometimes results in "sugary solipsism." He also accused her of creating, "deliberately clashing metaphors, as if to assert the rights of simultaneity in the teeth of logic." Except on the issue of sweetness, these two criticisms seem rather contradictory. The notion that Borson's poetry is sometimes too beautiful sits uneasily beside the contention that it is illogical, discordant, and solipsistic. Although both Ormsby and Wheatley engaged deeply with Borson's poetry, neither critic acknowledged Borson's extensive engagement with the grotesque. This points to the larger issue that Borson's body of work is highly divergent and multitudinous indeed, much more so than most of her reviewers have recognised. Borson scholarship will not be on a sure footing until it is appreciated that she has written poetry in a wide range of aesthetic categories.

In a companion piece to this essay, I argued that *Rain*, Borson's book-length poem from 1980, synthesised the sublime with the modern lyrical sequence. However, it would be no more accurate to describe her as a poet of the sublime than to refer to her as a "nature poet" or "a poet of beauty." Borson moves between a number of modes, including the beautiful, the sublime, and (least acknowledged of all) the grotesque. It is peculiar that Borson's extensive engagement with the grotesque has been so utterly ignored by reviewers, but therein lies an opportunity. By accepting her interest in ominous and disconcerting imagery, we can abandon the limiting misreading that Borson is "merely" a poet of beauty. With this in mind, readers can turn their attention

to the sizable number of Borson poems which deal with pain, injury, decay, and death. These are not, as Ormsby implies, failed attempts at latching onto happiness but, as we shall see, examples of what John Ruskin, the renowned English art critic, termed "the noble grotesque" artworks which foreground the disturbing aspects of nature and our subjective awareness of it. In other poems, Borson uses the grotesque to reveal the estranging qualities of modern urban life. This essay will explore a variety of significant poems—all of them published in the 1980s—with the goal of illustrating Borson's widespread deployment of the grotesque and teasing out the purposes to which it is used.

Arguably, Borson's interest in the grotesque predates her exploration of the sublime. "Blue," her first estimable poem of the category, comes from her second collection, *In the Smoky Light of the Fields*. This tormented and insomniac poem is the perfect ground on which to introduce Borson's aesthetics of the grotesque, for it is a poem overflowing with intrusions, disruptions, cleavages and unnerving displacements. Its first stanza showcases her remarkable facility in this difficult mode:

> As I lay down to sleep
> the pines stuck blackly up
> like quills in a dog's lip
> in the blue chasm of evening
> and flowers withdrew
> back of themselves like people interrogated.
> Like big sad animals caged.

"Blue" opens with the outlandish figure of a forest "stuck blackly up / like quills in a dog's lip." What we see here is a pervasive sense of intrusion, which affects even the syntax. Notice how the phrasal verb "stuck up" has the striking adverb "blackly" inserted into the middle of it, which parallels the way that porcupine quills have pierced the dog's lip, presumably during an attack. More subtly, this links to the act of writing, which was traditionally done with another sort of quill. A sense of unease is even conveyed at the phonemic level: there is a preponderance of harsh "stop" sounds, especially "b," "k," and "p", which disturb the flow of air. The threat of violence intrudes early and strongly in the poem, lending the poem a sinister air. Consider also the poem's title, "Blue". In the poem's fourth line, it attaches to the word "chasm", which implies a great cleft or severance in being.

The next figure is, if anything, even more suggestive of the grotesque, dissolving the boundaries between plant, human, and animal; in their withdrawal, the flowers resemble both interrogation subjects and zoo animals. In his classic book on the history of the grotesque, the German theorist Wolfgang Kayser explains that in the Renaissance, the word *grottesco* suggested a dissolution of boundaries between categories, especially plants, animals, and humans. Later, Kayser discusses the fantastical prints of Edward Lear, the English illustrator and poet, in which plant and animal forms merge. An example is *Piggiawiggia Pyramidalis*, a slender plant with pigs for blossoms. Similar but more sinister transformations are ubiquitous in "Blue": pine trees become porcupine quills; flowers become people and then animals; and trousers twist like a victim on the rack. It is easy to see how Ormsby might have detected "clashing metaphors" in imagery like this, but if we center our analysis on the grotesque, we can recognize that Borson's goal is not a verisimilitudinous representation of the external world but the depiction of a mind intuiting physical and psychological disintegration. This point is equally clear in the depiction of the apartment, which dominates the second half of the poem.



In the second stanza, the poet grotesquely represents her apartment as a kind of torture chamber, a fact reinforced the litany of past participle verbs depicting physical pain ("twisted," "hung") or mental disorientation ("confused"). Working in conjunction with "interrogated" and "caged" from the first stanza, these words create a sense of entrapment and dread. In the grotesque vision of "Blue," Borson's Toronto apartment has become a prison camp, haunted by the inevitability of death. Yet she also shows us the defences which she marshals against the grotesque and deathly. Mothballs are deployed against the predations of moths and silverfish, showing a mind perturbed about decay. The "teeth collected in the bureau drawers" are an even more macabre addition, but they could also be understood as a talisman against the forces of disease and deterioration. Yet none of these defences are particularly effective. Even the return of childhood memories carries hints of decomposition; they "come back imperfectly," like a faded photograph. In other words, many of the seemingly "random" and "illogical" images in Borson are actually united by anxieties about sickness, decay, and death. After all, the consciousness that is sensitive to the beautiful and sublime in nature will also be alert to its fearful aspects, including the eventual dissolution of the flesh. A grotesque antipode to her numerous poems about the beauty of the natural world, "Blue" achieves a significant expansion of Borson's imaginative parameters.

This point is explored by Ernst Derwood Lee Jr. in his dissertation, *The Grotesque in the Poetry of William Wordsworth* (1986). He found in some passages of Wordsworth's work, "subtle grotesque patterns characterized by fearful images which suggest death, decay, waste, and abnormality." For Lee Jr., Wordsworth's poems demonstrated that "he is affected not just by beauty but also by fear as he imaginatively perceives his world." This is an analysis which we can fruitfully apply to Borson's "Blue." Her "blue chasm of evening" is a zone characterised by injury, decay, and death. Far from being an exercise in solipsism, much less a quest for the beautiful or "unreal," "Blue" is an example of what Ruskin memorably termed "the noble grotesque"— a

grotesque that expresses a truth the artist would have struggled to convey in plainspoken language. As he says in Volume III of *Modern Painters* (1863):

> The third form of the Grotesque is a thoroughly noble one. It is that which arises out of the use or fancy of tangible signs to set forth an otherwise less expressible truth; including nearly the whole range of symbolical and allegorical poetry.

In "Blue," Borson creates a "noble grotesque," one which expresses visceral fears about confinement, illness, and injury. Due to the nightmarish quality of the poem, the reader may well surmise that these fears are subliminal. Though Ormsby is an unreliable guide to Borson generally, there is value in his contention that Borson's poems exist "in the elusive penumbra between the conscious and the unconscious mind." Intriguingly, when I asked Borson if she had ever used "jarring or unpleasant imagery" in her poems, she replied, "Not intentionally." However, throughout the 1980s she produced quite a number of poems that employed dark or disturbing imagery, which suggests that these images were welling up subliminally. Yet, if Ormsby is correct about the unconscious wellsprings of Borson's imagery, he badly misreads its import. Borson's unsettling poems should not be read as poetic caprices or fancies; they are not the products of a mind obsessively focused on happiness. On the contrary, they are most often "noble grotesques," poems which perceive the disquieting aspects of the natural world and human society.

It is equally certain that "Blue" is not an anomalous work, an aberration in an otherwise naturalistic oeuvre. In Borson's early collections, there are numerous poems which use dark or unsettling imagery. In her fourth collection, *A Sad Device* (1981), she makes frequent excursions into the realm of the grotesque, including, but not limited to, "Shapes," "At Kensington Market," "October," "Hanson's Field," and the title poem, "A Sad Device." However, the poem I will discuss first is "Scarecrow," an unacknowledged classic of the Canadian grotesque. Though it is arranged in a single stanza, it falls into two movements, the first of which is a subtly grotesque evocation of nature. It begins thus:

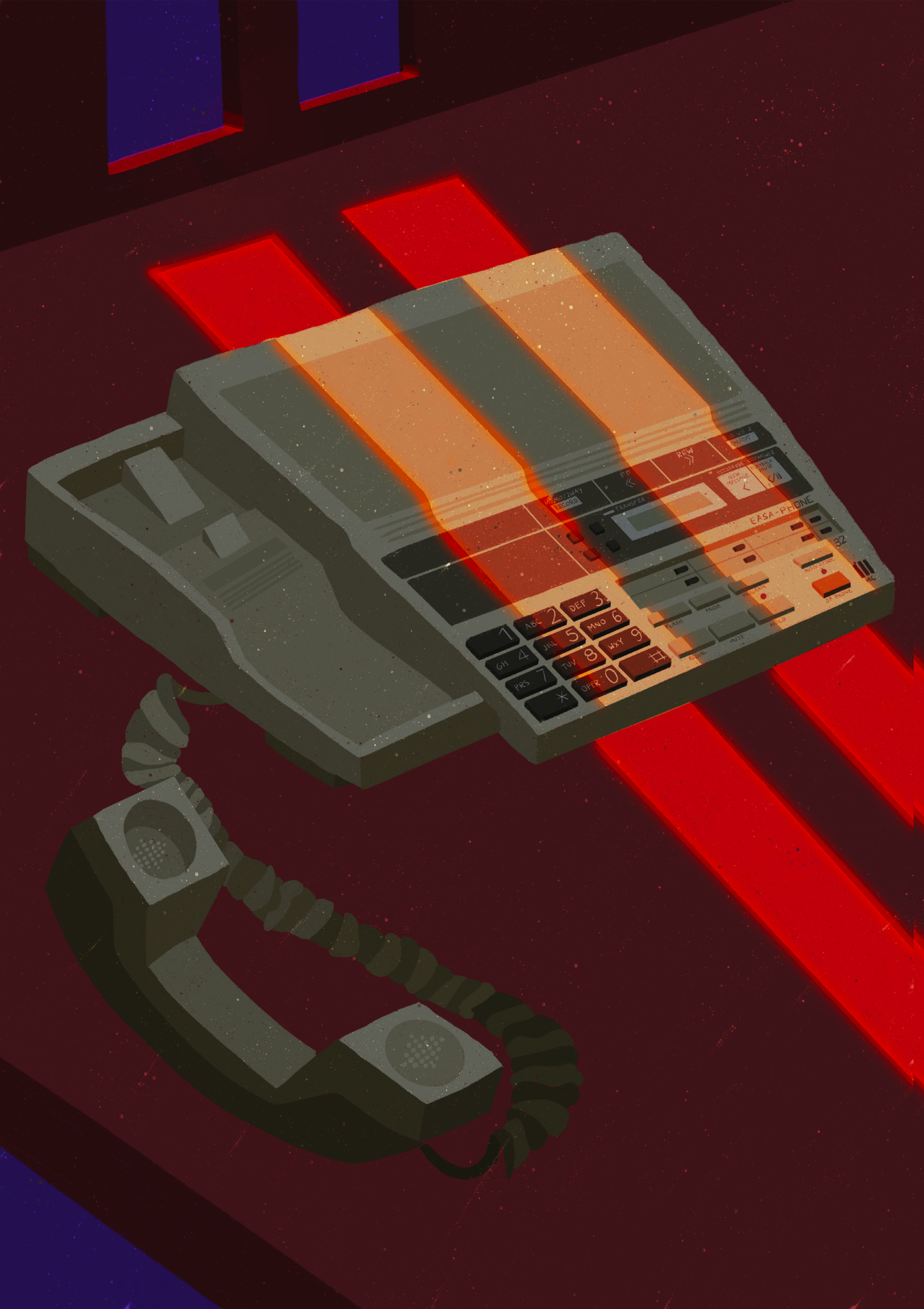
> Three hours I walked in the fields.
> Dandelions that only last week exploded
> like the yellow eyes of a million madmen had turned
> to full hazy moons in the grass, waning.

Characteristically of Borson's poetry of the grotesque, "Scarecrow" dissolves boundaries between plants, animals, humans, and inanimate objects. Just like in "Blue," things have a protean quality: the dandelions turn to madmen but then metamorphose again into "full hazy moons, waning." Later, the redwing blackbirds are first daggers and then assassins hiding among the leaves. Once again, the reader recalls Ormsby's charge of "clashing metaphors" but there is something which unites all this inventive simile-making, and it's there in the opening phrase of the poem: "three hours." This is a poem about time and mutability, and Borson uses syntax and punctuation to emphasise the fact. Note the way "three hours" is front-loaded in the first sentence, giving it an unusual salience. Another time expression, "only last week," interjects between subject and verb in the second line. In the fourth line, the word "moon" is a further reminder of the cycles of time, and it is promptly followed by the subtly grotesque "waning," which brings intimations of decay and dissolution. Haunted by time and change, "Scarecrow" is a poem that trembles with the foreknowledge of death. Though the "surface of the water" is placid and beautiful, it is shivered by "soft whips"—a painful awareness that the season of plenty is on the wane. In the final sentence, she seeks out a metaphor for the "true shape of man," settling on the scarecrow.

> Or maybe his real form
> is a mismatched suit
> stuffed with straw, a helpless thing
> overseeing a field of dying stubble,
> in a shape that thinks
> it can scare away birds.

Why is the scarecrow the real form of humankind? What Borson emphasizes is the uselessness of the scarecrow—its ineffectiveness in scaring away marauders, and its inability to forestall death. In other words, the scarecrow is the true form of the poet of the grotesque. Like the scarecrow, Borson perceives the processes of decay but is utterly powerless to arrest them. In this, her thinking parallels that of poet Emily Dickinson, who claimed, "This Consciousness that is aware / Of Neighbors and the Sun / Will be the one aware of Death." Yet the comparison with Dickinson can also help us to appreciate the uniqueness of Borson's poetic stance. Whereas Dickinson's poem is inward and meditative, "Scarecrow" faces outward to the natural world, and the knowledge of death is more covert than explicit. It is, so to speak, "concealed among the leaves." To receive it, the reader needs to pay attention to the patterns and obsessions of the imagery, for it is there that an ominous presence intrudes.

What these two examples illustrate is the importance of the grotesque in Borson's art. Her frequent engagement with the category should dispel the notion that she is narrowly focused on joy and beauty. Ormsby may claim that "she is a poet who wishes to seize the happiness of the instant in its flight," but this is a reading which widely misses the mark. As already






illustrated, Borson uses the grotesque to obliquely portray the frightening aspects of life. However, there is another purpose to which she deploys the category. In a number of poems, the grotesque is used to depict a sense of displacement and alienation. This feeling is most often engendered by city environments, especially those characterised by harsh lighting, urban light, and scenes of abject human misery. These poems recall the famous aphorism of Kayser, "The grotesque is the estranged world." In these poems, Borson implies that urban life is alienating and disturbing, inimical to our primordial selves. A notable example is "Shapes," which offers an unsettling depiction of a winter's evening in a large, Canadian city.

> Depots smelling like the holes in old shoes.
> The starlight trance of refrigerators
> in a thousand apartments like so many ice cubes.
> Under a streetlight a cat unzips a mouse's belly.
> A man lying in the snow like a broken bag of groceries.

While there is either a simile or a metaphor in every line of this passage, they are interconnected in revealing ways. For example, the coldness of the apartments is subtly suggested by both the reference to "refrigerators" and the comparison of the apartments to "so many ice cubes." These chilly associations cohere with "snow" in the final line, forming a link between indoors and outdoors environments. This imagery shows us that the city is a cold place in at least two senses of the word: the boxy, identical apartments are *figuratively* cold, in the sense of being unwelcoming and impersonal, and the city outside is *literally* freezing, which is a source of untold suffering for the homeless. The inside and outside are also linked by an imagery of light; the artificial light of the refrigerators is mirrored in the clinical streetlamps, which illuminate an alley cat's vivisection of a mouse. Alongside this extensive use of parallelism, Borson engages in the dissolution of categories, which is one of the hallmarks of the grotesque.

In the final two lines of the excerpt, Borson blurs the distinction between humans, animals, and commodities. The suffering of the "unzipped" mouse imminently presages the misery of the homeless man, who is grotesquely compared to "a broken bag of groceries." This richly assonant and alliterative phrase draws our attention to the commodification of human life, implying that cities reduce everything to its economic value, a process which is inherently dispiriting and dehumanizing. Whether it is the interchangeable apartments or the broken bodies in the snow, the poem focuses on the erosion of individuality and dignity, until everything is just a mass of "shapes." In other words, Borson uses the grotesque to highlight our estrangement from nature and each other. She asserts the importance of humanistic values and shows how these are eroded by the cold, competitive values of city life.

Borson's urban grotesques—a subset of poems including "Blue" and "Shapes"—were the result of the poet's move to Toronto. After getting her Master of Fine Arts at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Borson moved to Toronto with her partner, Kim Maltman, the poet and particle physicist. Though Vancouver was certainly not a small city, it was surrounded by the rainforest, so Borson, a keen hiker and environmentalist, could easily make excursions to natural places. In her 1980 collection, *Rain*, Borson memorably depicts the islands, forests, and mountains of the Vancouver hinterland. However, Toronto was much larger than the previous cities she had called home, making the transition difficult to deal with. When asked about the move to Toronto, she said, "It was terribly hard to adjust. Finally, I just began to focus on small things: grass blades, individual trees, flowers etc., and that's how I acclimatized." It may well have been the unfamiliar and unnatural environment of Toronto which resulted in Borson writing a large number of grotesques for *A Sad Device*. What these poems share is a sense of being out-of-place, of disconnection from the natural world. An emblematic example is "At Kensington Market," the setting of which is a bohemian area in downtown Toronto. However, the imagery immediately engenders a sense of unease. In trying to describe grapes at a fruit stall, Borson reels from one metaphor to the next, as if engaged in a desperate and doomed attempt to escape from subliminal associations of violence, death, and failure.

> Bunches of grapes drape over one another,
> heaped bodies, lost causes.
>
> They glow, violet marbled with green,
> and the bees dance over them
> like boxers in a ring.
>
> They are nipples engorging before your eyes.
> They are eyes.

In the first stanza, the grapes take on the sinister appearance of "heaped bodies," like victims of a massacre, dumped in a mass grave. This is the first of many grotesque displacements which Borson includes in this short lyric. The poem's second metaphor compares the grapes to "lost causes," bringing a sense of doomed idealism. In the second stanza, the grapes regain a fruit-like semblance, but a sense of indeterminacy remains. The grapes are variegated, meaning their violetness is compromised by hints of green. And though the grapes are no longer human-like, the bees assume human characteristics instead, with the phrase "boxers in a ring" bringing renewed suggestions of violence. In the third stanza, the grapes regain anthropomorphic qualities, but alarmingly, they are no longer depicted as whole bodies but parts thereof—first nipples and then eyes. The concept of the grapes becoming "eyes" is especially grotesque because it reverses the traditional distinction between poet and subject. At this point, it is as if the grapes (Borson's ostensible subject matter) seem to look back at her. This association of the grapes and eyes is strangely appropriate because it was the fruit that has permitted Borson to see inwardly, revealing a mind which is estranged from its environment. Just like the fruit in Kensington Market, Borson feels separated from her natural habitat, and it is this original displacement from which all the others flow.

While grotesques, both urban and pastoral, are probably most abundant in *A Sad Device*, they are also relatively common in Borson's mournful 1989 collection, *Intent: or the Weight of the World*. Noteworthy entries in the category include "Chitons," "Rubber Boots," and "House," all of which possess the eerie, unsettling quality which typifies the category. These are poems in which the poet, better known for her engagement with the external world, exhibits a negative or ambivalent response to objects and places you would expect her to relish: a cephalopod washed up on a beach; a well-worn pair of gumboots; and a childhood home, the haunt of moths and albino spiders. What makes these poems rewarding is precisely the unease they engender, the sense of something being uncannily out of place. But intriguing as these poems are, the collection's most undeniable poem of the grotesque is "Save Us From," which has proven a great favourite among poetry readers and bloggers. It is also something of an "odd one out" among Borson's poems of the grotesque. In terms of style and perspective, it bears little resemblance to the other works discussed in this essay.

To recap, Borson's archetypal poem of the grotesque is a short lyric containing unnerving and unsettling imagery. In the typical case, her poetry of the grotesque is the result of an aversive psychological experience—most often the awareness of decay or moribundity in nature, or the recognition of the harsh unnaturalness of urban environments. These poems are usually rendered in the first-person voice, and even when the pronoun "I" is absent, we assume that the scene is described by a hidden first-person subject. Furthermore, Borson usually employs short sentences in these poems, as if processing the estranged world, one image or thought at a time. However, in "Save Us From," she adopts a radically different approach. The poem uses an incantatory style which brings to mind Christopher Smart, Williams Blake, and Walt Whitman—poets who were heavily influenced by the Hebrew poetic tradition. Needless to say, this is not Borson's home turf, and her adoption of such atypical style is a strong hint that she is offering a new poetic stance on the grotesque. As many readers have commented, the poem is best understood as a prayer for salvation, a plea to be saved from the horrors of the modern world. If the overwhelming majority of Borson's poetry is secular in orientation, "Save Us From" is daringly religious, at least

in its style, using anaphora in a manner redolent of the Book of Psalms, though probably mediated through its nineteenth-century and twentieth-century revisionists.

In terms of construction, it is a Russian doll of a poem, consisting of three sentences, each one half the size of the one before. While the first sentence is epic, extending to twenty-four lines, the second (reproduced below) clocks in at twelve sentences, and the final sentence is a comparatively succinct six lines. The sprawling first sentence enables Borson to catalogue many of the dispiriting and unnatural aspects of modern life, incorporating everything from gas stations to ghastly "test tube" hues. In short, "Save Us From" is the poet's most expansive and encompassing vision of the ugliness of urban life, with the saving grace of her gentle, supplicatory spirit.

> Save us from insomnia,
> its treadmill,
> its school bells and factory bells,
> from living rooms like the tomb,
> their plaid chesterfields
> and galaxies of dust,
> from chairs without arms,
> from any matched set of furniture,
> from floor-length drapes which
> close out the world,
> from padded bras and rented suits,
> from any object in which horror is concealed.

This beautiful passage revisits some of the elements we encountered in her early poems of the grotesque: the deep sense of fatigue which permeated "Blue"; the deathly living spaces of "Shapes"; and "Scarecrow's" interest in concealed horror. But we will readily observe that much has changed as well. For one thing, she has shifted from the subject pronoun "I" to the inclusive object pronoun "us." Combined with the appeal to a higher power, this shift marks the adoption of a broader, or even panoramic, perspective. And what does the world look like when viewed from above? Firstly, she perceives herself as one of a multitude—the teeming millions of the modern city—all of whom are dispirited by gruelling schedules and grotesquely unnatural conditions. Secondly, she sees city-dwellers as the prisoners of objects, the tawdry bric-a-brac of modern life. Borson's catalogue of dreary objects (chesterfields, chairs, drapes, bras, suits) suggests that people lose perspective in cities, eventually regarding themselves as just another item of furniture or clothing. And to convey the magnitude of this insight, she adopts the prophetic voice, successfully appropriating the prophetic voice of D.H, Lawrence and Whitman. The effect is singular enough to invite speculation.



By the time Borson published "Save Us From," she had been exploring the grotesque for a decade. Yet her poems in this category are mostly rather subtle, meaning their grotesque elements remained largely unnoticed, possibly even to Borson herself. The reader of a poem like "Scarecrow" could easily read it as a typical free verse pastoral, overlooking the grotesque elements. But with "Save Us From," something important shifts. The grotesque elements are no longer lurking in the penumbra of the subconscious; Borson has brought them to full consciousness. As already mentioned, Borson signals the significance of this development with dramatic shifts in perspective, vocabulary, and sentence structure, all of which show a pronounced religious influence. By becoming fully aware of the grotesqueness of modern life, Borson finally sees what needs to be done: she switches to an incantatory mode, figuratively calling on supernatural assistance to exorcise the demon of the grotesque. On first using this phrase, I wondered if this wasn't too fanciful a figure, but I subsequently discovered a passage in Kayser which seems to capture a very similar idea. It is worth quoting in full, because it captures the essence of "Save Us From":

> The darkness has been sighted, the ominous powers discovered, the incomprehensible forces challenged. And thus we arrive at a final interpretation of the grotesque: an attempt to invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world.

Borson's undeniable facility for beautiful imagery has sometimes distorted perceptions of her poetry. While she *is* a leading poet of natural beauty, her poetry is reducible to neither beauty nor happiness. A better starting point is an understanding that Borson is a contemporary poet whose deepest roots are in the British Romantic and American Transcendentalist traditions. On the surface, her poetry bears little resemblance to that of John Keats, Wordsworth and Dickinson. Nevertheless, the categories of Romantic and Transcendentalist poetry—especially the beautiful, the sublime, and the grotesque—are invaluable in analysing her work.

Reviewers who fail to recognize the grotesque aspects of her poetics have tended to characterise it in limiting ways, either ignoring Borson's unsettling poems entirely or misreading them as failed attempts at depicting joy. By turning our attention to Borson's grotesque creations, we can gain a more balanced view of her poetry. Like her High Romantic precursors, Borson is a poet of both beauty and terror; fittingly, she discerns the latter in both natural and artificial environments. Though she is keenly attuned to natural beauty, she is also a poet of uneasiness and estrangement. In poems like "Blue," "Scarecrow," and "Save Us From," Borson's investigations of the grotesque resulted in some of the finest poems from her early collections. To properly evaluate her work, it is necessary to assimilate an understanding of its darker and more disturbing undercurrents.

# to cook is to love is to know her

**When my dad calls me,**

he is still getting over a cold. His voice is congested; he sounds young and vulnerable.

But I know my dad and I imagine his large frame is sitting at his desk chair in the office, my mom's reading glasses sat precariously on the tip of his nose.

Typically one to command any room he walks into, right now he's probably wearing gray sweatpants and a tattered cotton shirt.

*To Cook is to Love is to Know Her*

**Jessica L. Pavia**

When Dad calls me, he is still getting over a cold. His voice is congested; he sounds young and vulnerable. But I know Dad, and I imagine his large frame sitting at his desk in his office, Mom's reading glasses sitting precariously on the tip of his nose. While typically one to command any room he walks into, right now he's probably wearing gray sweatpants and a tattered cotton shirt.

He gets right to it: "So you want to talk about Nana?"

"Is that okay?"

Nana passed away in 2015, along with the spring. She was in her eighties, suffering from a dementia we later discovered was most likely caused by a certain metal they once used for hip surgeries. Apparently, the metal would dissolve and break off into the body. We could have sued. We didn't.

Dad still can't talk about her too much. Every holiday, he turns tense and rigid, his parents' absence from his life a consistent and noticeable one. "Your father's off," Mom will say. "Do you know what's wrong with him?" She's not quick to sense his emotionally soft side; typically, everything he feels is felt hard and loud. This quiet suffering is always a shock.

"It's another Christmas without her," I'll respond.

Today, he's calling to talk about Nana's cooking. I want to write about it because I'm forbidden from having her recipes, because I love to cook, because I want to know her.

"Well, your Nana was an incredible Italian cook because her mother was. Your Nana's side of the family was from Abruzzo, which is renowned for its chefs and cooks."

Dad talks like he's being interviewed, formal and rehearsed. He pronounces Abruzzo differently each time he mentions it. Years ago, when we had gone to Italy as a family, we stumbled out of torrential rain and into a restaurant built into the hills. There, in Artimino, Dad befriended the old chef as he does with everyone he meets. When the chef asked where Dad's family was from, he answered with Calabria and Abruzzo. The old man simply sighed with a nod and slammed his fist on the table twice to signify the Calabrese stubbornness before warming his heart to the tune of Abruzzese.

"I vividly remember coming home from school to my grandmother and Nana in the kitchen, dozens of loaves of bread and cookies piled around them.

You know, Nana would buy serious culinary and cookware pieces or have them handed down to her. Her mom gave her this massive wooden cutting board and rolling pin, and there would always be dough or cookies on it."

He tells me the cutting board would be covered with six circles of flour and eggs at all times, a bar of Fleischman's yeast nestled into their centers. While listening, I found it weird that Nana was making bread with eggs, but I didn't say anything, assuming it must have been a brioche or some other enriched dough. I don't want to stop Dad from talking, from giving me these moments. I'm keenly aware, right now, how lucky I am to hold them.

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Tonight, I'm making dumplings. Handmade ones that I will painstakingly fill and fold. I take the premade wrappers out of the fridge to defrost. For the past few days, I have been saving recipe videos from Instagram, convincing myself this is something I can feasibly do.

I cut the napa cabbage base and separated the leaves. Running them under cold water, I rub the pad of my thumb against any spots of dirt. The recipe tells me to blanch the cabbage, so as soon as the water begins to boil softly, I impatiently dunk the leaves in. I'm not sure how long one blanches for, so I just wait until the green spinach-like tendrils around the white core cook down a bit, then plunge them into an ice bath.

Fighting to wring all the water out, I press the leaves between two sheets of paper towels and roll that into a log, pushing my body weight against the countertop. I then toss shiitake mushrooms into the water and wait for the firm slices to soften under the heat. This will end up being a mistake—their porous bodies bloating from the water.

Whenever I cook, I think of Nana, especially if I am making something from scratch. Earlier, I tried to make dumpling wrappers by myself, combining all-purpose flour and boiling water in a metal bowl. The wrappers came out thick and chewy because I used an empty wine bottle as a rolling pin. I decided to nix them and instead ran to the store for these frozen, premade ones.

Nana and I used to cook together all the time. Each visit to Florida was punctuated by at least one morning spent in the kitchen glued to each other's side, rolling store-bought pizza dough between our palms until they formed twists. Nana plopped each down into thick, boiling oil. She waited patiently until their pale colour turned a golden brown, then placed each onto paper towels to dry off before we dowsed them heavily in cinnamon and sugar.

But Nana is from a family where your recipes are passed down only to the eldest daughter. She was her family's, my aunt my dad's, and my cousin, mine. It's a tradition I imagine was much less alienating when families lived in the same neighbourhood, if not the same house. When everyone gathered together on Sundays for dinner.



Now, however, we rarely see Dad's side of the family beyond the occasional holiday, wedding, or funeral. I've tried asking for the recipes, thinking maybe our more progressive times would soften this tradition. I used to think my aunt would make an exception for me; I've stopped believing that.

I dunk the mushrooms in the same ice bath and get to squeezing everything I can out of them. Their bodies ooze through my fingers, still swollen with water. In the end, I acquiesce and just add less liquid to the overall mix.

The wrung mass is dropped onto my cutting board, where I chop them into small cubes along with the cabbage and watch them pile into a metal bowl nestled in the sink to save space. Ground pork goes in as well before I measure out the soy sauce, sesame oil, Chinese cooking wine, salt, and pepper. The recipe tells me to mix for six to eight minutes, which feels excessive, but I remember hearing in one of the many posts I saved that stirring clockwise for a long period of time is what gives dumplings their juicy bounce. I acquiesce to the arm workout.

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"Your Nana was always reading a lot of cookbooks," Dad says into the phone. "They'd clutter the house."

A few weeks ago, I asked if Nana only cooked Italian food. Dad didn't skip a beat: "No, she cooked everything. She cooked Chinese and Thai. One day, I walked into the kitchen, and there was this giant pan there. I asked her what it was. It was a wok. The first time I actually saw one."

"How did Nana start cooking Asian food?" I asked.

"Well, we'd get Chinese or Thai food for dinner, and she'd want to learn how to make the dishes on her own. So she'd buy a new cookbook. She was making French food and typical American fare, too. Julia Child and Jacques Ponpon, they were really big at the time."

I wonder if his memories of his childhood home being cluttered with cookbooks are the reason why, as a family, we've long searched for Italian ones. Even though Nana cooked by feeling; by *that's the right texture*, by *another pinch*, by *it should feel like sand*. We still scour store shelves for recipes reminiscent of her own. Especially his favourite childhood cookies: half-moon pastries filled with smashed grapes, chopped walnuts, and dark chocolate.

My attention back on the phone, I ask: "What do you remember about the cookies?"

"We would go to Naples or Canandaigua Lake to buy the grapes. We'd bring back bushels of them and sit around the table to peel the grape skins."

I laugh at the idea of my father sitting patiently enough to prepare the fruit. I think of his thick and short fingers, and I wonder how he'd even manage to coax the thin skin off of each grape. He hears me laughing softly and asks why.

"I just can't imagine you doing that."

"Well, we all had to. It wasn't just me."

My dad, who threw Nana's china set against the wall when he was a toddler, giggling at the sound of ceramic shattering; who stole golf carts and was escorted home by the police; who made Nana cry more than once. My dad: emotional, strong, impatient. How did she get him to do it?

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As soon as six minutes pass, I stop mixing. My wrist is tired from the motion and I still need to actually fill and fold each dumpling. I cut the wrappers loose from their plastic prison and placed them on the bottom left corner of my cutting board.

Now that I've left the filling to settle, liquid from the mushrooms and pork escapes to the surface. I switch my spoon out for a fork, a possible challenge already clear in my mind.

The tower of wrappers is still frozen in the middle, so I gently coax each round off the other, careful not to split it anywhere. I try to place a healthy amount of filling into the center of my first dumpling, the small sheet cupped softly in my palm. I wet the edge, fold the wrapper in half, and tuck the filling inside. Still, it escapes through, and the dough is getting too wet to stick. I'm fumbling, trying to braid the two halves together, pushing hard into the dough to crease it. But everything is softening and falling apart at my timid touch. I let the mangled thing slip through my fingers, scoop the disaster up, and plop it into the garbage.

*They made it look so easy in the video*, I think.

The next time I looked up, two hours had passed. Before me, an army of dumplings marched out in relatively straight lines. I take the Dutch oven from the cabinet, originally white but now speckled and stained, and place its heavy body on the stovetop. I fill it with water and leave it to boil. In just a few minutes, a gentle gurgle comes over the air. Using a slotted spoon, I lower each bundle of sustenance into the water. When they float to the surface, I add one cup of cold water, wait for them to drop with the temperature, and bring it back to a boil. I keep doing this until the pork is cooked through.

In these moments, when I spend endless hours after work in the kitchen, I feel closest to her. When Nana died, I was seventeen. Pretty quickly in my life, she stopped being able to cook and instead came over to our house for the holidays in woollen sweaters. Her face softened from years of motherhood; her cheeks sagged beneath her chin, so she always wore a sort of frown. The last time I remember her being with us for Christmas, Mom and I found Nana hovering by the kitchen island, quietly folding napkins. She wasn't really there anymore and hadn't been for a long time. We approached her gently, Mom wrapping Nana's body into her own.

At the funeral, I listened to my aunts and cousins tell stories about cooking with Nana, about all the years they shared with her. I had so few, and the ones I did have felt measly in comparison. There was so little to hold onto.



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When I have kids of my own, what will I be able to tell them? When they want to hear about our family—our past—is fried dough all I will have to show for it?

If I can't know her now, if I only get part of the whole, especially when it is still so hard for anyone to talk about her, then I need to build my own traditions off of hers. I will welcome my current and future family with bread and cookies inspired by those my father grew up on.

For my twenty-first birthday two years ago, I asked my eldest cousin, Anna, to come to my parents' house and cook with me.

"I know you can't give me the recipes, but I was wondering if we could make them together."

"Sounds good. I can come over on Saturday."

When she arrived, Anna's arms were heavy with cornmeal and baking powder, vegetable oil and eggs.

"You know we have like half this stuff?"

"I just wasn't sure. Best to be careful. We're making polenta donuts. You ready?"

She took out our biggest mixing bowl and poured the cornmeal in, followed by water and eggs and sugar.

"This is where it gets tricky. Nana would go by feel, so the measurements aren't exact."

We talked about food and Nana and loss the entire time. I listened to Anna's mornings and afternoons in Nana's kitchen making fresh pasta, rapt with jealousy.

"Whenever Mom and Dad had to go somewhere, Nana would watch us, and we'd cook together."

That's how she knew what consistency the polenta dough should be. And when we put the bowl in the refrigerator for at least forty-five minutes to firm up, Anna could tell they were ready by a glance.

"There were recipes Nina's grandmother wrote down, but one dish could be made a million different ways," Dad had once said.

We pulled the mixture out of the fridge. Together, hands dusted with flour, we rolled about half a cup worth of the dough between our palms, forming balls. The vegetable oil was simmering the whole time, popping and rolling behind us. Each donut took its turn in the bath.

I was brought back to Nana's kitchen in Florida—how I had to look up at her from below the countertop. She tested the oil's heat against her skin, fingers hovering over the hot pan. Instead of watching her drop each twisted log of dough into the oil, I get to do it this time. Anna stood behind me, calling out when the donuts were ready to be turned. When they became golden brown and cooked through, each round was set to dry on paper towels. We doused them, like Nana and I used to, in sugar and cinnamon. We created a pile of donuts on the plate, lopsided and tall.

Anna has a few recipes but a lot still live with my aunt. Anna's a mom now herself, and I can only imagine what her home will smell like, how she will bake the same dishes for her son that Nana once made for her. He will come to know our family's flavours and histories in a way I may never. Especially now that we see each other less and less as family dynamics shift and there aren't grandparents to hold us accountable. The next time my family will be able to taste Nana's half-moon cookies is becoming less clear.

At the end of Anna's visit, the donuts were growing soft already (they must be eaten as soon as they're fried). She handed me two index cards.

"They're not her half-moon cookies, but I thought you might like the donut recipe and one of my favourite zucchini dishes of hers. They're just starting points, though. So make them your own."

I took the cards from her and let them sit in my hands. I had hoped this would happen. The cards were messy with Nana's script. It felt like an acceptance, like I'd earned a piece of my family's history. It would be easier to hold anger toward Anna, to call her selfish or stubborn, but that's not fair.

Anna knew Nana longer than me, which means everything to grief. These recipes—they're as much a tether for her as they are for me. Tradition connects us to our lineage. By keeping Nana's wish, her mother's wish, her mother's mother's wish, Anna is woven into the familial rug. Let her be.

Because even with a recipe, Nana's dishes are and were made differently each time depending on whose hands touched the pastry and whether they thought the mixture was dry or not. Meaning that even with her recipes, I might never taste her food as she made it. I can try; I can continue to feed my dad, but because I never got to taste her version, I might always be recipe-testing.

And it turns out that no one knows where Nana's sauce recipe is. Most likely, the index card is oil-stained and torn in my aunt's basement, having slipped out of one box or another. Not on purpose, but simply the collateral damage of life.

I mourn this loss, as does my dad. But he will tell me time and again how her sauce wasn't too sweet like jarred marinara is these days. That feels like an opening. A break in the line of inheritance, a missing link for me to reach into and hold.

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Once the dumplings float to the surface, all silk-like and bulbous, I drop them into a new soup. Rich chicken stock that has been simmering away beside me, filling the small kitchen with an earthy tenderness. I don't know if Nana ever made dumplings when she cooked Chinese food. Most likely, these are a new tradition I'm forming under our name. But she did spend hours in front of a stove, she did chop and bake and serve. She did nourish people.

The dumplings are imperfect. Some break in the drop, the soft roundness of their backs splitting under the weight of boiled pork and all the juices



inside. Some are stodgy, thick at the seam. But when laddled up to my mouth, when fed to my roommate as we rehash the day, each will be delicious.

I spend a lot of time these days cooking for him, wanting to hear how she did things differently, excavating what he remembers through what he tastes.

Every Easter, I make Ricotta Pie because Nana did. I know mine tastes different because he tells me so, but each time, I try to make the adjustments he suggests.

I want to know if hers was more cinnamon-forward or if mine's missing an earthiness that fresh nutmeg could bring. I want to know whether she used two eggs or three. If the crust is thinner than she would have liked. Was her zest of choice orange or lemon? Is the custard lacking? Did she use fresh vanilla pods instead of extract?

Mom never understands how he can gratefully devour the pie and, instead of lauding my efforts, instruct me on what could have been better. She comes to my defence at every critique Dad gives.

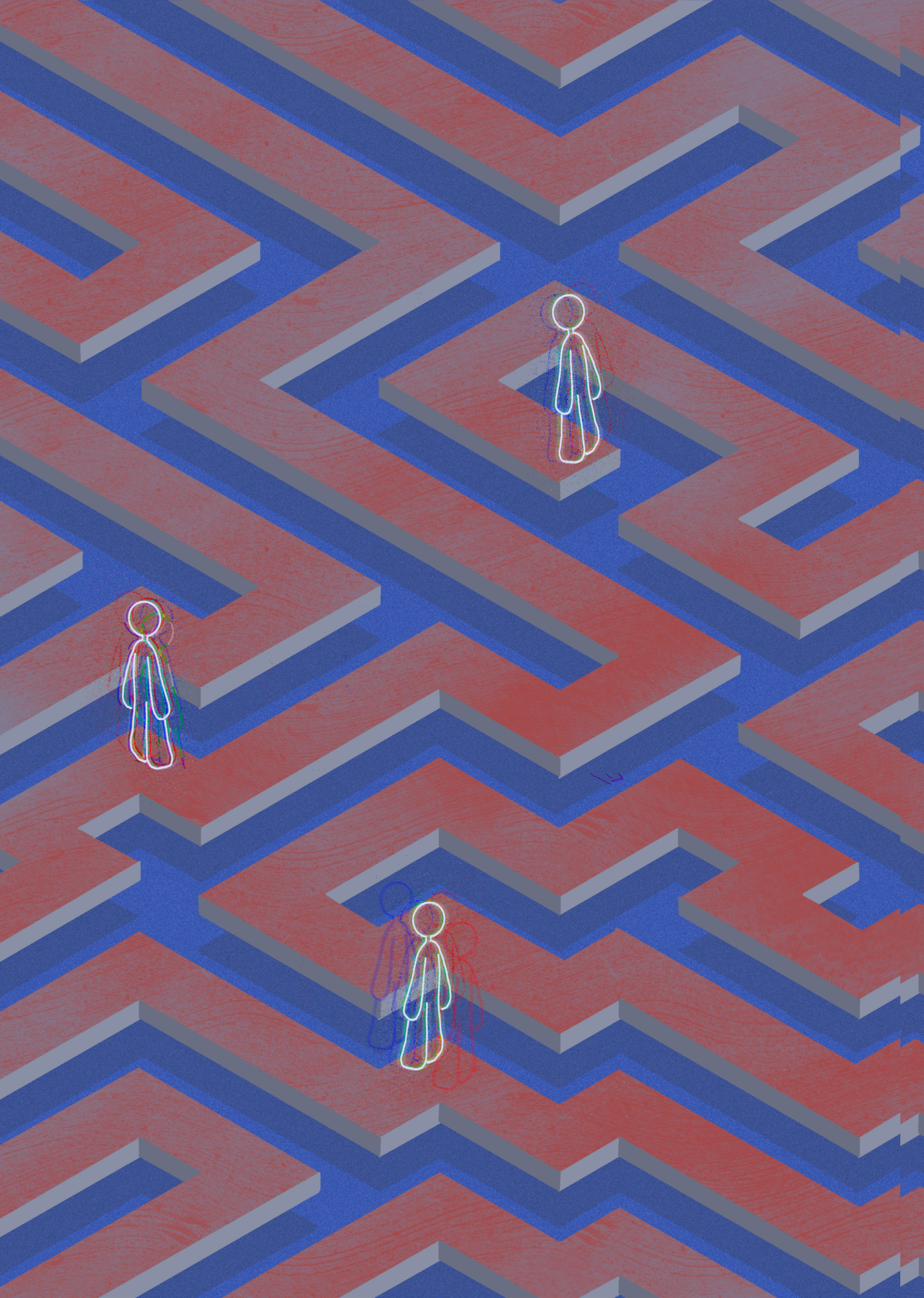
"You should be so grateful your daughter is cooking for you," she'll say. "Don't tell her what's wrong."

But we speak a language where stories are told through taste. Where memories are associative and nebulous, folded into fragile peaks.

Maybe one day I will perfect this pie. Maybe I will even find a recipe for those grape and chocolate and walnut cookies. Maybe that's no longer the goal. What I do know is this: if Nana were here today, she would have seen me, tasted my food, and given them all to me.

What recipes of mine will become embedded in this familial text? I'm my family's oldest daughter, and by talking to Dad about Nana, about his childhood, I am not only building up my image of her but of him as well. He's become inextricable to my understanding of who Nana was.

And traditions die hard with me and my father.





*Intuitive Navigation*

**Kasey Butcher Santana**

The bears paced in an enclosure that featured a series of stone cottages. I stood transfixed, watching them in their fairytale until, with a surge of adrenaline, I realized that the rest of the family had moved on without me. I was four years old and knew not to talk to strangers, but when I saw a zookeeper wearing the standard issue khakis, I decided that a stranger in uniform was safe. The zookeeper took my hand and I watched ducks waddle along the path while we looked for my family at the nearby exhibits. When we found them watching the macaws perching toward the front of their lush forest habitat, they mildly chastised me for getting lost. No one was in trouble for forgetting me. This was just the first incident in a childhood of getting lost. As I grew, so did my ability to lose my way; the range of my movements expanded, offering greater opportunity for wandering off, getting left behind, and worrying field-trip chaperones.

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I learned how to drive before anyone carried a smartphone with a GPS. I printed off directions from MapQuest for any excursion that took me beyond school, work, or my best friend's house. Navigating home from the downtown cinema, stopped at a traffic light, I frantically searched the map for a clue to how I got so off track. My foot lifted off the brake, and my car slowly tapped the bumper ahead. I hoped I imagined it, but I knew I felt contact, however slight. Then, the door of the other car opened. Alone in the dark, I stayed in my seat with the windows up as a man who looked like Danny Trejo examined his bumper, glowering. It seemed there was no damage because he shook his head at me and got back into his car. The hardness of his eyes when he looked at me still turns up in my subconscious at random intervals, along with the fear I felt, wondering what would happen next. I let my held breath out in a long, slow hiss as I remember him getting back into his car.

After another six months of getting lost, I came home and demanded of my parents, "Why didn't you tell me that you just take Jefferson downtown and Washington back?"

"How did you not know that?" they asked, frustrated that I had arrived, once again, after curfew.

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Seventeen and riding across Indiana in my musician boyfriend's minivan, I wished I had stayed home. I decided to tag along to a Wynton Marsalis concert with him and his stoner friends and now none of them knew where we were. The friends were always kind to me, but—ambitious and too serious, always toting around a thick book—I did not belong with them, and we all knew it. I did not belong with this boyfriend. We broke up before graduation, but years later, we met for tea in London, England, and he told me about a recent trip, renting a motorcycle and riding across Greece. I understood then why I fell for him when I was seventeen, but in that minivan, driving through cornfields, I started to realize that just because someone was nice to me that did not mean I had to follow them. "Men are better at navigating because there is more iron in our blood," one of the boys said as he looked at the map. The other girlfriend on the trip caught my eye and mouthed, "What the fuck?" before all the guys said variations of, "Shaun, no, man."

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During a summer class abroad in Rome after our first year of college, my new boyfriend was sure he could navigate through the twisting streets, as though the map was coded in his Italian genes. Our professor warned us that Rome looked like someone had tossed a bowl of spaghetti at a wall and planned the city according to what stuck. I was sure I would get lost immediately, but the chaos spoke to me. I always found the way back to the hotel while my boyfriend fretted over directions. You just took a left at the Trevi fountain, then two right turns, one at the marionette shop and another at the cat sanctuary, and then you crossed the river. Easy. I could manage this kind of intuitive navigation.

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I spent a semester abroad at Keele University in central England during my junior year and a large group of students from Kyoto University also came to campus for a month. The rest of us international students could buy cheap seats on their tour buses when they took day trips. On one such trip to York, I was hurrying to the bus home when I saw a young Japanese man walking alone in the wrong direction. I recognized him from an earlier trip to Oxford. We had been seatmates, sitting in awkward silence for two and a half hours. I imagined him wandering the old city walls, hoping someone would notice he was missing. No one would. I startled him as I tapped him on the shoulder. "The bus is this way," I said. We made it just in time. Three hours later, as we got off the bus back at the university, he asked to take a picture with me. "You saved me," he said. The sentiment was excessive in its expression, but I understood what he meant; I had been there.



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After Easter break, I took a weeklong trip with my friends Abby and David through Scotland to Iona, a remote island that my high school Shakespeare teacher had often talked about, describing its beauty and peacefulness. When I emailed asking for tips on getting to Iona, he outlined a long journey, culminating in a gusty ferry ride. From Keele, we took five trains, two buses, and two ferries. When I planned the trip, I made most of the bookings online, but the last leg—from the port town of Oban, Scotland, to the Isle of Mull, and across Mull by bus to a tiny ferry that would take us to Iona—had to be booked in person at the dock. I kept it to myself that I was not entirely confident I could get us to Iona and back.

At the ticketing office, the young man helping me looked as panicked as I felt. Between his thick Scottish accent and my fast Midwestern one, neither of us knew what the other was saying. After a few attempts to explain where I was trying to go, I looked at his tense shoulders and furrowed brow and intuited that he was new to the job. He simply had no idea what I was talking about, independent of any language barrier. An older colleague stepped in to help.

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*"We explored Iona Abbey and learned how Christianity came to Scotland; we feasted on burgers and pints of Guinness at one of the island's two restaurants, a small but elegant dining room located inside the hotel that we could not afford to stay in."*

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My relief when we took our seats on the ferry was interrupted by the realization that I still had to figure out how to book the return trip across the water. We made it though, and once we arrived on Iona, it hit us how small and remote the island really was. There was not enough activity to fill our three-day stay. We explored Iona Abbey and learned how Christianity came to Scotland; we feasted on burgers and pints of Guinness at one of the island's two restaurants, a small but elegant dining room located inside the hotel that we could not afford to stay in. We took a boat to see Staffa, an uninhabited island where Puffins sometimes roam. We took long walks.

After our second dinner at the hotel and a walk along the beach, we took a wrong turn. Iona is so small that it would take just over an hour to walk the whole island, end to end. There are more sheep than people. Getting lost seemed impossible, but somehow we managed. We watched the sun sink into the endless sea as we wandered off the path into knee-high brush. Under a

starry sky clearer than I had ever seen, we wandered more. It was lambing season and over the buffeting wind, we heard the haunting bleats of baby sheep, dogs barked at a distance, and we feared we would accidentally trespass and get attacked. An eerie sound like interference on a radio seemed to follow us. As Abby and David bickered about celestial navigation, I just kept walking, reminding myself that on an island this size, we could never be that far off the main road. Our cheeks and ears burned from the cold, but we trudged along for another hour before a sparse row of street lights led us to the main road. With aching feet relieved to be out of the brush, we silently made our way down the street and up a narrow staircase to our beds, the lambs still audible from under our blankets.

When I returned home from my semester in England, I visited my teacher to chat about the places I had traveled. I explained the winding trajectory we took to get to Iona and confessed that we had gotten lost on the island. "You know there's quicksand on Iona?" he asked, taking a pointed sip of his tea.

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Lying on the loveseat I salvaged from the common area of my grad school apartment building at the end of the previous summer, I was too exhausted to even cry. My apartment was my sanctuary in a rural college town, far enough from campus to be quiet but close enough to walk. I spent my days in that apartment reading, grading freshman essays, and training a puppy but this peaceful life I had started to build for myself felt hollow. My depression during that icy winter seemed like an extreme reaction to a string of changes: a bad breakup, a semester of graduate classes where I felt stupid and disengaged, and my friends from my master's program moving away to other schools for their next degrees or jobs. We had navigated these transitions together, venting about exams and applications over coffee and stacks of papers but it only took one semester apart for our group to disintegrate. Continuing into my doctoral program at the same school, I was moving on but also felt left behind. I had no map for this emotional state. A counsellor at the campus health center referred me to a support group for graduate students that met once a week, giving us a space to talk about the stress, competition, and loneliness of our programs with people outside our departments. There was this guy there named Julio, the only man in our group. I felt drawn to him, but aware that group therapy is not exactly the dream scenario to meet a partner. Over months, slowly, I felt less lost in my life. After the semester ended, we all found each other on Facebook, and Julio and I kept talking throughout the summer.

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On our honeymoon, I could not find the train station in Kortrijk, Belgium. That morning, hungry and jetlagged, Julio and I were uncharacteristically



tired of each other. When our train pulled into the station where we would switch lines to our final destination in Bruges, I told Julio I was going for a walk and darted away before he could protest. I thought I had an hour before our next train. I had thirty minutes. Noting each turn I made, I left mental breadcrumbs and explored the town square, taking photos to show Julio when I returned with a cooler head. On the walk back, I realized that I missed one of the turns. I did not recognize anything around me, and I could not find any signs pointing me toward the train station. Routinely checking the time, I wound my way back through the maze of streets until I stumbled upon a familiar white stone church. I took off running, praying that I was headed to the train station. I expected Julio to be angry that I was gone for so long, but when I sprinted through the terminal doors, he scooped me up into a hug, nearly crying from relief. As I took shaky breaths, he explained that when I had not returned, he started to spiral, imagining me getting kidnapped or how he would explain to my parents that he lost me in a foreign country. He did not yet know that they were used to me getting lost. When I missed our train, he tried to ask the man working the ticket counter if he had seen me, but in his guidebook French, the best he could come up with was, "Have you seen a brown-haired woman?" His relief when I returned eclipsed his frustration. Hours later, we walked in exhausted silence, but holding hands, through the cobblestone streets of Bruges, starving and in need of a beer.

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In Spain the following year, at a train station at the foot of Montserrat, I sat blinking away tears because I misread the map and schedule. We were stuck, waiting for the funicular, sacrificing valuable time on our day trip from Barcelona, shortening our planned hike. Annoyed, but kind about it, Julio sat a little too far away. Incrementally, I moved closer to him until, when the next train pulled in an hour later, my wet cheek rested on his shoulder.

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The academic career I trained for ten years to launch would not happen. Examining the shelves of books I had accumulated, I reflected on all the times I felt insecure in the classroom but pushed down the instinct that I should pursue something else. My search for something I *could do* led me to a county jail where I worked as civilian staff in the library. Among misfits, criminals, and down-on-their-luck people, I felt—for the first time—that I was doing a type of work I should have been doing all along. I found parts of my heart and mind that a university had never asked for.

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Driving home to Colorado after my father's funeral, I decided to take a detour to see Carhenge, a roadside attraction in Nebraska that, as the name suggests,

recreates Stonehenge with old cars. My dog and I spent the previous night outside Omaha in a smelly motel room with mysterious smears on the walls and no knobs on the faucet. I could hardly sleep, so we left at dawn, with Rory snoring on the passenger seat.

For long stretches of the highway through Nebraska, my phone struggled to find a tower. I made sure that I loaded directions before I left Omaha and reminded myself not to close the map so I wouldn't lose it when I lost cell reception. Exploring and taking photos of Rory sniffing tires or pigeons roosting in hollowed-out Buicks, I got distracted and—out of habit—started closing all the apps on my phone. Even as my thumb swiped up on Maps, I realized I was lost.

"We're okay," I told Rory, counting on my years of navigating with MapQuest or my gut. "We just have to find the highway, and then it's four hours home. No problem." I repeatedly tried to connect to the map, but I was so far in the corn that my phone did not get service again until I reached Colorado.

After an hour of searching for any sign pointing me to I-76, which would take me to Denver, I got enough reception to call Julio, who had returned to work the previous week. My map, however, would still not load. I could not explain where I was enough for him to help me find my way. We gave up, hoping that I was at least heading in the right direction. I feared I was driving north and hours later would discover that I was in Wyoming. The anxiety and anticipation gnawed at me. I needed to get home. Losing my dad, planning his funeral back in Indiana, and grieving, had exhausted me. I just wanted to lie down.

I raced down the country road screaming wordless angry sounds. Rory looked at me with wide, scared eyes. Before I fully broke into a Biblical lament, I saw a field of sunflowers and slammed on the brakes. Sunflowers are my favourite, but I had never seen a field so big—or individual flowers so massive. They looked not like plants, but like a mythical race of people, bobbleheads bent toward the horizon. I pulled off onto the side road and parked the car. While Rory circled, searching for the perfect place to pee, I stood near the flowers, looking up at their uncanny faces, and calmed myself. Cuddling Rory, I got back into the car and kept driving. An hour later, I found I-76. The mountains on the horizon guided us home.

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At four in the morning, my daughter cried, responding to the alarm in her belly. These early wakings had become our routine. I fed her then snuggled her close until Julio brought a hot mug of coffee. On this specific morning, I practiced the conversation I would have in a few hours, over Zoom, quitting a job that I loved. My daughter was seven weeks old and the maternity leave I cobbled together by hoarding sick days was ending soon, but we



were six months into a global pandemic and the promised winter surge loomed. We lived in a childcare desert with no family nearby. I simply could not make the costs and risks balance against the paycheck I brought home from the jail library.

These early morning snuggles, repeated day after day, would start to blur together, a warm respite from the uncertainty of the world into which I welcomed this baby and the anxiety I felt about my future, however grateful I was to have choices. I was a new kind of lost—I knew where I was, but didn't know where I was going. Months later, with the baby asleep in her own room, I spent early mornings writing, learning how to keep bees, or doing chores around the small alpaca farm Julio and I built. Like the map turned inside out, landmarks shifted but were still recognizable. I wondered how many more unforeseen twists still lay ahead. It has been so easy to see these turns as failures, but when I look away from the billboards of "should have" and "could have" and back at the path that led me here, I no longer feel lost at all.

*Season of Leaves*

**Christopher Sturdy**

The first time I discovered my grandpa crying was on thanksgiving. He played it off with a meandering speech, *You know…Northerners know somethin' about trees. Fallin' leaves always gettin' us ready to grieve. That's when it's safe. Them branches hold it on the nights you can't*. At eight years old, I only knew to wrap my twiggy arms around his stump legs. The year's first snow hit the next day, and I remember watching the maple in my parent's front yard discard leaf after leaf, unwrapping its capable limbs and painting our white canvas yard in hues of honey, scarlet, apricot.

And maybe my grandpa is to blame for my cycle of emotions. Like clockwork, I cry at the year's first frost. Sometimes I'll cry the day before if I'm really shaken, like when October 2005 claimed my grandpa, dead on the toilet, a shitty heart attack, or when Sophie left me a few Septembers ago with a shirt soaked in her tears and second guesses. My cries look a lot like gutters toward the end of the season of leaves, gargling everything the trees cough up. All that deciduous refuse frothing at the pipe's mouth, plugged tight save for a thin rainwater trickle from last night's storm. It erodes the foliate dam little by little as the puddle becomes a tributary, becomes a river, becomes a gushing waterfall.

I suppose now I understand my grandpa was right, because I don't remember crying all those years when I lived in that beach town where temperatures couldn't drop below freezing. I never reached for a jacket. I mean…how could my depression surface where trees clutched their greens like fancy pearls, refusing to acknowledge loss? How could my depression surface in a place where my boots never touched discarded leaves coating streets like ski wax? How could my depression surface in a place where I watched my friends die via *Facebook*, their *Zoom* funerals, and no bare branches to hang my grief on?

So you see, it makes sense that I'm here tonight in Minnesota, parked outside my parents' house in -7 degrees Fahrenheit with a frozen Master Lock on my U-Haul trailer and a new teaching job starting on Monday, watching the old maple in their front yard with one stubborn brown leaf waving like a flag of surrender. It makes sense that this stubborn leaf would hang on long enough for me to watch it detach and fall, riding waves of frigid gusts only to land on my windshield. And it makes sense that I produce a sob so loud it could change the direction of a river's current, the gutters of my tear ducts finally loose from years down south.

## *Portrait of my mother before she becomes an artist*

**Christopher Sturdy**

*Poem ending on a line from "First Light" by Chen Chen.*

Of course I'm procrastination-panic-cleaning
my apartment tonight, hiding my anxieties like she taught me,
behind the scent of Windex, Pledge, and Swiffer, too afraid to give
her the contents of my pocket just yet, too scared to say
something I've been sweeping under my lungs for years.

If my mother gave herself permission
to be an artist, I think she'd start by
sanitizing elegies of a sorry she never rinsed clean
before her mother's funeral, dusting off unspoken joys
bleached with guilt from stories swallowed
& hollow, diet versions she lives with for personal sanity.

Then she'd move onto her father, rinsing off the heart
attack honestly this time. No family lies of peaceful
sleep. She'd use apostrophe as apology for cutting him
out as easy as she cut checks for QVC her whole life.

For a break, she'd open doors
kept locked for two decades. Airing out
stale memories: The upstairs tub clogged & flooded,
growing a petri dish biome or the basement before it became
the city's second landfill for dirty plasticware and takeout boxes.

If my mother gave herself permission to be
an artist, she'd scrub the fear from bathroom tile grout,
shampoo the carpets that no guest has seen since almost losing
the house in 2010, and clobber the dust out of every rug she used
to love with my old Louisville Slugger.

But tonight, she's given herself permission
to argue with me, which I suppose is its own
form of art. We talk about prisons
as Tucker Carlson chirps his myopic missives
into her ears for the 200th week in a row. Her argument
unfurls in fiction, changing the channel on commercial break
& now it's all Chuck Norris or Steven Seagal, white men
with badges, pixelated agitprop.

Her safety comes with easy-to-spot bad
guys, *good apple* cops, demarcated lines
of justice that don't exist outside of TBS.
I'm thirty-five minutes deep into an invisible power-
point presentation via eccentric gestures. She nods, letting her questions slip
under couch cushions, beside pocket lint and pennies from 2002.

*Can we at least agree*
*that prisons can be personal?* I say,
finally accepting we won't agree on a level
larger than the two of us.

*What?* her crinkled brow says, the blue of her *iPhone*
creating shadows where they shouldn't be.

I gesture at the basement & the office door closed
behind me & above my head into her bedroom painted
in cat piss and wilted cardboard scraps.

The room washed in silence, deterging
Tucker & cop shows & old lies we both kept.
The quiet soaks into her cheeks, and again I'm reminded
of all the small ways we're alike. Eyes sloshing about
in a bowl of reflection, ideas scraping the folds
of her memories. I, too, see me distracting myself
with cleaning when I could be writing. I take my chance, give her
the pen in my pocket, kiss her forehead. I don't want to second guess
it my whole life. I ask her the one question I'm done
sweeping under my lungs:

*What would my mother say if she were the one writing?*

## *Pushing Boundaries: Radical Style and Nontraditional Form in Hannah Pittard's* We Are Too Many

**E.G. Shields**

How much time do I spend going over conversations in my head, replaying exchanges until I can make sense of them? What fragments, gathered while riding the downtown train or passing a couple on the sidewalk, stick with me and form themselves into the beginnings of a narrative? How often do I look at a situation, joyous or heartbreaking, and think, *I can use this later?*

Writers work continuously to craft the dialogue in their scenes, noting down word choices that could bring their characters' voices alive on the page. Sometimes those characters are imagined, but often they are us—our families, our lovers, our friends. In her memoir *We Are Too Many*, Hannah Pittard presents us with a portfolio of conversations. Written in three parts, Pittard records years worth of discussions leading up to, and following, her husband's affair with her best friend. By intertwining the history of her friendship and her marriage—and the ways in which the two overlap and intersect—and by walking us through the details in close to real-time, she makes us viscerally experience the breakdown of both. She takes moments where one might wish to be a fly on the wall, and makes us, the readers, just that.

The first part of the memoir, "Remembered Conversations," is structured as a script. Nonchronologically, the fragments of conversations in this first section—both real and imagined—paint a portrait of the relationships between Pittard, her now ex-husband, Patrick, and their best friend Trish, the paramour. Each exchange, rarely longer than a page, begins with set directions. It feels like one is watching a dark comedy unfold in a series of episodes. The directions at the beginning of each scene give, in a few sentences, an idea of what the speakers are doing at the time: talking on the phone, walking the dog, lying in bed. We see where they are and we are given a hint of the general mood.

My favourite example of this comes somewhere in the middle of the section, "November 2015—Hannah Asks Patrick to See a Therapist":

> They're in the kitchen. Why are they always in the kitchen when they fight? Patrick is on one side of the island. Hannah on the other. They are divided by an island. Hannah can't

stop thinking about the futility of this symbolism, and she wants to pull the thought from her skull like bubblegum from the sole of a shoe.

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The effect of this is a sort of close, third-person narration, which gives the reader the sense of being an objective observer. We as readers are never told what to think, but we are given the information and left to draw our own conclusions. Similarly, perhaps, to Hannah's own feelings of learning about the affair and having to piece together how it happened and how, or if, she could have prevented it. We know from the first conversation what is going to happen—"July 2016—Hannah Discovers Her Husband is Having an Affair"—and the rest of Part One takes us back to various points in time that might explain or foreshadow this life-shattering event. We sit at the bar observing multiple tipsy heart-to-hearts where Hannah and Trish appear to bond. We also observe hypocrisies that become so apparent across different interactions with Trish. Take this phone text exchange (can it even be called an exchange?) when Trish learns that Hannah made out with someone she doesn't "approve" of:

*Trish: What kind of piece of trash are you?*
*Trish: You disgust me.*
*Trish: He was your student.*
*Trish: Last year he was IN YOUR CLASS.*
*Trish: He's a baby. He's a senior IN COLLEGE.*
*Trish: I'm so gnarled out right now.*
*Trish: You're sick.*
*Trish: Anything? Anything at all to say?*

We listen in on phone calls between Hannah and various members of her family. Some of her family members seem blissfully unaware, caught just as much off guard as Hannah herself. But her sister, a constant ally and advocate, saw it coming from the beginning:

*Hannah: Guess who's having an affair.*
*Greta: Your horrible husband.*
*Hannah: Ha! Yes!*
*Greta: Wait. For real?*
*Hannah: Guess with whom.*
*Greta: The loser you insist on referring to as your best friend.*
*Hannah: Double ha! Yes, yes!*
*Greta: Oh, H…*



We see Hannah run into Patrick's ex-wife, Holly, who warns her of certain red-flags, tendencies that we watch, like a forest fire, unfurl over time. We question if Holly has her best interest at heart. Who can be trusted? Is this foreshadowing, or a spurned previous lover? We encounter scenes like this and wonder, like Hannah must have, what the motive might be:

*Holly: You'll end up paying for everything.*
*Hannah: I don't know what you're talking about.*
*Holly: He'll use you and then dump you. We went through my inheritance in a year.*
*Hannah: We're not together like that.*
*Holly: I don't get it. You're not his type.*
*Hannah: Okay.*

By skipping around in time and drawing different people into the narrative, Pittard presents a multifaceted view of the surrounding circumstances leading up to the affair. We see young Pittard's naivety in both friendships and romantic relationships. We see the dynamics at play that make us want to call out and warn the young woman on the page. We see her sister actually warn her on multiple phone calls. We want so badly to stop the inevitable, but we are powerless. We can only watch it all happen.

Part Two, "An Imagined Exchange," is a switch to a more cerebral examination of what went wrong, an attempt to process the relationship—but not in any traditional way. This section begins as an internal monologue musing about what type of event might bring Hannah and Patrick back into contact, if any. Then we start to see the tense change—Pittard is addressing these thoughts to someone. We learn that "this someone" is Patrick. The section is written as if she were speaking to him. Then, the narrative is interrupted by the ghost of Patrick who still lives in Pittard's brain:

*There you were, the old you, and I knew you hadn't changed. It was comforting in its way, knowing you were still you.*
*YOU: I disagree with much of how you've portrayed me.*
*Well, sure. Yeah. That makes sense.*
*YOU: Don't condescend to me.*
*Wherever I go, there I am.*

These interruptions by another character complicate the narrator's perspective in a fresh and unexpected way. By having an imagined Patrick call her out, disagree with her, and point out what he sees as inconsistencies or fallacies, Pittard is calling into question her own perception of how things played out, of where to place blame.

> *YOU: Even now, you deny me any agency. Whether it's intentional or not, whether you can even see it happening or [not]… I took care of myself before I met you.*

She is anticipating any possible criticism about her perspective at the same time. She sees in her own narrative the critiques a reader might have and any scepticism they might be bringing to her story. By doing this, she calls out the possibility that she could be an unreliable narrator before the reader might.

The exchanges in this section also serve as an opportunity for closure. Pittard reminisces about good times she and Patrick had. She shows the sentimentality and tenderness that were nevertheless present in their relationship. "Do you remember our wedding?" she asks imaginary Patrick.

"It was a great day. One of the greatest of my life," he answers later.

Even so, she refrains from glossing over any complicated feelings that come up. She points out that although it was a wonderful day, a happy memory, it was nevertheless still clouded by Trish. We see again that Trish was there from the start.

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Part Three, "A Coda in Pieces," serves as a conclusion, an ending passage much like a coda in a musical arrangement. This section is structured as a series of short, numbered vignettes. These flashes of memory are more focused on the *After*, the emotional effects of the affair, which lead up to the present day. They also fill in some important historical information that might not have fit into the structure of the first two parts. We see how Pittard and Trish met for the first time, and learn of Pittard's reflections on the beginning of their friendship. We learn the origins of Pittard's eating disorder and how it manifested for years in the background, as well as the relapses that would have been happening during the stretches of time we read about in Part One.

This section gives us a different kind of insight, a more direct look into Pittard's thoughts and memories, from her own perspective rather than as an outside observer. The vignettes here are honest, raw, and emotionally vulnerable, like one of my favourite passages that comes near the end of the book under the heading "31.":

> *I like to say I have no regrets, but it's not true. Because I'd give almost anything to go back—to any one of those moments—to the man at the table full of men or to the female doctor who wouldn't sterilize me because she didn't think I—at age thirty—could have known my own mind or to Patrick when he was explaining why it wasn't a big deal that he'd gone alone to see Lucinda Williams with an attractive, single woman from his workshop and then gone out after, still just the two of them, until three in the morning—and be rude.*
>
> *My god, to go back and be rude, just once. What a pleasure.*



In *We Are Too Many*, Hannah Pittard restructures our idea of a memoir into something totally innovative. She takes what we think of as a memoir's structure and flips it on its head, creating a form that is entirely her own. Within these new parameters, Pittard presents a narrative of an extramarital affair like none we have ever seen. She gives us a sampling of the complexity of human relationships. She shows us the red-flags, the missed opportunities, the beautiful moments, and the mistakes that make up each of these connections, both within a marriage and outside of it. She shows us all the angles and all the wounds, both open and healed.

"In grad school, my peers constantly accused me of writing personal essays disguised as fiction by way of the third-person pronoun," Pittard writes in the book's introduction. "'This is you,' they'd say. 'This is you. This is you. This is you.'"

In *We Are Too Many*, Hannah throws off the guise of fiction and drops the reader, sometimes uncomfortably, into a series of memories. She takes the idea of the personal essay and runs with it, turning it into so much more than just an essay. She takes scenes from her history and makes us, the reader, experience them alongside her. *We Are Too Many* is a masterpiece of craft. It is an intimate portrait of a writer and of a life, and we, the readers, are unable to look away.

*Coda*

**David C.C. Bourgeois**

In spite of the meanness of their possessions, the apartment was as cramped as Sonia could stand. The landlord's unit took up most of the floor, leaving not much room for the awkward one-bedroom apartment she shared with Michael, only a claustrophobic little sliver, in fact, into which their lives were squeezed. Winter coats by the entry, backpacks by the bathroom door, an upright piano too large for the living room, a love seat so smothered with laundry it was rendered all but useless—there was room for little else. Charts and lead sheets sat wedged into their two small bookcases and, of the few mementos they brought when they took possession, the only thing of real value to her was a tortoise-shell music box. Her father bought it when she was an infant to gentle her squawking and stifle her tempers. Now they used it as a paper weight.

The apartment lacked even a separate kitchen. It was just a corner of the living room with a stove and fridge, and the counter on which they often ate their meals. A window at the end of the narrow room relieved her sense of encasement somewhat, but it faced the brick and iron of the alley and, except for when it snowed, there wasn't much to like about the view. Their fledgling livelihoods could afford them little more. Already the landlord was threatening an increase. If not for the help her parents periodically forced her to accept, wearing down her resistance with repeated hints and insinuations, some months they could not have kept their bellies full. As it was, there were times she felt almost hollow, even all the way into her bones.

Weary from another hurried, nearly automatic round of lovemaking, Sonia slumped over the sink and dragged a forearm through her bangs. The heat and steam of the dishwater was almost too much for her. Michael entered from the bathroom and shuffled over to the piano. A stack of music, most of it hers, he dropped onto the floor. Her music stand was folded away in a closet to save space, and Michael liked a bare music rest.

"Could you maybe put those in the bench?" Sonia asked.

It was the kind of thing she said sometimes just to hear herself say it. He had said little since coming to her after dinner, with adolescent urgency and hardly waiting for her to get excited. Now, not even seeing her, Michael flopped down and shifted himself into position. He caressed the keys and

pressed down gently, almost inquiringly, eliciting from the instrument the whispered, intimate opening notes of the *Pathétique*, second movement.

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*"She could almost feel it herself: how his fingers touched the keys, the dexterous tension of his phrasings, the taut freedom in his playing that one had to know oneself to really understand, and which she did understand, better than he sometimes credited. She loved seeing him like this."*

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Sonia rattled the cutlery in the rack to get his attention, then rattled it again, but too late. He was already gone. At times, he would wander through hours of repertoire without returning. Sometimes he would forget to eat and she would have to put a plate down at his side before he took note of the time or his own hunger. Her eyes rolled more or less on their own. They knew the routine. She lifted a glass from the water and, minding the chipped edge, twisted the dishcloth inside and around the lip. Then she turned it over in the rack to dry. She was on the verge of plunging for another dish, but paused instead and really looked at him.

Perched on the bench, back rounded towards the keyboard, head slanted away, his eyes half-open but sightless. *Adagio cantabile*. Slow and graceful. Singingly. His shoulders shifted with the music's subtle, shifting moods, rising in crescendo, falling or retreating into moments of spareness. Her frustration eased. She could not see them, but knew the way the fine muscles of his hands and forearms must be fluttering visibly beneath his flesh. She could almost feel it herself: how his fingers touched the keys, the dexterous tension of his phrasings, the taut freedom in his playing that one had to know oneself to really understand, and which she did understand, better than he sometimes credited. She loved seeing him like this. Even when it was classical music, which he played infrequently and mostly for the discipline, she found herself drawn in. The purity of concentration, of expression. He never felt more truly there to her, though he was really somewhere else, than when he was playing; and the further away he went, the more her heart wanted her to follow. Sometimes she would come over and lean against the piano just to feel his touch reverberate through the cold, black lacquer of the cabinet.

She closed her eyes and her mind wandered. The night before. Colin on the phone and in a panic. It had taken Michael several minutes to talk him down. Don't worry. They could rework the sets. Everything would be fine. Yes, he knew they wanted vocals. Sonia had come out of the bedroom



to listen. He hadn't thought of that, Michael had said. He didn't know. He would ask. Then, to her delight, he did. Could she stand in. Jenn was sick. Did she know the material.

The closing notes of the *adagio* faded and Sonia watched Michael shift at the piano and stare aloft. He probed the keys for a few moments, his head tilted forward and a little to one side, listening, almost inquiring of them what they wanted. Then he eased into the opening bars of a Jane Siberry tune. Delicate and mournful, "Love is Everything." Her breath caught. She smiled.

Some weeks before, Michael had heard her humming the melody and, sensitive to its possibilities, he began to work it up. And then last night, at last, when the closing set ran short, he asked her could she do it. Removing her microphone from its stand, she went to stand beside the piano. The stage lights were irritating at first, and the crowd restless, and she too much aware of Colin sitting back on his stool, the neck of his upright bass resting on his shoulder, watching and listening. But then, once she opened her mouth, she became insensible to just everything, everything for the length of the duet, everything except the blending of her voice with the piano. The drive home had been serene. Glowing, she had slid down into her seat, undone her hair, and let her neck go limp against the headrest. She had almost reached over to hold Michael's hand, before remembering that he didn't like the distraction when behind the wheel.

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*"But as her hand fell on the vibrating cabinet, she felt herself grow warm and begin to pulse, and she opened up to it with less and less restraint, the notes climbing on the updraft of the refrain, rising with each repeated phrase until the high was almost more than she could take."*

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Reaching the chorus, Michael's playing rose to a *mezzo forte* and the apartment air grew thick and full. The melody was like an eaglet struggling to take flight. A break- up song, it broke her down a little every time. Sonia felt the fear and joy of the night before stir again inside her as she listened. Her stomach trembled and she smiled. It was like he was reading her mind.

She dried her hands and went to him. Her voice was cold at first and lifted off with difficulty. But as her hand fell on the vibrating cabinet, she felt herself grow warm and begin to pulse, and she opened up to it with less

and less restraint, the notes climbing on the updraft of the refrain, rising with each repeated phrase until the high was almost more than she could take. Had the ceiling been a lid she would have blown it off its hinges and flown away.

After that, it was just so easy: her eyes closed, her tone colouring, her voice gliding gently down the sweet, attenuated sadness of the melody as she circled back and rode the coda home. Her body was aflutter with the rare, tremulous joy that came to her sometimes, and she breathed deeply as Michael's accompaniment died away in the song's fading, arpeggiated chords.

*"...her eyes closed, her tone colouring, her voice gliding gently down the sweet, attenuated sadness of the melody as she circled back and rode the coda home. Her body was aflutter with the rare, tremulous joy that came to her sometimes..."*

He cut off the sustain, and the notes fell silent. Sonia sat down beside him, smiled, and put her head on his shoulder.

"Last night was wonderful," she said.

Michael didn't answer. He only plinked some listless phrases.

"I hope we can do that again," she added. She watched as Michael's face tightened. "What is it?"

"I don't think so," he said. He hesitantly trilled a pair of keys. "Don't misunderstand. You were great to stand in. I just don't think it should be a regular thing."

Sonia looked at him. "I thought it went well."

"It did...really...only I have to worry that you'll forget the words or miss the changes or...I don't know what else."

"You don't know what else."

She watched Michael stare hard at the keyboard. His fingers repeated their ornamentation: a mordent, a biting baroque gesture.

"Maybe if I had more time to prepare," she said.

"Sure, but...look, you know how some people—they open their mouths and their whole body seems to hum...like they're totally free and open. When you sing, it's like...I don't know. It's like you're closed off somehow. Like you're trying too hard."

She looked at him. "But we used to do this all the time."

Michael just frowned.



Sonia rose from the bench and tidied the pages from the floor. She crammed them onto a shelf, but carefully. After all, there was hardly money to replace them. Maybe he didn't mean it. Not the way it sounded. There was a kind of apology in his unwillingness to look at her, and when she looked at him she could see how very sorry, in his sadness, and his slumping, and his hesitation, he felt. Though, admittedly, less for her.

She returned to the dishes and watched as Michael resumed his noodling, errantly tapping out a few abortive intervals. Major seconds. Or maybe they were diminished thirds. The piano's even temperament makes it hard to tell. Though, to be fair, the difference is small, only a few cents.

## *City: A Love Story*

**A.D. Carr**

> *"We see ourselves in this city every day when we walk down the side-walk and catch our reflections in store windows, seek ourselves in this city each time we reminisce about what was there fifteen, ten, forty years ago, because all our old places are proof that we were here."*
> —Colson Whitehead, *The Colossus of New York* (2004)

The weekend began with a parade.

J. arrived home around 4 p.m. After a quick round of drinks with friends at a neighbourhood pub, we walked back through gathering revelers to watch the celebration from our third-floor fire escape. It was the first weekend of March when Cincinnati celebrated Bockfest, a quirky and beloved beer festival that marked the official-unofficial start of spring. Unlike other parades—which might feature junior high drumlines or spritely acrobats—this one was oriented around the procession of dozens of wooden kegs, a bathtub on wheels, men and women in lederhosen and dirndls, and a multitude of docile, leashed goats meandering along a route between the oldest bar in the city and a century-old lagering warehouse-turned-event space. I watched my husband watching the merriment below and felt a flood of dread.

Earlier that day, the dean of a small college in Iowa called to offer me a tenure-track position. It was my dream job, the one out of the fifty or sixty listings I'd applied to that I couldn't refuse. And so when I called J. to share the news, there wasn't much to discuss. Later, in the few moments of private celebration we enjoyed before colliding with the others, we raised a toast in appreciation of my achievement, gingerly steering our conversation around the things we didn't want to talk about: the last Bockfest, the last City Flea, the last Second Sunday, the last spring and summer *here*.

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When people ask for the story of how we met, I never know quite where to begin. We first met at a party my roommates and I threw after I'd finished my master's. He was, at that time, just a friend of a friend, an interloper passing through my neighbourhood on his way to a Wilco show. We made eye contact across the yard when I noticed him noticing me. I didn't ask his name.

A year passed, during which I moved into my own place, muscled through the first year of my Ph.D., and ghosted men who got in my way. At

the end of the next summer, I walked into a bar only to find myself halted by his gaze from across the pool table, where he was setting up a shot. Sidling up to me later, he eyed my fresh tattoo—an ampersand on my left forearm, still shiny and a bit swollen—and turned around while lifting his shirt to show me his own: the f-holes of a viola, bold and elegant, positioned like wings on his back.

At last call, J. asked me about where I might like to go on a proper date, and for the first time that night, I had nothing to say. For three years, this city had been, for me, a way station, an incubator for my ambitions, nothing special, nothing permanent. For him, it had been home for almost thirty years.

"I don't know," I said. I didn't know anything outside of my apartment, the bar on my corner where I sometimes graded papers, and the university English department.

For a time, I tried to keep things casual; the more hours we spent together, the more I looked for excuses to rebuff such a predictable distraction, as I had with other sparkly-eyed men who wanted to stay out late on school nights. But before I could gather the courage to ignore his calls altogether, I felt a gravitational shift, a force pulling me toward him; snugged into his orbit, it was easy to love him.

He tells a simpler story. "You had a cold dead heart, and I warmed it back to life," he would say, grinning. This version is also true.

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I made him a copy of my key, and he dusted off the French press stowed in the back of my cupboard. I adjusted my habits so our work and leisure time lined up, and he returned to his apartment every couple of days to spend time with his cat and sort the mail. On weeknights, we mostly hung around my neighbourhood near the university, subsisting on Indian takeout, $2 Molson drafts, and discounted popcorn at the art theater around the corner. On weekends, we ventured out: into *his* Cincinnati.

In the fall, he took me to hear Beethoven's Third at Music Hall and to see the tigers at the zoo; on one early winter day, he burst through the door with a couple of plastic sleds and an elaborate plan for the season's first snowfall. In the spring, we skipped school and hopped a bus downtown for the Reds' Opening Day parade. Once summer hit, we calculated the meager buying power of his teacher salary and my graduate stipend and signed an $850/month lease for a sprawling, if somewhat tired, loft in Over-the-Rhine, a not-yet gentrified neighbourhood in the urban core. At the time, the area was mostly populated with artists, students, and other low-income residents. Our loft sat three stories above a storefront, across the street from a rock-and-roll bar, and in the center of everything. We bought a grill, adopted a dog, and, because we had no yard, explored the city on foot—the dog a convenient catalyst to meet people and weave ourselves into the fabric of the neighbourhood.



J. knew everything about the city. As we walked, he'd point out his favourite murals and rattle off comprehensive histories of this or that building, even when entire structures had been razed and rebuilt. He showed me where his parents went to middle school in the late fifties, where the old baseball stadium stood before the interstate carved a permanent wound through the urban core, and where, in the nineties, his dad ran a food ministry. His affection for his home made him a perfect docent, and I was his eager apprentice.

He talked and I listened, feeling the city imprint itself upon me. Over time, I heard myself repeating the same details and anecdotes to friends and family who visited. "This road used to be the Miami-Erie canal," I'd say about the parkway that cuts across town just south of our apartment, launching into the story of how the district above came to be known (derisively) as Over-the-Rhine. We'd continue our stroll, pausing occasionally to admire the architectural features that qualified the district for the National Register of Historic Places. At some point, it became apparent that the arc of my tumble into love with J. mirrored the arc of my tumble into love with our city, and I couldn't give the tour without weaving the threads of our own history into the tapestry. Here is the bakery where we buy our bread. Here is where we go for coffee on Saturdays. Over there, down that block, is the brewery that opened the same day we got married.

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As the last clump of parade entries came into view, our group of ten or so drained our beers and drifted back out into the brisk evening, weaving with festival-goers past the rock-and-roll bar and the new popsicle shop, darting across Liberty Street between waves of traffic, and cutting through the seedy gas station to the beer hall. Inside, local brewers tapped kegs of bock, bands played bluegrassy polkas and, later, a new Sausage Queen would be named.

Like any hyperlocal tradition, the festival brought together every faction of the city: parents, kids, yuppies, and hillbillies; blue-collar westsiders and well-to-do suburbanites; politicians, physicians, musicians, aestheticians, and, of course, the neighbourhood folks, all crushed in shared, pulsing revelry. We mostly huddled, marvelling at the masses, or tried to snake through the crowd together without spilling too much beer.

At seven, the main band went on, Jake Speed and the Freddies. We'd missed them last year. As the opening chords of their folky festival theme song rang out, the crowd erupted, hoisting our beers and singing along. My chest thrummed as we approached the chorus, and at that moment, it overtook my throat, choking off the song's dearest lines altogether. Replaying the job offer I'd all but formally accepted, I looked at my husband swaying arm in arm with his lifelong friends, and just as profoundly as I'd felt the expansion of the universe all those years before, I felt the world protract, somehow constricting

my lungs and leaving me gasping. Yeasty air filled my head as scenes from our life shuffled across my memory, and I felt the peculiar sensation of my heart splitting in two: one half threatened to burst out of my chest with the excitement of long-delayed vocational validation, while the other half burrowed into the depths of my stomach as if trying to root here, now, permanently. I dunked my nose into my cup and took a long draw of beer, hoping it would coax my throat back open and help me find my breath again. From a few feet away, J's face fell from elation to alarm.

"What's wrong?" he yelled at me over the swell of duelling mandolin and guitar. I shook my head and waved my hands. Nothing, nothing, please ignore me. He moved toward me like he always does when I try to push him away. "What's wrong? Why are you crying?"

Was I crying?

"I'm not," I said, crying. "I'm fine. It's fine."

"Come with me," he said, pulling me by the elbow through the throngs of people and out onto the street. "What's wrong?"

I rubbed my eyes with the heels of my hands.

"I'm sorry," I said a little louder than I meant to, the only volume at which I could form coherent words. "I'm sorry we have to move away." I felt my pulse quaking in my ears and my bowels. I thought I might collapse or throw up or melt into the pavement. The thin, late-winter breeze burned in my chest and snapped at my neck, moist with sweat.

"Stop—what?" he asked, frustrated now. "I thought we were having a good time. Why are you thinking about this right now?"

I could hardly look at him, choosing instead to survey the scene in front of me over his shoulders: girls slinging their arms around each other's shoulders, boys pissing on the few remaining piles of ashen snow, the #17 bus roaring up East McMicken on its way into Clifton Heights.

"Because you love Jake Speed!" I cried helplessly, gesturing with open arms all around us—to the festival hall and the drunks stumbling off curbs, to the passing cars honking at jaywalkers, to the twinkling lights of our city. "You're giving all of this up for me. And I can't say no." It was an act that overwhelmed as it humbled, a gift I didn't know if I could match if he had asked the same of me. With everything I'd worked for finally within reach, I couldn't imagine unstitching ourselves from this perfect, gritty city, and I was afraid of what our life would become, what our love would become if we left behind its conduit. If we would be enough. If *I would be enough*.

If he was willing to go, to leave all of this, for me, should I have been willing to stay? That I knew he wouldn't even ask made everything hurt worse.

"I'm sorry," I said, openly weeping now and reaching for him. "We're missing Jake Speed."

"I love *you*," he countered. The yellow light from the Shell station cast my field of vision into an impressionistic glow. He smiled and shook his head and held me tight, and I could tell he was also afraid but trying not to think about it. "I'll be fine," he said, rubbing my back. "We'll be fine."



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The traditional gift for the first wedding anniversary is paper. That summer, after the movers cleared our apartment of all the boxes, we made paper of our skin, inking outlines of Ohio into our arms. Mine with a heart marking the location of our city, his filled in with a blocky rendering of the fountain at the city's center. Two weeks later, I took my last pre-dawn jog around the neighbourhood, past new kitschy storefronts and old hardware shops, weaving around sidewalk closures where construction equipment signaled the promise (or threat) of new condos or a renovated wine bar. At Fountain Square, where I usually looped back toward home, I paused to look for a penny to toss. The sun was just beginning to lift off the river, reaching out toward me from between the buildings. I couldn't find any coins, but I stood there awhile anyway, cooling in the fountain's mist.

Not wanting to rush the final blocks, I walked the rest of the way, stopping at the coffee joint around the corner from our place just as the owner set out his sidewalk sign: two cortados to go. We packed our dogs—two of them now—and his instruments and my bikes into the cars and drove through wind and rain to a small city bullied on all sides by oceans of commodity crops.

Not long after, we bought a house on a quiet wooded street. I'd grow tomatoes; he'd play in a band. We had a baby. We buried a dog. We lost a one-hundred-and-forty-year-old oak tree in one of those summer storms that build strength over hundreds of miles of open plains, and with our then-three-year-old holding the hose, we planted two new trees in its place.

Last week, sitting at a window table at a local brewery in the Czech district, I noticed a new sign on a building across the street.

"We should try that," I said, pointing.

He turned.

"When did that open? Didn't it used to be—"

"Yeah," I said, remembering the bar we hadn't been to since our first or second year here.

"Man," he said, under his breath.

We liked that place.

***Court Ludwick*** is a writer, artist, teacher, and Ph.D. student at the University of South Dakota. She is the author of *These Strange Bodies*, a hybrid collection of essays, poems, and experimental works, forthcoming from ELJ Editions in 2024. She is an associate poetry editor at South Dakota Review, as well as the founder and editor-in-chief of *Broken Antler Magazine*. Court's writing and art can be found on Instagram and Twitter @courtludwick, and on www.courtlud.com.

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***Christopher Sturdy*** (he/him) resides in Minneapolis, Minnesota where he teaches creative writing to high schoolers. When he's not teaching, he can be found attempting to keep plants alive or dribbling a soccer ball to see if he's still got it (whatever it is). His poetry can be found in Press Pause Press, *Emerge Literary Journal*, and *A Thin Slice of Anxiety*.

***E.G. Shields*** is a recent graduate of the new school's MFA program where she studied fiction, nonfiction, and hybrid/graphic writing. In her spare time she can be found either curled up with a book, enjoying a meal with friends, jumping into the ocean, or strolling with her dog through the park, looking for birds. Her work was featured in the Reader's Write section of *The Sun* magazine and her drawn essay appeared in *The Rumpus*. She lives in Brooklyn, New York.

***David C.C. Bourgeois***' work has been published or shortlisted for awards in several Canadian literary magazines. Most recently, his debut novel *Full Fadom Five* (Baraka Books) was a Finalist for the 2023 QWF Paragraphe Hugh MacLennan Prize. He lives with his wife and two adopted alley cats in Montreal.

***A.D. Carr***'s work has appeared in *The Rumpus* and CRAFT Literary, among other places. She teaches writing and rhetoric at a small college in Iowa, where she lives with her spouse, her five-year-old child, and an old brown and white dog.

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