

JUL-OCT 2019 - ISSUE 3

# Dreamers

Creative Writing

## ITCH

Story by  
Carolyne Topdjian

## HAIKU

Contest Winners

# 10

## EXOTIC

Writing Retreats

+

Writing Farm

+

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Author Interview with  
**Caroline Misner**  
*The Spoon Asylum*



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COVER PHOTO BY ELEANOR DOBBINS

# Exciting News

## Masthead

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We've had an exciting couple of months here at Dreamers. First, our membership application was accepted by Magazines Canada and then soon after, they agreed to distribute the Dreamers Magazine to independent bookstores across the country. Just a few days later, we found out that our magazine was also accepted by Indigo/Chapters/Coles, and a week later, it began appearing on bookstore shelves. It happened so fast!

We're also excited to announce the launch of our writing farm! We've been working on getting this set up for a year and we're FINALLY done with bylaw variances, lawyers, surveyors, property mergers, and building permits. The Dreamers Writing Farm in the beautiful Bruce Peninsula, Ontario, Canada, is now open for business! This summer, writers can participate in a self-directed writing experience – spend time in our Secret Garden in the woods, choose a healing writing prompt from our tiny library, stay in our Dreamers Studio or in one of three private bunkies, visit with our three Nigerian dwarf goats – the Brothers Grimm, and enjoy our open air shower and outdoor kitchenette. It's the perfect environment to spark your creativity. For even more inspiration, head over to nearby Sauble Beach, an 11 kilometer freshwater beach that offers glistening white sand and breathtaking sunset views.

This issue of the Dreamers Magazine is also something we're excited about. Inside, you'll find the winner and honourable mentions for our 2019 Haiku Contest. We had over 600 haiku submitted to this contest. The number and quality of the entries made choosing the winners very difficult, but we're so pleased with the results. We hope you are too. A special thank you to Dr. Reinekke Lengelle, Symposium Co-Editor for the British Journal of Guidance and Counselling, Assistant Professor at Athabasca University, and of course, Poet and Writer. And definitely make sure you check out this issue's feature story, "Itch," by Carolyn Topdjian, with its gritty plot and beautiful, unexpected ending. I also really love "Sunflowers" by Jean Thomas. I've read this piece many times and it only gets more powerful with each new reading. The world needs more stories like this one.

Thank you for sharing in our excitement and for the support so many of you have offered us over the past year and a half! We're overwhelmed by how quickly the Dreamers Community is growing. We couldn't have gotten here without all of you.

*Kat McNichol*

**Editor-in-Chief**

# 2019 Haiku Contest

Congratulations to the winning poets, and thank you to guest judge, Reinekke Lengelle!



## Honorable Mentions

### **empath**

by Kelly Aiello

i am an ant  
carrying the weight of a collapsed star  
that doesn't belong to me

### **Found**

by Kathryn Comber

Found: thoughts of you and  
fragments of her smashed guitar  
swept under the rug.

### **Bonsai**

by Robert Keeler

Haughty trimmed bonsai  
Cut snip cut snip contemplate  
Yikes time to pay rent

### **Why Dream**

by gil olson

why dream ahead  
when the fledgling maple leaves  
beg our attention (now)

### **Hummingbird**

by James Presley

Hummingbird hovers  
At my window, lifted by its constant mantra—  
A hosanna asking to be shared

### **Tea Haiku**

by Renate Heru Utomo

vapours of rose tea  
filling the garden  
of our past

# Itch

by Carolyn Topdjian

I stopped ignoring him on a frozen February morning.

It was the kind of Monday I pictured postal carriers calling in sick. Five seconds out the front door of my apartment building and my nose-hairs had stiffened to pins. Ten seconds, and ice water streamed from my eyes. At the street corner of Parliament and College, clouds drifted from storm drains. Someone's car engine sputtered. I tugged the collar on my parka to shield my cheeks and mentally cursed the pedestrian stoplight. Standing still was crystalizing my bloodstream.

I stomped my chukka boots, hoping to stem the bite of frost from my toes, and regretted my decision to opt for fashion over function. It seemed like a good idea back in October, but now... I had forty-seven dollars in my bank account until my next paycheque from the company. Not nearly enough to invest in a pair of fur-lined mukluks. I could ask my stepmom, Kiki, for a loan, but that would

“ A familiar hunger inside of me ignited.

come with an earful I didn't need.

You proved your point, Genevieve, she would say in that nasally tone. Stop being immature and come back home.

Too bad she'd converted my room into a sewing studio slash walk-in-closet. Not to mention home was a town full of losers, gossips, and vacuum-sealed bumpkins, where everyone had their neighbors pegged by high school and forever kept tabs on their failures. The only way I was headed back there was through a frontal lobotomy. Or Easter break. Whichever came first.

The light changed as a streetcar blared its horn at a careless driver. Chin tucked to my chest, I merged into a group of pedestrians crossing the intersection in search of heated destinations: banks, falafel joints, coin-wash laundromats. I had seven minutes to spare before the start of morning rehearsals and steered past fogged windows into my regular coffee shop—the one where breakfast

sandwiches tasted of cigarette smoke. More importantly, it had the qualities I sought: cheap caffeine and nonexistent lines.

I was in and out with a cup of black fuel warming my fingers. While staring at the lid's *Contents Hot!* warning and venting steam into my nose, I nearly tripped over his feet.

They're what I saw first: his legs extended, faded work pants with hems that were too short, long johns underneath. I'd sensed him peripherally on previous occasions—passed him for months—but he'd never been this close to the door before. I jerked to a stop to avoid kicking him and coffee splashed and collected in the creases of my polystyrene lid.

The brim of his tuque was pulled low over his brow. His eyes were shuttered as if he were hibernating through the worst of winter. Given his patchy stubble and rosy skin stretched tight



over his cheeks, he couldn't have been more than ten years my senior. My gaze downcast, I made to pass. Dog piss stained packed snow. Leaning alongside him, a battered cardboard sign pled NEED MONEY FOR FOOD in spidery letters. I hadn't meant to read it.

I paused, wondering why he was out on a day like today. Perhaps the soup kitchens were burdened with too many mouths to feed or the shelters overcrowded with flu sufferers. Without thinking, I reached into my tote bag where, atop my balled-up socks and leotard, I'd stashed a chocolate-glazed doughnut. Breakfast-to-go, I'd rationalized a minute ago, though, if I was being honest, the only place this doughnut was going was down and up my throat again. Last month, the studio had hired a nutritionist to lecture the company—a vegan do-gooder named Gayle who shat golden nuggets of kale. She could kiss my deep-fried ass. No one asked her to parade around her office in tights. My stomach gurgled.

As nimbly as I could with my mittens, I laid the pastry in its waxy bag next to the beggar's sign. It would freeze into a solid ring in the time it'd take me to walk the remaining distance to my studio, but I'd done my deed, paid it forward. His musk of sweat, piss, and tobacco—muted thus far by the cold—barreled into my sinuses. I imagined myself licking the floor of a public urinal and held in a gag. Repulsive. As if I'd spoken the insult aloud, his eyes shot open and blinked at me with suspicion.

"Wharrt's this?" His voice was akin to grinding rocks.

By now I'd distanced myself enough to breathe again. "A doughnut." I sounded like a child caught misbehaving. I shifted my stinging toes, already regretting my altruism.

He poked at the bag, checking it for its contents. "Dohn' wanno fuckin' doughnut!" He flung the offering toward me. It rebounded off my chest, onto the pavement. I back-stepped, my heart kicking wildly against my ribcage.

"Your sign says you're *hungry*." I met the red-rimmed pits of his eyes even as commonsense ordered I leave.

Immediately. What if he carried a knife or was a deranged nutjob? What little body heat I possessed crawled up my neck.

"Shhuh"—he folded his arms and looked me up and down—"whachha know about hungry?" All too much. But that was my dirty little secret, wasn't it? His mouth curled. "You just another 'ichy girl."

My jaw dropped as I mirrored his sneer. I wasn't sure if he'd called me *richy* or *bitchy* and which was worse. I should have snubbed him like all the other times, kept right on walking and left that doughnut for the pigeons and rats to fight over. It's what any sensible person would do. But, as Kiki liked to point out, I'd never been big on sensible.

I white-knuckled my cup, threatening to crumple it in my grip. My brain stumbled over several plausible comebacks and somehow settled on "*Excuse me?*" in a screechy tires sort of way.

He rested his head back as if bored of the conversation. "Gimme some change or go the fuck 'way, 'ichy girl." He tsked. "You blockin' my sun."

*Excellent advice*, my brain shouted. *You're blocking the disgusting wino's sun!*

My body had other ideas. It wanted to pitch coffee at his head. Smash chocolate glaze into his smug face. "You know nothing about me."

That seemed to perk him up. He sat forward and squinted at my face as if he were trying to solve one of life's great riddles. I was backlit. I stepped to his opposite side so the sun wasn't in his eyes and he could get a better look. Again. No commonsense.

His gaze fell to my mouth. "I know you like them sweets." He swept his tongue across his front teeth. I shrugged my shoulder to my ear to stifle a shiver. His lips were chapped, sore-red like mine. He glanced at my tote bag next, maybe to check for a logo. A wallet. An easy mark to lift. I tightened my grip on my sac's handles.

He cocked his chin. "Where you goin'?"

*A back-alley dumpster.* "Nowhere."

"You from that dance house?"

Yes. "No. None of your business."

"Shuh. Do look the type. Wanna dance for me, 'ichy girl? Could use a—"

"Fuck off."

He sucked air through his teeth. "*Damn*, 'ichy girl got bite. I like that." He smiled, transforming his face into a canvas of pleats and edges. The lines made him old, weathered beyond his years. He may have been handsome in another life—one that afforded him a bar of soap.

"If you were really hungry, you'd take the doughnut."

He gestured at my cup. "That coffee? Gimme your coffee then."

I looked him straight in the eye, lifted my cup, and took a sip. The end of my tongue scalded. It was worth it.

As I walked away, his garbled laughter scratched the back of my neck.

\*\*\*

He wasn't there when I headed home later that evening, but his sign was. Edited. I narrowed my eyes as I drew nearer.

NEED MONEY FOR FOOD LAP DANCE.

I was still sweating from hours of barre work and hadn't yet bothered to zip up my coat. I grew hotter beneath my layers, anger clouding my thoughts with nonsensical retorts involving doughnuts. I expected to see the waxed bag and its chocolate insides squashed amid the road. But neither was anywhere in sight.

Crossing my arms, I did a quick scan of the street in case he was hidden somewhere, waiting for my reaction. *Ridiculous.* Why would he be watching? Why would he care? He was probably passed out somewhere, steps from a liquor store or squatting inside a crack house.

A woman walking her Labradoodle steered around me. The crosswalk light blinked. A cab whizzed by, splattering slush onto my calves. I recoiled and muttered beneath my breath. As usual, the world turned, oblivious to my presence.

Till this day I wonder: what made me do it?

The outer cold. The inner heat. The shared bite of neglect.

Before I could change my mind, I dug around the bottom of my tote bag for a pen. Crouching low, I scribbled my response and left in haste.

\*\*\*

Tuesday morning, the sign was gone. Likely the wind had blown it away. In many ways I was relieved to be done with the confrontation. And yet I'd be lying if I said some part of me wasn't disappointed. Did he even get my message? Is that why he wasn't back?

I didn't see him again during my lunch break and dismissed the incident. Well, not entirely. It just wasn't in the forefront of my mind. I had less than ten days of rehearsals remaining before the company director premiered his latest work: an existentialist piece that commented on links between the migration of birds and patterns in human respiration. At least that's what it said in the brochure set to print. In truth, my body felt flockless on stage, adrift with no inner compass to guide me. It was too close to my daily reality of wandering through life unsupported by my dad—a reminder I neither wanted nor needed. Worse yet, I had a nine-minute solo. My first. That was enough to contend with. Forget the rumor of a critic or two attending on opening night.

The fear of judgment, of failure, of being sent back home with nothing but the blisters on my taped toes as evidence I'd done something—*anything*—made a ripple no matter how feather-light—it was all the incentive I needed to stay clear of any more doughnuts.

I'd skipped breakfast, limiting my calorie intake to soot-black coffee. It was my usual regime, (assuming I could find the

discipline to keep away from cheap pastry). Lunch entailed a side portion of leafy salad, *sans* dressing; and dinner, half a can of water-packed tuna. The night before last, I dreamt I was growing scales on the roof of my mouth and woke up gagging. Someone should have fired kale-Gayle.

\*\*\*

"See ya tomorrow." Jude flashed me a well-practiced smile of seduction—one sure to pull a girl or two to his bed come Saturday night—then jammed his fists into his pockets and loped away to catch the subway uptown. I paused, watching the lines on his plaid coat converge into darkness. I was destined to return alone to my cluttered studio apartment. Or was I? All it would take was one word released from my throat and Jude would turn. His smile would reappear.

The lines on his coat vanished.

Though it was blocks away, my building's fetid odor of boiled cabbage haunted my nose. Next to my mattress, the tiny window—tracked with pigeon shit and overlooking brick a foot away—flashed before me. I should've jumped at Jude's invitation to hang out for dinner. But that would've entailed eating. Possibly getting naked. I was human after all.

I dragged a long breath, the cold in my lungs sobering, and finally resumed walking. I didn't even like Jude. Not really. I stared at my boots as they crushed freshly fallen flakes.

"Genny got a penny?" His voice was familiar no matter our brief encounter.

I stopped in my tracks—my back stiffened. The only people who called me Genny were from high school. For an awful heartbeat I was transported back: braces, zits, the world unjust. The first two torments may have passed but the third proved permanent. "Don't call me that."

I lifted my gaze. Wrists resting on drawn-up knees, he was in the same spot where I'd last seen him. No beggar's sign tonight.

He cocked his brow followed by one

side of his mouth as if to goad me. I dared not move and lose the battle. By this point, I was fighting for some elusive principle. Dignity. Pride. Sidewalk space. I crossed my arms.

*Stupid girl*, Kiki's whine warned in my head. *Don't talk to weirdos from the city.*

"You prefer"—he took a drag of his cigarette, its tip flaring in the encroaching shadows—"Geneviève?" He pronounced it with a fluent French accent. Just like my father. My brother. My lover. Like he'd found me and named me in a crowd of strangers. Smoke flushed from his nostrils.

"How do you know my...?" I couldn't finish. My entire sense of control had been spent keeping my tone steady. I edged my chin forward, struggling to see him better without shifting closer.

He wasn't wearing his tuque. His hair was long, dark. His eyes, presuming. Was he from back home? *Not possible.*

He tilted and pulled a section of newspaper out from beneath him. "Fame's gotta price, 'ichy girl.'"

Hearing his original, offensive address was no better than my proper name. I willed myself to be still. Years of dance had trained me to hide it. Fright. Loneliness. Vomit.

He tossed the paper at my feet: a town crier, folded inside-out to an article.

The arts section. Of course. I'd overheard the marketing coordinator bragging about the premiere being featured on local news blogs. And in print apparently.

I blinked at it: a black and white image of me winged, head thrown back, soaring above Jude's flexed arms. Was that what I really looked like? Sinew and bone? Floating on imaginary parts?

"That your boyfriend, then. *Jude Christensen*?" Tiny captions credited our giant egos. He made it sound dirty. Nothing like my musical Geneviève.

I'd almost forgotten him there, studying me with unbridled curiosity. Even by night I must have been entertaining,





never entirely out of costume. I shook my head, unsure why I was answering such a personal question.

"Saw you walking together."

I shrugged and met his glassy, belligerent stare with my own. Now more than ever, I wished I'd left with Jude. A clawing began in my belly, a fury building, beating through my veins. The reasons were too irrational, too abstract for my mind to metabolize. "What do you want from me, huh?"

Instead of answering, he flicked ash and scratched his lip with his thumb.

Without intending to, I had stepped closer. "A thrill? A handout? I already told you." His sign. I'd written him a fucking response. "Wasn't it enough for you to *read it?*"

His jaw jerked left like I'd slapped him. Unknowingly I'd hit a trigger. Bang. *Point Genny got a penny.* He raised his hands flush against the brick wall, palms-forward like he was under arrest.

*Wait.* My forehead knit. "What are you doing?"

He blew out his cheeks, his knee jittering. "You got that look."

"What look?"

"Shuh." He grimaced. "Like you 'bout to stick me, Joy." Above his head, his cigarette trembled in his grimy fingertips.

"What? I'm not—my name's Genevieve. Are you"—I swallowed—"are you scared of me or something?" *More like he's freezing from cold, I scolded myself. Shaking outside. Inside. Like you. Welcome to subzero hell.*

"Know who you are." It was a growl, bass notes reverberating deep inside his chest. "Read your note."

I took another step, uncaring that he reeked, that he was mentally imbalanced—willing him to look at me. He didn't. He wouldn't.

"I see—I see you," he said ironically. "Gen-Geneviève." This time, I was the one to flinch. "I ain't the only kicked dog with dreams," he continued, shaking his head, arguing with some invisible force. "I ain't the only one with fleas, 'ichy girl."

And it occurred to me. He'd never cursed me as a bitch. Or as rich. He'd seen me as I was: wanting. Itchy.

The backs of my eyelids burned. In that instant, I was anything but clothed. Twenty-two years worth of fringes, feathers, sequins—they swirled and spilled like the snow nipping my ankles. This stranger—this filthy and broken man—he understood. Beneath our grime and sweat, maybe we weren't so different. "I—"

And I almost told him then. I almost confessed the last proper meal I'd eaten was nine years ago; how I constantly felt empty; how just the other night I'd forgotten the face of my biological mother and had cried myself to sleep and now this performance coming up was my ticket out—the only way to purge the pain.

But more than anything, I almost said *I'm sorry.* Sorry for not giving you money. Sorry for pretending you didn't exist or belong or matter. I knew how it stung and wanted to take it all back. But that's the thing about craving a connection in a world full of repeated lies and disappointments. When the time came, you failed. I failed. I was no better than Kiki or my dad.

Instead, I stuffed my hand into my bag and pulled out a twenty-dollar bill. One good thing about starving yourself, you saved on grocery money. In a burst of movement, I crumpled the cash into his knuckles and took off without waiting for his reaction.

An hour later, hidden in the hole of my apartment, the fire of his palm continued to scald my own where I'd touched him.

...

I had my eyes closed with my iPod blasting, drowning out all sight and sound. Unfortunately nothing I did could kill the cocktail of muscle relaxant cream and ammonia that hung in the theatre's greenroom. Or the nerves that ran amuck in my stomach. I'd already retched twice since the dry-run this morning. I was determined to keep down the energy bar I'd inhaled forty minutes earlier.

Someone tapped my shoulder.

Sara, the assistant stage manager, signaled ten fingers and pantomimed for me to remove my earbuds. "From Andrew." She passed me a note with my rehearsal director's familiar chicken scratch: *Martha from the Star is sitting stage left. Break a leg. -A.*

"Thanks," I mumbled and made a mental note to throw up stage right.

Sara offered a sympathetic smile. "It's a full house. You're going to—"

Her eyes shifted in distraction as her smile melted. She angled toward the microphone on her headset. "What?" She checked her watch. "Where the hell's Derek? It's not my job to—" Irritation crimped her features as she listened to the response through her radio. "What about the ushers? Are they standing around, fanning themselves with the goddamn programs?" Something between a scoff and a moan escaped her mouth.

I tucked my iPod inside my hoodie's pocket. "What's wrong?"

Sara waved for me to wait. "How'd he get a ticket?"

"What happened?" I tried again.

She rolled her eyes in reaction to the conversation only she could hear. "Try to calm them. I'm coming." She shifted her mic and blew out a sigh. "Gotta go kick out some bum from the audience."

"Wait, what?" My anxiety must have been written on my face because she slowed while back-stepping to the door.

It had been a week since I'd seen him—since I'd given him the money and run.

"It's nothing. Some patrons are complaining about the stink coming off this guy. Keeps it interesting." She spun and rushed out from the greenroom before I could ask another question. But it wasn't necessary. I already knew the details.

Pacing the little greenroom, I tried to push it out from my mind. I had

problems of my own. Big ones. Like Martha from the Star. I had to regroup, refocus. I *tried*. But my worry was unrelenting.

They would throw him out, ticket or no ticket. He'd make a scene, slur his words, draw attention from the box office girls and passersby. Derek or Sara would call the police.

Nausea stirred. I couldn't just pretend he was nothing—worthless. I couldn't be like my dad. The last time I'd phoned home, Kiki had said he was busy with work. My father didn't like to travel in the winter—too hard to justify the time off. He had yet to see me dance. Well fuck him. Fuck Kiki. And fuck Martha from the Star.

Without thinking I bolted for the emergency exit. The crash bar stung my palms. No time to waste. A fragmented, distant part of me ordered I stop—control myself. I was due on stage in mere minutes. This was past spontaneous, irresponsible even by my own standards.

Someone called after me. It was all in the background. In the foreground, only I existed. Only he did. My body rushed to save us both—how and from what though, I couldn't articulate. Disbelief looped in my mind. He'd come to watch. He'd used the cash—not for drugs, not for booze or cigarettes—but for *this*.

I followed his trail of reek—the only audience who mattered—across the lobby, past the latecomers and dwindling will-call line. My soft warm-up booties hit the pavement outside and the slap of frigid air caused me to hiss.

Where his stench left off, his bark took over. He was causing a scene all right. He'd gotten as far as ten meters from the theatre doors and was currently cursing anyone who glanced in his direction. No cops yet, but the way he was hollering..

A wide berth had formed around him. People hustled to shows, restaurants, late night gyms—did their best to ignore the pathetic, raving lunatic. He was a disease to be avoided.

I stood there, frazzled. I'd chased him. I'd found him. Now what? Why was I risking this right before my cue? Had I intended to drag him back inside, demand his admittance like some prima donna for the homeless?

Slush seeped into my booties and the wind drew goosebumps from my body. My teeth were at risk of chattering.

The answer came the second his red-rimmed eyes locked on mine. The world tilted and stilled. He stopped shouting. He nodded. He'd known all along.

The stage was where I belonged. It was everywhere and anywhere. My street. My music. The vibrations slipped over my bones—engines, cables, wheels, cellphones. They streamed, spun in harmony. My stomach unclenched. And I began to move with the flow.

A familiar hunger inside of me ignited. I was bathed in heat—an indigo neon sign my spotlight. Amazing how a frequency could transform you, lick you from the outside and drown you from the inside. I twisted pieces of myself into patterns, flexed, arched, and leapt.

I didn't need Jude to soar. I didn't need anyone but myself and him, watching, feeling the hurt others chose to evade. One and the same: I was every weirdo—every messed-up dreamer, willer and spiller striving to stretch her wings.

His face became a blur of two, of four, of sixteen and thirty. A new bubble of space formed, a cell splitting and shifting from him to me. At some point my booties and hoodie came off.

Later I would remember how they held up their phones and recorded. I would recall how traffic slowed to a standstill; how applause and whistles sliced the dark. In the moment, however, I could process nothing but his cherry-chapped lips, parting in awe as I danced for him.

*Shuh.*

Bird and breath caught in the current. I flew.

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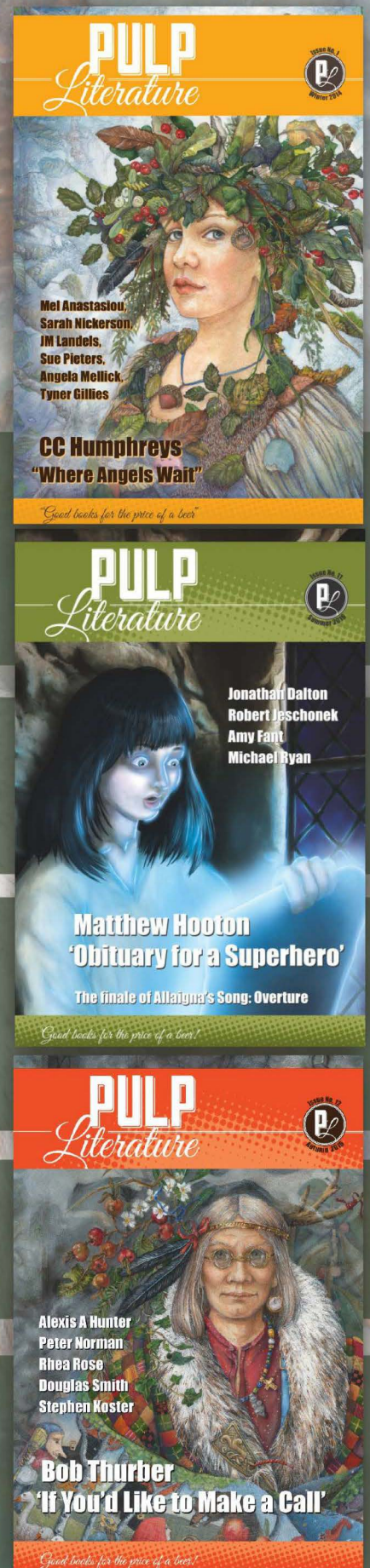
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## kindled

by Nan Williamson

“ little  
tongues  
of fire  
flickering  
low.

This morning, my body unfurls from sleep,  
soft sheets teasing bare breasts, groin thrumming.  
Outside my window, a goldfinch whistles and warbles.  
I laugh aloud. There are miracles in the garden: water spurts  
from the fountain, splashes over mossy stones, licks  
my bare feet. Lush late blooming peonies bend  
in sweet heaviness until the lover sun urges them awake.  
They unfold glad petals, tip perfume to the air.

Renoir painted them open: brushed on thin washes  
strokes of iridescent white, daubed the centre—soft dots  
veined with purple, faintly crimson shadow. He caught  
the creamy petals' silky feel. Peonies, dew-slippery,  
wanton, luxurious in their prime, as if aware  
that imminent rain will leave the petals pale and splayed.

I walk around all day, naked under my clothes,  
half-annoyed as you tug at my roots again,  
planted long in the garden of affection  
and easy love. Tenuous links with old romance  
mix memory and desire, enough to renew faith  
in my own power. I move more assuredly now,  
seductively, little tongues of fire flickering low.  
Astonished by appetite at my age, I am amused:  
these sudden surges of desire disrupt the current narrative.  
Last night, I felt both beautiful—and unprepared.

“perhaps if you were opaque

*raw and clinging to bone*

---

## Sanctuary

by Joanne Jagoda

I'm a blondish plucked chicken  
underneath my burgundy scarf  
though I thought I was bold and tough  
when I cut my hair short weeks ago  
ready with wigs and peacock-bright coverings  
until the last wisps started their heartless descent  
and I wept, sprawled on the bathroom floor

waiting my turn, I sit  
on the leather chair  
magazines unopened on my lap  
admitted by default to this curious flock  
a sorority I never wanted to join

quietly chirping in different languages  
draped in cottons, silks, perky knits  
exotic birds in festooned plumage  
we steal wary glances at one another

bald beautiful birds shorn to their essence  
stoic smiles, jutting cheekbones, haunted eyes  
a thirty-something with a hennaed pate sits to my left  
proud and elegant, so cool and hip  
she cries, comforted by her mom  
I sigh; she is too young for all of this

name called, ID checked again  
my chemo cocktail prepared  
I play my music and close my eyes

I see the others in the room we share  
connected to the tubes  
tied to each other by strings of understanding  
the red poison drips relentless

hopeful birds we are all  
sometimes we chat  
sometimes we huddle quietly under warm blankets  
tended to by nurses, family and friends  
we hover bravely  
not knowing what tonight or tomorrow may bring  
praying we will soar again

## Reflection

by Kaitlyn Neath

I thought I would love you still  
that you would be the same  
but here you are  
a stranger  
beneath the bulbous pouch  
behind sleep hovered eyes

perhaps if you were opaque  
raw and clinging to bone  
organs breathing  
beating  
a familiar rhythm  
I would learn to love your pulse

## Diagnosis

by Catherine Carson

Under a grey sky, a fog enveloping  
oblivion, rain blowing at unpleasant angles—  
despair is welcome then; nurtured, even.

It's when the plants grow lush with  
anticipation, grass regains its color, and  
flowers burst through soil in their grand  
declaration of life—  
again and again, *life*—  
that is when despair seems most bleak.

When the world opens itself up, and still  
you are blind, despite yourself.

# Author Interview with Caroline Misner

*Inspiration, Nature as Metaphor, and Fearless Writing...*



CAROLINE MISNER - PHOTO BY JAN KURZ

Journey Prize Nominee, Caroline Misner, has published 4 novels and more than 150 stories and poems in literary journals across North America and the UK. Her recent novel, *The Spoon Asylum*, is the culmination of almost 10 years of work. It offers readers an immersive experience in the realities of the great depression, the history of jazz music, and life in a remote Ontario town in the 1930s. Written in crisp prose packed with funny and intelligent dialogue, *The Spoon Asylum* deals head-on with themes of racism, love, and the bonds of family.

Although Caroline often publishes short stories and novels, her first love is poetry. Her poems are both languid and terse and frequently use nature as metaphor to dig into the heart of an experience. Here's an excerpt from her Pushcart Prize nominated poem, "Piano Lesson."

"The metronome claps its steady thunder  
into the sunbeam threaded through lace;  
the cuneiform of notes are gouged  
like dead black worms upon the page:"

In this interview with Kat McNichol, Editor-in-Chief of

Dreamers Creative Writing, Caroline Misner discusses inspiration, nature as metaphor, and fearless writing.

**Caroline, welcome to Dreamers!**

Thank you! It's a delight and an honour to be here.

**Where did the idea for *The Spoon Asylum* come from?**

About twelve years ago I had a dream in which I saw a young man sitting on a rock in a field. He was approached by an older portly black man with a trumpet and they started talking. It began to rain and they sought shelter in a small cave. When I woke up, I thought I could write a story around that particular scene and it eventually became the second chapter of "The Spoon Asylum." I couldn't incorporate the rain and the cave into the scene, but I was very pleased with how it turned out. Eventually, I built these characters up in my mind and couldn't let them go. They became my protagonists, Haven and Wetherby, and I just fell in love with them both. I built entire stories around their lives and "The Spoon Asylum" was born.

I tend to get that way whenever I start a new project, be it a short story or a novel. I create these characters in my mind until they become as close and as dear to me as the real people in my life. By then, the story can just about write itself, since I know these characters so well. Sometimes, I find it difficult to let them go and I end up writing sequels and prequels around them.

**Other authors I've spoken to have also mentioned dreams as having inspired them. In an interview I did recently with Stephen Heighton, he described this phenomenon as his "night-mind." He said: "With your overthinking day-mind off duty, your night-mind is able to speak with great clarity and power." Is this the first time a dream has inspired your work?**

Much of my work has been inspired by dreams. Though I may not always remember the details of my dreams, the emotional responses to them linger long after I wake up and often get incorporated into my writing. Dreams have been the seeds of many works of art and literature throughout history. Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein" was inspired by a dream—or rather a nightmare she had at the age of eighteen. Upon reading Stephen King's autobiography, "On Writing," I learned the classic book, which inspired the movie "Misery," also came to him in a dream.

Inspiration can come in other forms of sleep, not just the deep REM dream state. I find much of my work comes from the twilight period when I'm lying in bed, waiting for sleep to take me. All sorts of thoughts and images flit through my mind; words, sentences, lines of poetry. I keep a notebook

by my bed at night so I don't forget those "aha" moments that I know I will forget in the morning.

### **What else inspires your writing?**

Just about everything and anything. The people in my life are some of my greatest sources of inspiration—my kids, my husband, my friends and coworkers. "The Watchmaker" was inspired by my husband who was going through a difficult breakup with his business partner at the time. I thought, how far would a man go to save his partner and his family from the unimaginable atrocities of NAZI Germany? Would he go so far as to risk his own life? His relationship with his own son? I believe everyone has a story to tell. Everyone has, or has had, some sort of hardship or trauma in their lives. I like talking with strangers I meet in waiting rooms or in lineups at the store. Most people are happy to talk about themselves and I learn a lot from them.

I also get a lot of inspiration from reading the news. My story, "The Burning Times," was inspired by a news article I read about a homeless woman who was found dead of third degree burns while trying to keep warm with a butane lighter. I thought it was heartbreaking, tragic, and I wondered what the last few hours of her life must have been like. My horror story, "Devour," published by Blank Fiction in 2015, came from a news article about a cannibal in Germany who actually lured his victims with online ads.

### **I've noticed that you use nature as metaphor and simile in a lot of your poetry. Why does this theme arise so often for you?**

I live in the beautiful Haliburton Highlands of Northern Ontario, in a little cottage in the woods which was once our vacation home but is now our permanent residence. Nature is all around me. I look out my window and see a pristine lake and green rolling hills and big puffy clouds in a crystal blue sky. I'm surrounded by birds, squirrels, wild turkeys and all sorts of woodland creatures. It's hard not to be inspired by such beauty. I've never been much of a city person. I find city living makes me anxious—the noise, the hustle and bustle, the crowds, the traffic. I grew up in rural Czechoslovakia, on a little farm on the edge of a forest, so that is the environment where I find the most harmony. I've never been one of the stereotypical writers who can go into a busy noisy café with a laptop and peck away for hours undistracted. When I write, I need peace and quiet so I can collect my thoughts and concentrate.

### **How has your work as a poet impacted your prose writing? Or has it?**

I feel as though the two go hand in hand. I started off writing poetry as soon as I was old enough to write—about the age of four or five. Writing prose just seemed like a natural extension of that. I remember as a small

child gluing sheets of paper together into little booklets that I filled with my own poems, stories and drawings. As I grew older, I found the books available to me in my school library didn't interest me much. I thought I could write something better, something that I wanted to read. So I jotted down a few stories and showed them to my parents who were floored that I child my age could write like that. I continued writing both prose and poetry and have never looked back. I feel that the two genres needn't be at odds with one another, especially with my particular style of prose that incorporates a lot of similes and metaphors. Many writers I know write in both genres and like me they find that the one enhances the other.

### **How do you handle writers block?**

This may be infuriating to a lot of writers out there, but I don't get writer's block. I have the opposite problem. I have so many ideas swimming around in my head and in my notebooks, I wish I had more time to write them all down. But the day to day activities of life get in the way—work, chores, social and family obligations. Sometimes, I get so physically and mentally exhausted after all that, there is little left in me to write. Then I start berating myself for not getting my butt down in that chair and writing, which should be a priority.

Sure, like all writers, I may get stuck on a word or on how I want to frame the next sentence. During times like that, I don't let it get to me. I know the solution will manifest itself sooner or later. I get out of my chair and putter around the house or take the dog for a walk. I let my mind wander and try not to force it. Ten minutes later, I'm back at my keyboard typing down the perfect word or phrase that seemed so elusive just a few minutes ago.

### ***The Spoon Asylum* is historical fiction, and a previous book you wrote, *The Watchmaker*, was also historical fiction.**

### **Have you always had an interest in history?**

I have always been interested in history. I'm particularly interested in the Second World War and how it affected ordinary people. Growing up in Eastern Europe during the Cold War, I vaguely remember the stories of how difficult it was for my grandmother during the German invasion and the subsequent communist occupation after the war. I couldn't imagine what life must have been like for all those innocent people at the time. I'm especially horrified by the injustices of racial and cultural prejudices. I can't imagine hating and exploiting an entire group of people. We are all human and we all deserve the same level of respect and dignity. To deny anyone of that, to me, is deplorable.

### **How do you conduct your research for these books?**

Aside from listening to stories from people who were there, I conduct my research the old fashioned way: I go to the

public library and study books on the subject. Sometimes I do research online, but I find the information can be sketchy and unreliable. Chapter ten of *The Spoon Asylum* was inspired by horrific images I found online of public lynchings in the early twentieth century. They were difficult to look at but I had to do it if I was to write honest portrayals of my characters.

**Have you found writing to be healing? Please explain.**

Writing is the most therapeutic tool I know. Being a sensitive creative artist type, I tend to let my emotions get the better of me sometimes. I get all up in my head over something or someone and the only way to release those feelings is by writing them down. The resulting work may not be overtly obvious, as I tend to use a lot of metaphors in my writing, but just the process of getting it out of my system is incredibly healing.

**Are you working on a new novel? If yes, is there anything you can tell us about it?**

I am working on a new novel but being the creative superstitious type, I don't like discussing it before it's finished for fear of jinxing it. What I can tell you is that it is a science fiction/romance story set in the far future. The first two stories I ever had published were science fiction and I really enjoy writing in that genre. I find it liberating. I can create my own worlds and creatures and characters and let my imagination roam free. I also find science fiction to be a metaphor for the common zeitgeist of an era. Just look at the proliferation of alien invasion stories during the cold war or the glorification of youth in *Logan's Run* which was written in the late 1960s.

**Reviewers of your work comment on your ability to take on difficult themes, such as racism and anti-Semitism, with insightful understanding.**

**Can you explain how you manage to do this?**

I'm not sure how I manage it myself. I do like to put myself in someone else's situation and interpret how they would feel. The whole idea of *The Spoon Asylum* is to not judge people too critically until you understand and can empathize with what they've been through. I always ask myself: "How would I feel if this happened to me?" "How would I react to this situation?" "What would I do?" Once I can answer those questions with honesty, I can write the piece from the heart of my character, since by then I already know them so well.

**Do you have any advice for writers working with difficult or controversial themes?**

The only advice I can give other writers about working with these difficult and controversial themes is to not let them get in the way of what you want to express, no matter how distressing it may feel. Be fearless. Sure, there are subjects out there that make certain people uncomfortable but you must never let that stop you. I have had reviewers accuse

me of being racist for the subject matter and some words and phrases I used in *The Spoon Asylum*. They were offended. But I look at it as a tremendous compliment because it meant I got the message out loud and clear. I'm glad they were offended by what happened to my characters. I was offended too by what my characters endured. Racism and antisemitism are offensive and should never be tolerated. Facing these subjects in a clear and honest way is the first step to healing and understanding. That's probably why I enjoy writing historical fiction. By understanding our past, we can come to grips with the present and the future.

**Out of all of your writing, do you have a piece that is your favourite and why?**

*The Spoon Asylum* is of course one of my favourites. It was a labour of love. I spent almost ten years trying to get it published because I believed in it so much and I believed in my characters. Another is "Strange Fruit" which was published in *The Prairie Journal* in 2008 and nominated for the Writer's Trust McClelland-Stewart Journey Prize. It was originally published as a short story but it is really an excerpt from a novel entitled *The Myth of the Immortal Child*, which is the sequel to *The Spoon Asylum*. It follows the aftermath of the lynching in chapter ten of the *The Spoon Asylum*. Again, it's a controversial subject, not pretty to look at, but honest.

As for poetry, I have so many poems I'm particularly fond of it's difficult to pick just one. If pushed, I could say "Shepherd's Gold" stands out for me. It's a simple poem written in three short stanzas and it's about—you guessed it—sheep! Driving through the country at sunset one spring day about fifteen years ago, I saw a herd of sheep grazing in a field. The scene looked so beautiful and serene, I wrote a poem about it when I got home. The words just flowed out in a simple yet concise way. It was originally published by *Leaf Press* in 2005 and again by the *Ontario Poetry Society*.

**What advice would you give to new writers?**

The same advice I received from my mentor, Michael Crawley, who sadly passed away in 2013: get your butt down in that chair and write. Write. Write. Write. Make it a priority, make it an obsession. It doesn't matter if what you produce is any good or publishable. Just get it down and the gems will slowly begin to reveal themselves on their own. So many people I meet tell me they have a great story in their heads but don't have the time to write them down. Make the time. Those stories aren't any good to anyone by languishing in your head. Get them out there. And don't be afraid of what comes out or what anyone else says. My favourite writer of all time is Sylvia Plath. I keep a copy of this quote at my desk and refer to it whenever I need that boost to keep going: "...everything in life is writable about if you have the outgoing guts to do it and the imagination to improvise. The worst enemy to creativity is self-doubt." Bravo, Sylvia. I couldn't have said it better myself.



# Layered Poetry in *heft* by Doyali Islam

Book Review by Carole Mertz

**D**oyali Islam's rich personal history is apparent in the work she shares in this remarkable poetry collection. Her style is unique; she presents all of her poems in *heft* in two columns and uses only lower case letters. Her 'parallel poems' comprised of interesting, unusual, and often difficult topics (some contemporary, some from recent history), show her skill in juxtaposing two or more elements, layering them so that the poem in the left column and the poem in the right column relate to each other and form a unified whole.

In "41st Parallel," (pp.70-71) her left column, titled "burlap," depicts a mother whose son is being pulled from her, and thrown into a truck: "as I grabbed the truck, / one of them hit me. another one kicked me, / and I fell." The author notes inform the reader that this pertains to the Chilean *arpillera* movement.

Subject matter on the right half, titled *Canvas*, concerns two painful historical moments: one, the 19th century slave trade, the other, the death of one Marta Ugarte, who was tortured and murdered for her opposition to Pinochet's military dictatorship. "o aparecida," Islam writes, "your hands, small in life, / were very large and had / no fingernails"—words drawn from a human rights report and merged into the poem.

Many of Islam's finest poems appear in the final segment of the volume. "37th Parallel," (p. 82), for example, tells of a Japanese farmer's re-vegetation methods and also speaks to the plight of Nabeel Yasin, Iraqi poet, who felt he must relocate, leaving his homeland and his mother behind. Every poem in this collection, however, offers a meaningful and richly nuanced perspective.

Readers will discover in Doyali Islam's stunning craftsmanship an author who conveys strong social and political convictions. We eagerly await her next publication.

Doyali Islam has received several awards from the *Ontario Arts*

*Council* and from the *Canada Council for the Arts*. You can find examples of her work in the *Kenyon Review*, *The Fiddlehead*, and *The Best Canadian Poetry in English*. She currently serves as Poetry Editor for *Arc Poetry Magazine*.

**“...your hands, small in life, were very large and had no fingernails...”**

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# Mother Knows Best

Nonfiction by **Suzanne O'Brien**

**T**he call I was expecting came just after two o'clock on a blustery March afternoon. Instead of going home after my meeting, I had ended up at the library. I sat in my car alongside the building, watching the leafless shadows of swaying elms along Minnehaha Creek.

My cell phone rang. I hit the green answer button, my mouth dry. "This is Suzanne."

"Hello, Suzanne. This is Megan from Piper Breast Center." Her voice was warm and efficient.

"I'm Dr. Johnson's nurse navigator." She paused. "Are you in a place where you can talk? I have your results."

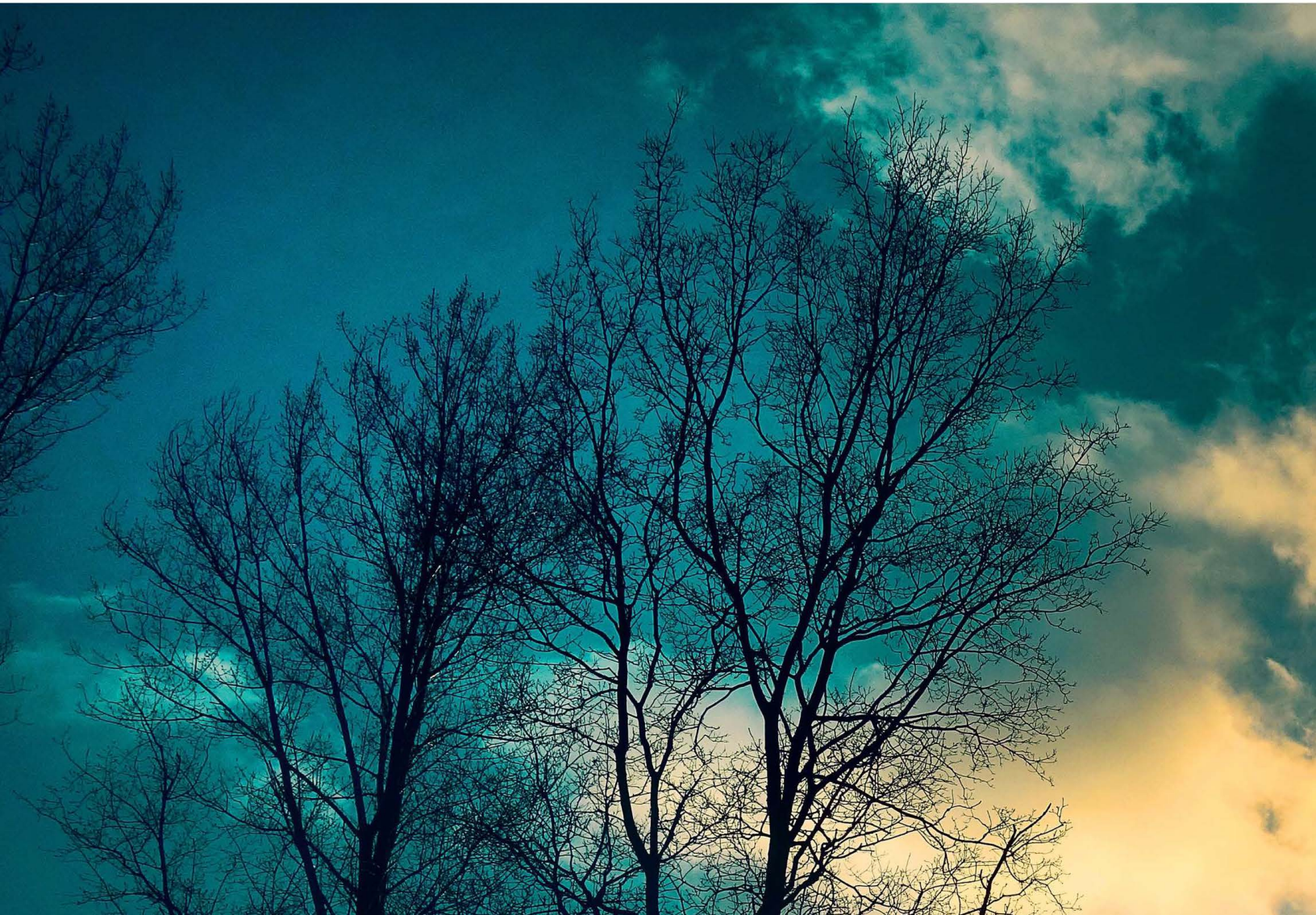
I recalled without wanting to the startling snap of the biopsy needle in the darkened room. That was Tuesday, two days ago. I had just popped in for my annual mammogram and afterwards I planned to run a few errands and get home in time to meet the school bus.

Staring out the window at the gray-brown grass, I swallowed. "Yes, I can talk."

"I'm sorry to have to tell you that the radiologist confirmed invasive ductal carcinoma in your right breast."

I let out a breath that I'd been holding since Tuesday, when the technician (named Lucky, I'm not kidding) had asked me to step into the waiting room for a follow-up ultrasound. It wasn't relief, exactly, but there was something freeing about knowing. "Okay," I said, sitting up a little straighter. "Wow."

"I know this is hard to hear,"



said Megan. "But I want you to know that it's early, and this is a very small tumor, the size of a pencil eraser. And I'll be with you every step of the way."

"Thank you," I said. It seemed an absurd response. Then I made it even more absurd. "It must be hard to do this part of your job."

"It is, but it's important," she said, and then went on to talk about next steps. How she would be my main contact. How she would be in the room to take notes when I met with the surgeon and again with my oncologist next week. I already had an oncologist? We said goodbye, the sun went behind a cloud and came back out again

and I realized that I hadn't asked a single question.

I turned up the heat. Right now, the only thing I wanted was to hear my mom's voice. I picked up my phone again. Twenty past two. This was Mom's good week. She always bounced back right before the next chemo treatment. She would still be with her needlepoint ladies at the Picket Fence.

She answered on the first ring. "Hello?" Like she was talking into a corded phone.

"Mom?" My breath was coming in small, sharp inhales as I fought to speak through threatening tears. "Piper just

called..." I couldn't continue.

"Oh, Suz." Her voice caught and then she said, like she always did about the hardest things, "Hang in there, babe. We'll get through this together."

Mom could have said anything. Her voice had soothing powers that had calmed my fears and mended my broken heart many times over. Just listening to her was like tucking into a soft, warm hug.

After we hung up I sat still, feeling the shock and numbness fade. I brushed the tears away. And a moment later, there it was... a tiny, familiar bud of hope growing in my heart.



# Prepared

by Isabella Mori

Outside, the hot August sun branded everything in its path, seeking out every cleft and angle. But not here. Room 263 of the Samaritan Home was just this side of cool; warm enough not to require a cardigan, cool enough to provide welcoming shelter from the relentless heat out on the streets.

My hand, then, was just the right temperature to connect, sense, soothe. A flutter of movement stirred under it, on the thin blanket covering what little skin, flesh and bones was left of Ms. Dorothy Watson, Professor Emerita. I sat on the chair beside her bed. On my lap, an old photograph.

I looked at the picture. Two big branches reaching up, an orange bird on a smaller, third branch. More birds flying far in the distance. A big red ribbon tied around

the tree trunk. It seemed out of place in this otherwise bland old colorized photograph. I stared and stared at the image. I am not a detective; I am an end-of-life doula, I help ease the journey of dying. What this picture meant, I did not know.

A tiny, tiny sigh now. I looked up. No, nothing. The face had not changed. To anyone not schooled in the many faces of rest, slumber, and REM states, it would have seemed like sleep – this old woman not moving, in a prone state, eyes closed: she must be sleeping. But look at her: gray skin on a face that used to be shiny black, cheeks concave like a deflated hot air balloon, mouth not animated for months and months now by the chatter – red lipstick chatter – that she had been so famous for. When you bent closer, there was expression on

the face, and it spoke discontent: the corners of the mouth disinterested in lifting, a hint of furrow between the brows, cheeks not just sunken but flabby, eyelids drooping more than necessary. No, this was not restful sleep.

"She doesn't have much longer, Shirley," Darla had said to me. "I went to see her as soon as I heard. I – didn't know that there were hardly any family or friends left. Only me." Dr. Darla Wiley, Dorothy Watson's cousin's granddaughter, less connected through family than through a common Alma Mater. She had looked out the window, exquisitely manicured fingers crossed over her legs. Exquisite legs, too, of course; to be expected for a woman of her stature. "I don't have much time, and to be honest, I am not good at this sort of thing. Not at all. But I owe her. We all do. The ones who have gone



already and all the others who don't even know her – but she paved the way. I think she'll understand."

Understand that Darla had hired me, a doula, yes, but really, a stranger. For twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, for however long it took, I was to sit here in this chair, sleep in the little cot, eat at the nice little round table in her room, water the old woman's flowers, read to her, and accompany her, finally, as she exited this life. Why me? I was one of the least experienced doulas around but I was available, and "I see you have an artistic background. That will be helpful." That's when Darla pressed the photograph in my hand, and left. What did she mean?

I don't know why I kept staring at the image. I had it memorized: The varying shades of brown and gray on the smooth, slender trunk and branches, three of them, dividing into a few smaller ones (thirteen branches altogether, was there a meaning to that number?); the tuft of leaves on the smallest set of branches, with that orange bird perched strangely on two twigs, one foot on each, wings wide open; the blue, just slightly hazy-cloudy sky (was that thing in the middle a grease stain or another cloud?); the five birds flying way in the background. Above all, a sense of quiet, almost empty expansiveness. And that silly red ribbon. When Darla had given me the picture, I was so perplexed by her quick decision to hire me, it never occurred to me to ask her what she knew about the old photograph. Since then, five days ago, we had only texted – not the right medium to discuss mysterious ribbons on tree trunks.

In the meantime, I talked to Ms. Watson about the photograph, the way you talk to people in a coma – gentle, but normal, about familiar things. "I'm looking at this photograph, Miz Watson –" That's one of the things Dr. Darla had told me, the 'Miz,' clearly pronounced, was important to Dorothy Watson, a celebrated early feminist, not nearly as important as the 'Doctor' she had worked so hard to earn. "This photograph, it looks old, I bet it's important to you. Darla thought I'd appreciate it because I'm an artist. I wonder what it would be like to talk to you about art, about Picasso and Rodin ..." She had a little sculpture of Rodin's

*Thinker* on her nightstand, and three prints of Picasso's colourful cubic period. They probably meant something to her.

With a sigh, I stood up. I needed to move around a bit. I walked to the open window, admitting to myself that I felt incompetent, lonely and antsy. My practicum had not prepared me for this. Kuebler-Ross's stages of grief, yes, fighting relatives, yes, the physical ugliness that can come with death, yes – but a more or less comatose old woman and an old photograph with pretty much nothing on it? What was I supposed to do with *that*?

A sudden gust entered the room, stirred – no, whirled – the toothpaste-white lace curtains. I knew it would be good to meditate a little now, or go for a walk around the block, maybe spend a moment in the chapel downstairs; I knew it but just didn't feel like it. Unease tugged at me, spiky little things running through my veins, insisted on rooting me: stay here, with this irritation. There wasn't much to see outside, just the sun glinting off the windows of the green VW bug and a baby blue SUV parked across the narrow side street, a two-story yellow building with a red roof off to the right, a nondescript church tower in the background, an older man wearing a gray cardigan (in this weather?), walking a waddly, overweight dog. I crossed my arms, bored, dissatisfied, guilty for

"Don't," she croaked again, "Leave it open." I could not make out whether her eyes were open but her middle and ring finger tapped the blanket, weakly.

I finally rushed back to my chair beside the bed. "Ms. Watson, can I get you anything? I'm Shirley Duncan, and I –"

"Never mind." A wheezy, hoarse sound, her voice barely audible, "Listen."

She coughed a little, and then some more; she didn't have the strength anymore to fully clear her throat. She moved her arms, a feeble attempt to dig in her elbows.

"Would you like to sit up?" I asked. Her response sounded like a 'yes.'

It took a few minutes to settle her in the new position. Everything about her was so fragile and brittle, and what physical energy she had left flowed slowly, haltingly, a thin stream in a dried-out bedrock. Finally, she sighed a tiny little sigh. Her breathing returned to the barely perceptible, uneven rhythm I had become accustomed to, sitting beside her these last days.

But then, suddenly, three breaths, deep for her, and she opened her eyes. There was something behind the glassed-over, dirty brown eyes with the yellowed whites – a sudden, strong beam making

## “Above all, a sense of quiet, almost empty expansiveness.”

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feeling that way. Behind me, in the hallway, a bit of noise; they were probably getting the afternoon tea ready. The gust that had come through the window turned into a steady wind; I moved, maybe I should close the window? More noise from behind, some sort of –

"Don't." Yes, that's what it was: *don't*. It took me a second to realize that it had come from the bed. Ms. Watson? I was so surprised to hear from her – she had not said a word in weeks, according to the nurse – that I turned towards her but then just stood there.

its way through old, tired nerve endings and brain cells.

"Girl," Ms. Watson said, "don't fret." Her eyes smiled; it was too much for her mouth. "Gimme that photo."

I put it in her hands. She held it, lifted her head a tiny bit, laid it back on the pillow. More deep breaths, small noises like a little dog snoring.

"That's an umbrella tree. Kenya. .... Monastery. That tree out my window, every day. .... Father Victor ..." a little smile, a sigh. "Father Victor, yeah. .... He took that photo." Her head up again,

holding the photo firmer, more smile – then back on the pillow. "We couldn't ... I was engaged, he was a man of God, missionary. We weren't ... " her eyes closed. Was she going to fall asleep again? "... ready, couldn't do it, prepared. Didn't know that ... that ... too young ... that sometimes ..... you just gotta go for it, ready or not. Get that?" Suddenly her head shot off the pillow, that beam behind her eyes full on, shining its light on me. "member that. There's never a good time. Rarely. We ..." She closed her eyes, almost squeezed them, took another one of those deep-like breaths, then opened her eyes again, beam on at high speed. "We loved each other, get it? Not just hormones, we really loved each other. But we didn't dare. Didn't dare. Me with my work, one of the first black philosophy professors and engaged to that other guy, him with his God stuff, we thought we couldn't do it. Couldn't get together the way we wanted."

She shook her head; I don't know where she found the energy to do that and to talk so much. But I didn't wonder about that then; nothing existed for me in that moment but the words, flowing from this long-lived woman, each carrying with it a comet-trail of memories, learnings, experiences.

"Every morning," now a smile, deeper than before. The photograph trembled slightly in her hand. "He'd bring me tea. Then we'd stand, often, looking out the window, he behind me and I could feel, oh I could feel, girl, the air between us as if it was our wedding bed ... " Her eyes closed again. I sensed my heart beat, blood pumping gently, persistently, everywhere, my breath expanding. "29th birthday, he came earlier, woke me up, a cup of tea in his hand and his eyes, oh, girl, his eyes ... I thought he was going to ... and he took my hand ... oh, girl ... " Her smile opened her face like a blossom. "But he took me to the window. There on that tree, look," she found the strength to point at the picture, "he had put that big red ribbon on the tree. He stood behind me ... that air between us, oh, girl ... I thought ... and then he took this photograph. And left."

Moisture around her eyes, a deep, deep

smile, lips trembling not with weakness but with the power and weight of her long life.

"I had to go back the day after ... he gave me the film to have it developed ... he died the next month ... an infection."

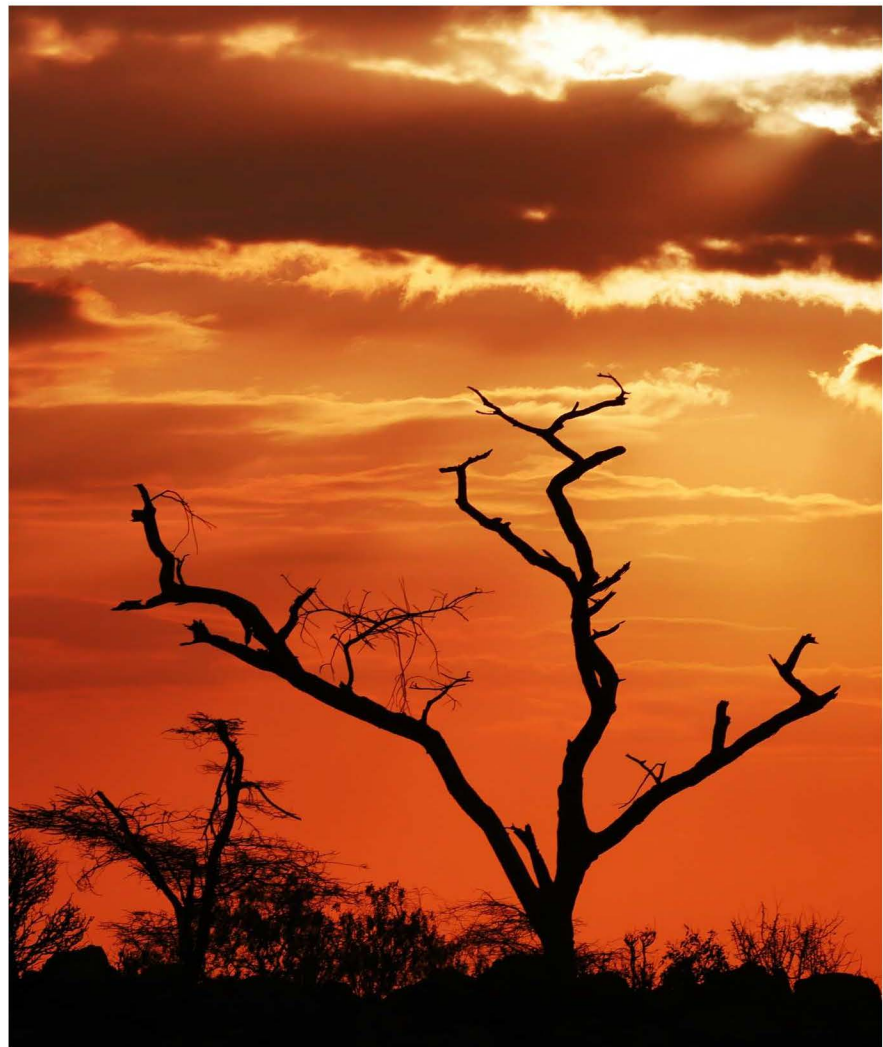
She lifted her head, pierced me with that beam again, "Remember, you're never prepared. It's never the right time. It doesn't matter." Those words came, clear and precise, out of the mouth that a year ago, at 96, was still painted scarlet red, the mouth that had spoken back in the 50s, 60s, 70s to hundreds, no, thousands of women, black most of them, poor most of them, rallying them, burning power into them with that big, sharp, penetrating beam.

Miz Watson's head was back on the pillow. The photograph slowly fell over. She opened her eyes once more, smiled at me, directly at me: "But I loved him. And he loved me."

I touched her hand, lightly, so as to not break it. I felt her breath, that wonky, awkward, snorting rhythm. Then it became deeper, more regular. Maybe she would sleep now, and sleep better.

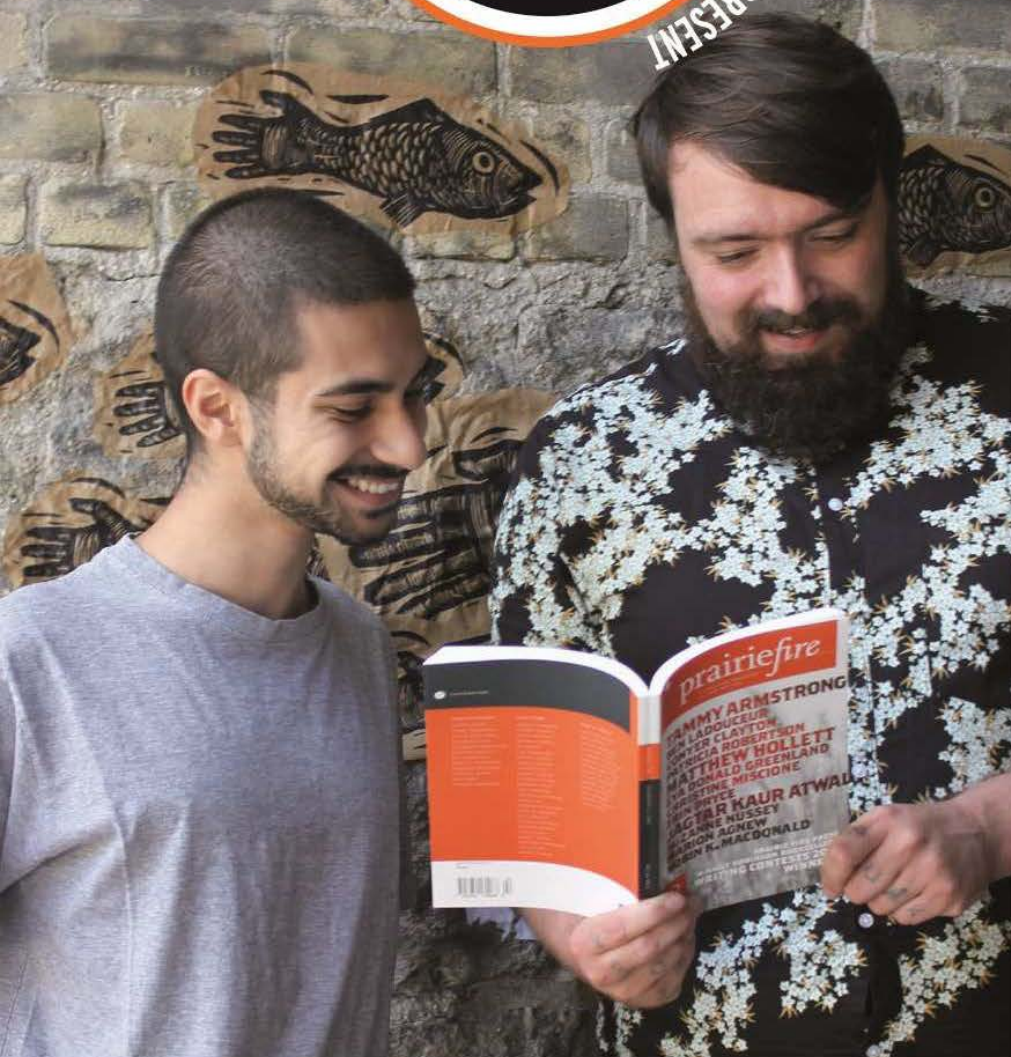
Air came to the old woman slower and slower. A sudden rattle. Her eyelids flew open. Laboured breath, gurgling, finally, a word, "Yes." With great effort, she swallowed, then: "Prepared."

She died with her smiling eyes open.



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**BANFF**  
CENTRE  
FOR ARTS AND  
CREATIVITY

“ *the lemon was laying  
as a fetus in the glass.* ”

---

## Afterfall

by Lori Ulrich

I lay on the cold ground  
arms spread wide

tomorrow means  
nothing  
in this place

it's getting dark  
I can't see the stars

plans to save you were  
lost in the whispers  
of night

the weight in your eyes  
I couldn't turn away from

torn open  
nothing inside  
but silent screams

watching cancer take you  
until there was nothing left  
to take  
but bones  
and skin

afterfall  
I lay in the snow  
hold on  
for another day

## The Worst Drunk Poem I've Ever Written

by Laura Mota

I found in the pocket  
of the jeans I wore last night  
a yellow note:

*from the triple g&t  
an obscene straw points to her.  
one more mental romance.  
the lemon was laying as a fetus in the glass.*

I laughed  
then took my phone  
and booked an appointment  
with a therapist.

it is time to talk about him.

## Blame

by Barry Dempster

Blame the promiscuous breeze of Chernobyl,  
diesel fumes, warp-walled genes.  
Blame payback.

Blame the consorts of unhappiness,  
Freud shouting *Get a grip.*  
Blame how little you touch yourself, your  
hands like iron mitts.  
Blame the day stamina imploded.

Blame mother and her *Born Again* tattoos,  
dad and his popcorn machine of gloom.  
Blame age, diet, stress.  
Blame the faith something was bound to go bad.







# 10 EXOTIC Writing Retreats

---

## Go Somewhere New

by **Kat McNichol**

We love the people and places in our lives, but writing comes more easily with solitude and time.

### **Solitude.**

### **Time.**

Those are beautiful words, right? Luxurious words that conjure images of writing studios filled with cozy armchairs, sunlit windows and silence.

Like me, you've probably learned to write pretty much anywhere, from your living room surrounded by kids, to busy coffee shops, airports, and even in a car at the side of the road.

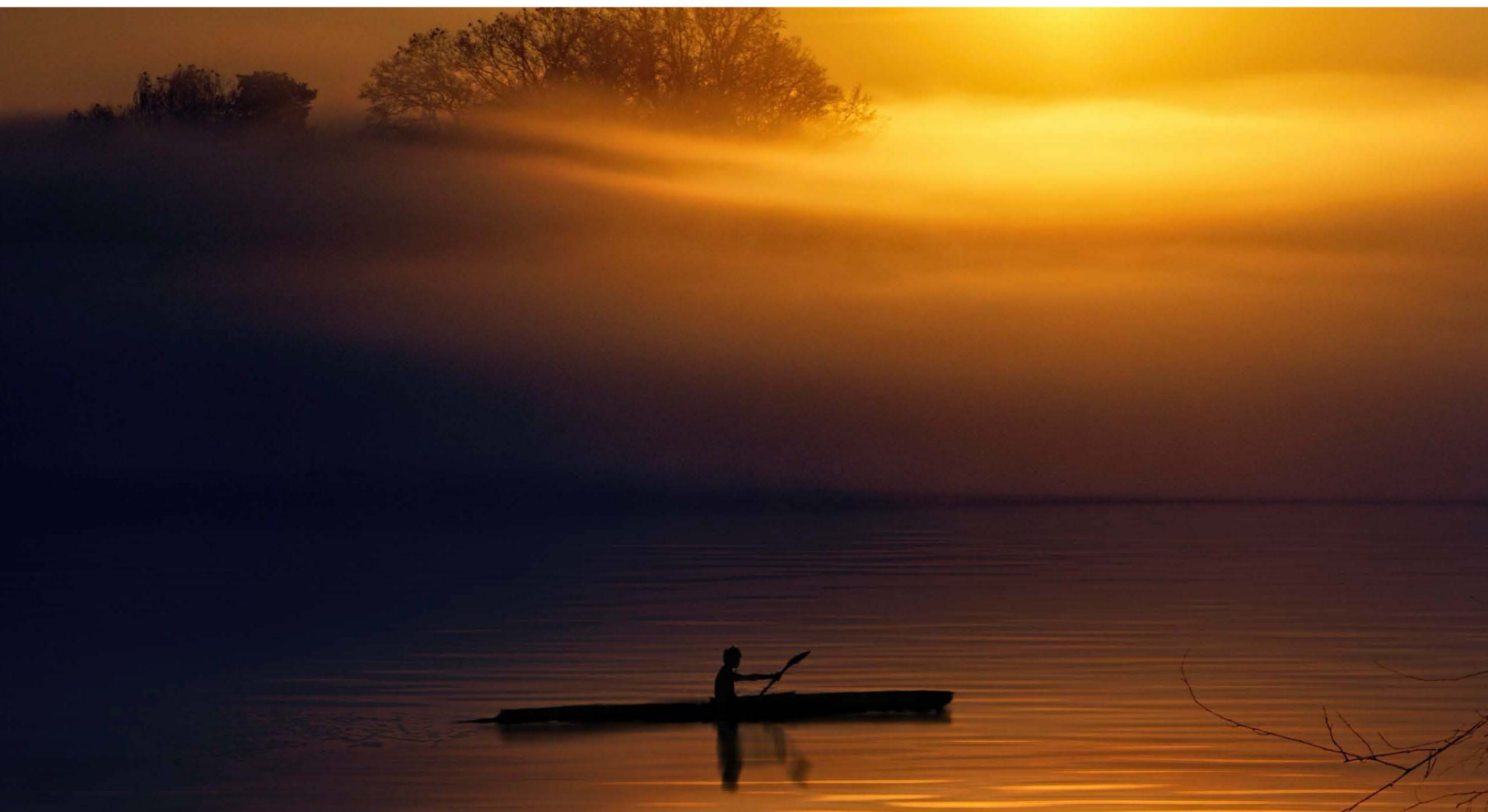
But sometimes, writers need space – we need time and solitude like we need water and air.

Writing retreats give us that space, plus, they offer the perfect excuse to take a vacation. At a writing retreat, you can relax and recharge while working on something that's important to you.

Don't be afraid to go somewhere you've never been before!

The following list includes my top 10 picks for exotic writing retreats, in no particular order.

I haven't personally attended all of these retreats, so make sure you do your own research before committing.



- 1 Iceland Writing Retreats**  
Reykjavík, Iceland
- 2 SIWC at Sea**  
*Take a Writing Retreat Cruise!*  
Galveston, Texas, USA to Roatan, Honduras to Puerto Costa Maya, Mexico to Cozumel, Mexico back to Galveston, Texas, USA.
- 3 Under the Volcano**  
Tepoztlán, Mexico
- 4 Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity**  
Banff, Alberta, Canada *in the Canadian Rocky Mountains.*
- 5 The Himalayan Writing Retreat**  
Satkhol, India *approximately 9 hours from Delhi.*
- 6 Hamlet's Hideaway**  
Various Locations in Denmark  
*This year it's at the Fredensborg Royal Inn next to Fredensborg Palace.*

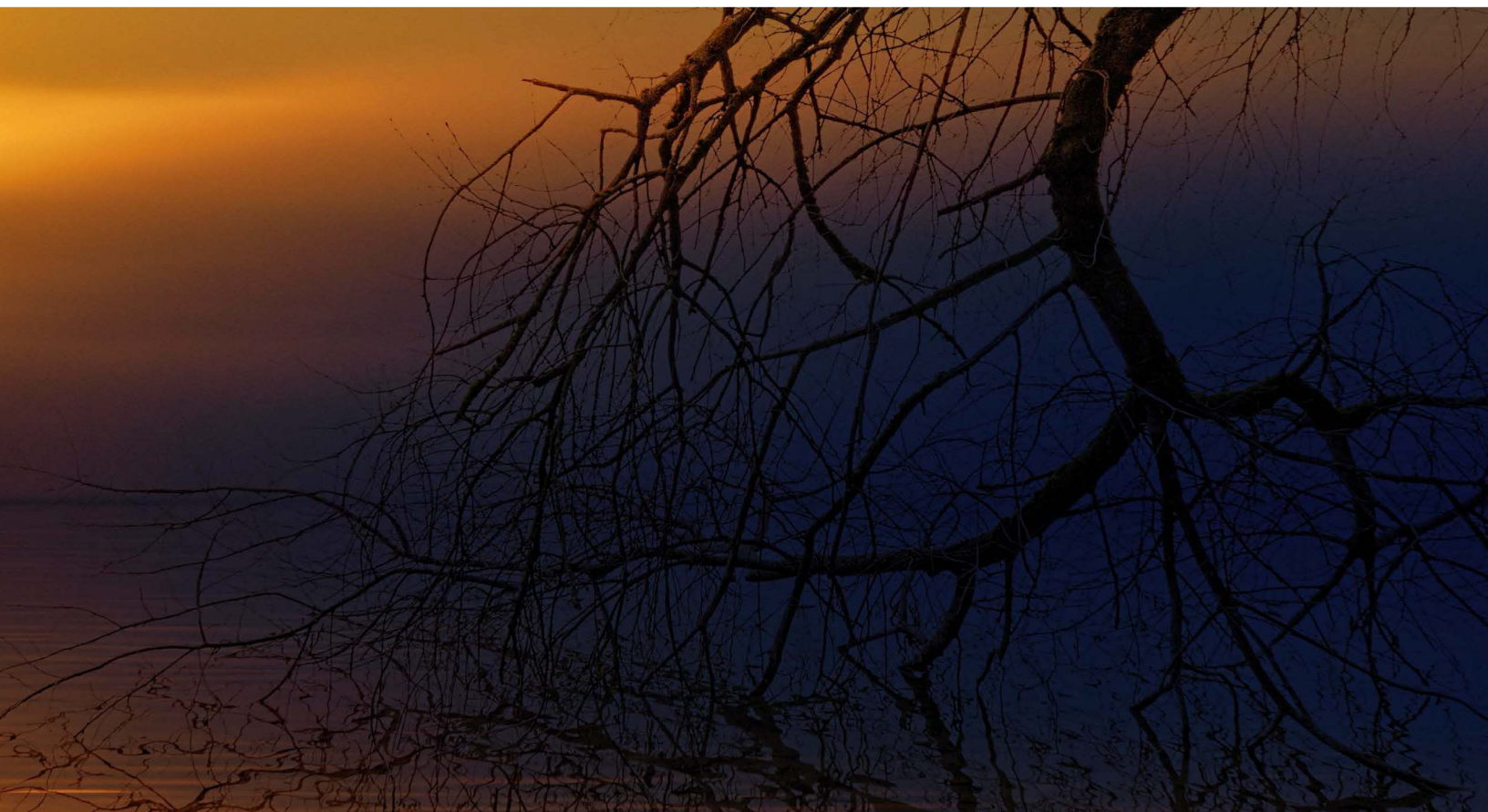
- 7 Centauri Arts Creative Writing Retreat**  
Finca Luna Nueva Sustainable Rainforest Ecolodge, Costa Rica
- 8 Retreats for You**  
North Devon, England, *in a 1600s thatched house!*
- 9 Firefly Creative Writing Retreats**  
Various locations in Ontario, Canada  
*Check out their 4 night writing and canoeing journey in Killarney Provincial Park!*
- 10 The Creative Writer's Workshop**  
Doolin, Co. Clare & Inis Mór Island, Galway, Ireland  
*They're offering a memoir writing retreat this September!*

*Bonus*

- Dreamers Writing Farm**  
Hepworth, Ontario, Canada  
*We've just opened our own writing retreat in the beautiful Bruce Peninsula!*

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For retreat details, visit:  
[www.dreamerswriting.com/retreats](http://www.dreamerswriting.com/retreats)



# Stampede

by Lily MacKenzie

The Calgary Stampede had roared into town. My friend, Sharon, and I met at the Fairgrounds' entrance at 8:00 PM. We pushed our way through the crowds, trying to keep each other in sight, unable to hear ourselves talk above the creaking and grinding of the rides and the shouting voices of carnies: "Step right up, fellows, win your little lady a big prize and her heart. Come on, girls, you can play, too. Here, I'll give you a free one."

"See any cute guys?" Sharon asked.

"Yeah, they're everywhere. Lots of Americans. Why are American men so much better looking?"

"You got me, honeychile. Must be the water."

Pretending to be a southern belle, Sharon wore an elasticized off-the-shoulder white peasant blouse that exposed her breasts with a skirt that flared out from her waist and showed off her hourglass figure. I liked Sharon, but I was jealous of her body and of her sophistication. Instead of clunky cowboy boots like I was wearing, she had sleek white sandals that showed off her painted toenails.

I asked, "Aren't you going to get cold in that blouse?"

"Me? Cold? Never in a hundred years, honeychile, not with all these good-looking guys to keep me warm." She stared boldly at a couple of cowboys lounging against some bundles of hay. They sucked on cigarettes and eyed all the girls that passed. They looked like the real thing, wearing silver spurs on their boots and Stetsons on their heads. The hat seemed a permanent part of them.

Sharon swayed her hips as we passed the cowboys. But when I



imitated her walk, I just ended up throwing one hip out of joint.

"They are kee-ute," she said. "Bet they'd like to party."

At fourteen, Sharon was a couple of years older than I. Skipping a grade

had tossed me into an older crowd. I had to move fast so I could keep up. Now I switched into high gear, but I felt sick to my stomach, not sure I was ready for the kind of partying she was talking about.

A young carnie with a blonde crew

cut and a big space between his front teeth dug deep into his apron pocket and pulled out a hoop. He handed it to me. "Circle a peg and you git your choice of prizes from the top row." He proudly waved his hand at a shelf of miniature horses and ashtrays. Cowboys riding broncos were painted in red on the ashtrays' glass bottoms.

I took the hoop from the carnie and flung it at a peg. It landed on the ground.

He held out one more hoop: "Too bad. Take another shot for just 25 cents." We moved on, laughing, the sound absorbed in the swell of voices.

By then we'd entered the Midway. Lights had come on, making the place even more magical. The Ferris wheel, a constellation, had dropped out of the sky; the roller coaster snaking around bends was a shooting star.

Sharon said, "Look, Tillie. 'Madame Olga, Palm Reader. Wanna try it?'"

"Why not."

We stepped inside the tent. Madame Olga sat at a card table with a black-fringed scarf draped over it, a deck of cards spread out in front of her. Her hair was bleached, dark roots an inch long. Powder caked her face, and some of it sprinkled her black see-through nylon blouse. Her bra showed through the filmy material. From the cleavage that showed, it was clear she didn't need falsies.

A lantern hung from the ceiling and made shadowy shapes. I shivered a little, not sure I wanted to know my future.

"Madame Olga velcomes you. Come, seet down, young ladies. The key to your future eez in your hand."

We sat across from her on a dusty wooden bench. I looked at my left palm. A cowboy riding a bronco had

been stamped there by the ticket taker at the front gate. Was he the key to my future? I clutched my purse in my other hand.

Madame Olga gathered up the cards on the table and flipped them. "Vich do you vant? A full reading costs \$5.00. Zee bargain reading eez \$1.50."

I said, "What about the two of us for \$2.50?"

"\$2.75. Zat's zee lowest I can go."

Sharon and I dug the money out of our wallets.

"Who vants to go first? Vat about you, young lady," and she nodded at me. "Gif me your left hand." She took my hand and stared at my palm for a minute, shaking her head, muttering. I didn't know how she could see anything in that light, but maybe that's why she was a fortuneteller.

"I see many lovers in your future." She squinted, looking more closely at my hand, pressing her fingers against one part of my palm. "Ah, yes, you have a very full Mount of Venus. Zat's good."

"What does it mean?" Her accent was catching.

"Zee Goddess Venus, she smiles on you. Your love life vill be very full."

I was in a daze when we returned to the Midway. Madame Olga's words made me dizzy. I wasn't even a woman yet. How could she know I would have lots of lovers?

The two cowboys we'd seen earlier were lounging outside the tent. "Hey, girls. Did Madame Olga tell you we're in your future?"

I giggled and let Sharon do the talking. "You bet, honeychile. She said two handsome strangers would take us to the moon. My name's Sharon. This is Tillie."

The one with a tiny black mustache

and curls creeping out from under his hat said, "I'm Kit. This is Ben. How about the Haunted House instead?"

Wanting to appear with it, I shrugged. "Okay by me."

Kit slouched along beside me, hands in his rear pockets. "You ever been in there?" He pointed at a huge tent, a penny arcade that had peep shows. "You put a nickel in a slot and a pretty girl undresses."

"I thought we were going to the Haunted House," I said.

"We are. Just thought you'd like a little entertainment on the way. Whadya say, Sharon?"

She said, "Doesn't hurt to check out your competition."

Inside the tent, we lined up for the peep shows. The guys went first, inserting their coins into the slots and bending over the viewers, peering inside. When it was my turn, I stepped up, and Kit put a nickel in the machine. He was at least six feet tall, and when he took off his Stetson, a strip of white circled his forehead, just like the stripe down a skunk's back. He bent over, trying to look through the viewer with me, pressing his face against mine, almost knocking off my hat.

He smelled like a man, a heavy musty odor, and his dense beard scratched my cheek. I hardly noticed the images flipping over rapidly. A pretty dark-skinned woman in a grass skirt, breasts exposed, was doing a hula and swinging her hips.

"Bet you could do a mean hula yourself, kiddo."

Ashamed because my own body wasn't a woman's yet, I watched the peep show. Kit pressed against me, breathing faster. "I'd like to see you do a dance."

I turned away, heading back to the Midway.

...

At the Haunted House, we all stood in line, waiting to get seated in one of the rickety looking cars that careened into the open every few minutes through a swinging door. They looked ready to jump their rails. I searched the crowds strolling past, white cowboy hats bobbing like buoys, hoping to see a familiar face. I felt out of my depth. Someone needed to rescue me.

Kit rested his hand on my waist as if he owned me, tightening his fingers. The pressure and heat from his palm sent a shiver of excitement through me, but it also made my stomach churn. It reminded me of the first day of school when I didn't want to leave the safety of home for that unknown world, and I threw up after breakfast.

I glanced at him, my arms tightly crossed. He was twirling a toothpick in his mouth, staring hard at the pretty girls that passed by, his eyes hungry. He was like hawks I'd seen, circling their prey before attacking.

The rattle and clatter of Midway rides made me even more edgy—the jerky movements, the possibility they could fly off their tracks and soar into space. I remembered reading about space travel in *The Book of Knowledge*. It would take a prop airplane millions of years to reach the moon. The numbers boggled me, but I liked to think of being in space, of visiting the unknown. I pretended that Earth was just one big space machine, the endless prairie sky making me feel at times that we were being lifted into it, on a space ship traveling through time.

Finally it was our turn, and a carnie strapped us into a car that took off through the door into the Haunted House. Kit hollered, "Giddy up! Let 'er rip," and darkness swallowed everyone. Sharon giggled. I held myself stiff and gripped the bar resting on my lap. Kit's leg pressed

against mine. We whirled away from the entrance, the darkness deepening. There weren't any stars to look at.

It reminded me of going under anesthetic when I had a broken leg, losing consciousness. My ears roared, and I tried to rip off the mask pressed over my nose and mouth. Kit's mouth covered mine, cutting off my breath. I wrenched my head away. A skeleton leaped out at me, its bones rattling, so close I could touch it. I screamed, and Kit laughed along with the eerie canned laughter and screeching voices.

The car turned a corner sharply, and the motion threw me against him. I could smell his sweat. My heart in my mouth, one terrifying image after another jumped out at me from the dark—a head severed from a person, hair held in a disembodied hand, blood dripping from it; a doctor in white scrubs holding a dagger above a woman's body in an operating room; a baby floating ghostlike through the air. I clung to Kit now, grateful for his protective arm holding me close to him. In the dark, unable to see his face, I could fool myself into thinking he was the father I'd never known, protecting me from these nightmarish images.

We jerked around another bend and catapulted through the swinging doors into the welcome sounds and sights of the Midway—carnies called out at passersby, bright lights of the double Ferris wheel whirled around and around. "Holy cow, what a ride," Sharon said, jumping out of the car, her lipstick smeared. She rubbed at her mouth with one hand, wiping off the remaining color, forgetting her southern accent. "Jesus, Tillie, why were you screaming so loud? What were you doing to her, Kit?"

"Trying to keep her from jumping out!"

"That's a lie," I said, adjusting the Stetson on my head.

He said, "Why were you sitting so far away then?"

"I kept getting thrown around." We were standing next to the ticket seller for the Haunted House. Kit lit up a cigarette and leaned against the booth. "This is your big chance, girls. You wanna come over to our place for a beer? We're staying just a few blocks away."

"What time is it?" I asked, jostled by the people passing by.

Kit punched Ben on the arm and said, "This girl has a handsome guy after her and she wants to know the time? The night's still young!"

Gripping my clutch bag, I looked at Sharon, hoping she'd get the message that I'd had enough. I said, "Whadya think? Don't you need to get home?"

She was clutching Ben's arm. "What for? Ma-ma and Pa-pa are living it up at the Petroleum Club. Why shouldn't I have fun too?"

Outnumbered, I didn't want to be a spoilsport. No one would be waiting up for me at home. Mum had just said, "Watch your money. You don't want to end up walking home by yourself."

I tried to stall. "We haven't ridden the Ferris wheel yet."

"Aw, that's too tame," Kit said. "We're used to riding bucking broncos. The Ferris wheel's for old ladies."

"You mean you guys are competing in the rodeo?"

"Hell, yes," Ben said. I just got myself second prize tonight. Not bad for a country boy."

"Where you guys from?" I asked, hoping to stall them.

"Well, that depends on what day it is," Ben said. "Today we're from Montana, a little place called Kalispell."



I played along with him. "What if I'd asked you yesterday?"

"We might have been from Wyoming, where the coyotes howl."

"...And the wind blows free."

"Hey, you sing pretty good. You could be in one of these shows here."

I felt myself blush, though I liked it when someone complimented me on my voice. Maybe I would travel someday to the United States and sing in clubs.

The crowds were thinning out now, and the four of us walked side by side. Sharon and I were between the two men. "You wanna take these girls on the Ferris wheel before we leave?" Kit asked Ben. "Give 'em a little thrill?"

"Fine with me."

When Kit started rocking the seat back and forth, ignoring my screams, I knew it was a mistake. "Come on, girl, let's live this up. Hang on." He hooted and hollered as we approached the top and tipped over, descending, our seat swaying wildly. The earth seemed in motion, the Midway out of control.

My stomach felt like it had dropped from my body, suspended somewhere. I clung to the bar with one hand and clutched my purse and hat with the other one, unable to control the shrieks coming from my mouth. Kit's lips were pulled back from his teeth, his hat in one hand, and he hollered "Giddyup," as if he were riding a bucking horse or bull.

The sky exploded into fragments of color, a great booming sound blocking out the Midway's noise. I forgot it was time for the nightly fireworks' show and thought everything was coming apart, the constellations falling out of the sky and showering us. I remembered Chicken Little calling out. "The sky

is falling, the sky is falling." Like Chicken Little. I felt overwhelmed.

Finally the Ferris wheel ground to a stop, and the attendant released us from the seat. "How's that for a ride?" Kit ruffled my hair. I ducked, jamming the Stetson onto my head.

\*\*\*

After, we walked through tree-lined streets near the Stampede grounds to one of the old converted houses that rented rooms to transients. Western music and laughter floated out of the windows and

reached us in the street. The guys must be partying already." Ben said.

Kit flexed his muscles. "We'll have to do some catching up."

I tried to get Sharon's attention, but she seemed totally gone on Ben, laughing at everything he said, even when it wasn't funny. I was on my own with Kit. He steered me onto the porch and up the stairs to the third floor. I looked into the rooms we passed. Men and women in jeans and fancy shirts lounged on beds and on the floor, guzzling

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beer, smoking, and laughing. A radio played Hank Snow singing "Your Cheatin' Heart," and some drunken female sang along with him, off key.

On the third floor, Kit led us into a room with empty cases of Molsens and Labatts stacked against one wall, taking up more space than the broken down green chesterfield and chair. "Looks like Buzz and Dave have warmed things up already," Kit said.

"Buzz and Dave?"

"Our roommates. Yah hoo. Ride 'em cowboy," Kit called out to a guy who was sprawled across some women on the sofa, legs and arms entangled like an octopus. They didn't even notice us. "Don't let us disturb you. Maybe we can get some pointers, eh Tillie." All I saw was a blur of bodies. Some were standing—taking slugs of beer. Some were sitting—girls on men's laps. Some were slow dancing—bodies grinding together. Sharon and Ben disappeared into a room off the living room.

"You like to dance, kid?"

"Sometimes."

Kit grabbed me, waltzed me across the room to the kitchen, and lifted me onto the counter. "There. You're just my height now." He shoved a beer into my free hand; I clutched my purse with the other one, remembering Mum's warning, "Keep an eye on your money." Sipping the beer Kit gave me, I studied the kitchen floor. Bare boards showed through in places, and the pattern in the linoleum no longer was visible.

A cockroach skittered across the counter and disappeared into a partially open cupboard. Kit set down his empty bottle and stood in front of me, hands holding the counter edge on either side of my legs, pressing up close. I wished I were a cockroach and could find a crack to crawl into. "The way you're

sipping that beer, it'll take all night to finish it. Drink up! Have some fun."

I put the bottle to my mouth, tilted my head back, and tried to take a big swallow. The bare light bulb's glare blinded me, and the beer tasted bitter. After taking several sips, I tried to make conversation—distract him. "So what happens when the Stampede's over?"

Kit rubbed his black stubble against my cheek, knocking the hat off my head. "We head back south, doll baby."

I leaned back as far as I could. "To where?"

"I dunno, Wyoming, maybe. Wherever there's a rodeo. Me and Ben'll find us some doggies to ride. Cash in."

"Aren't you afraid of getting hurt?"

Kit took the beer from me and threw back his head, drinking it thirstily. When he came up for air, he opened two more. "You mean break a leg or something?"

"Yeah."

"We're always breaking bones—ribs, shoulders, legs, arms. You name it. No big deal. They heal eventually."

"How do you earn a living then?"

"Broken bones don't stop us from competing. You talk too much." He covered my lips with his, pushing his tongue inside, filling up my mouth, almost choking me. I was going under anesthetic again, falling into blackness; I yanked my head free. "I can't breathe."

"You're supposed to breathe through your nose. Christ, don't you know how to kiss? Let's dance." He grabbed my hand and pulled me off the counter, pushing me around the floor, stepping over bodies, bumping into other dancers, stomping on my feet at times with

his big boots. He breathed heavily into my ear, singing off key along with Hank Williams—"I'm so lonesome I could die."

He danced me into a big pantry and pulled me onto the floor, forcing my body under his. Holding my arms over my head with one hand, he ran the other one over my body, stopping at my breasts and fondling my padded bra. "Nice little titties. You like to have them bit?"

I struggled but was helpless, pinned under his weight, angry because my body was betraying me by responding to his touch. "Stop! I'm a virgin. I've never done it before."

"Don't give me that shit. A tough little broad like you? You're no virgin."

"I'm only 12."

"So? I like 'em young."

He covered my mouth again with his, the taste of beer and cigarettes strong on his breath. He bit my lips, drawing blood, and his whiskers scraped my skin. I cried out in pain. "Shut your mouth, you little slut. You want it. Trying to play hard to get, huh."

"I want some more beer, I've never done it sober before."

"That's more like it. It'll loosen you up."

He got up and I followed him. I said, "I'm going to the john," and slipped past him, heading for a door. I hoped it would lead outside. I stepped over couples petting on the floor, running down the stairs and out the front entrance, taking deep gulps of air.

I ran for blocks, looking behind me every few feet, afraid to stop, certain I could hear Kit clomping behind me, but it was only my own heart, pounding in my ears.

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# Sunflowers

Nonfiction by **Jean Thomas**

Lately, I've been thinking a lot about sunflowers—the kind that kept Van Gogh tethered to his body and that convinced Hannah Gadsby that human connection can shield us from the world's incessant cruelty.

I think of them often in small moments where isolation gives way to discovery. Just before sunset when I'm watching women whip around a skating rink. The few beats after meeting a soft butch when her partner draws a thumb across her cheek and I watch her eyes flutter shut. The look of wonder in a friend's eyes when they see their shaved head for the first time. I've started to see myself in the sunflowers queer love leaves in plain sight.

For a long time, I felt pressured to link those bright spots with the right descriptions — definitive and unflinching. It's the pressure a lot of us feel — to declare ourselves into existence before anyone else can define us without our permission. Sometimes that leads to beautiful reclamations and sometimes it forces us to claim spaces we're not sure we belong inside. I'd like to chase the sunflowers instead; trace my way through fields that haven't been named yet.

...

The sunflowers have led me here but I'm still afraid. In my free moments, I keep clicking back to a page splashed with gender bending bodies, pursuing a feeling I can't quite explain. I want to slip on a chest binder and see how it feels. I can't bring myself to order one.

I'm afraid that I'll like it too much — cross over to a world where I can't forget the euphoria I feel when I'm not fused with femininity. I'm afraid to find that joy and then realize I've been living with compromise and pretending it's good enough.

I'm angry I've gone this long without knowing that I may not be fully woman or that my idea of woman stretches outside feminine expressions. I'm angry I've lived so much life without really living inside myself. I've spent so much time surviving in reaction to the world that I'm just now discovering how I was meant to feel. I'm scared that how I feel inside will invite more scrutiny and more surviving. I've been surviving so long and I'm not sure I can live that way anymore. But maybe, just maybe, that's the whole point: to confront the not knowing to see where it carries me.

...

Sometimes I want to be called they. Sometimes I'm afraid of how good it feels and what that joy will mean for me. Sometimes I want to leave womanhood behind and sometimes I don't know who I am without it.

...

I'm meant to find something here, in the sunflowers the world kept me from. I was never supposed to see myself in their expansiveness. I was never supposed to discover masculinity re-imagined. So I'll linger, now, until I'm ready to leave my love letters out in the open. Someday another one of us will need them.



# Threadbare

by Christine Heuner

I'm shivering in a hospital gown and Hanes underwear. A nurse brings me another blanket, crisp with hot starch. I want to cry.

The wallpaper border of pink carnations clings to moss green walls; the flowers have floated up to the surface of an algaic pond to comfort me.

The lights are dim. In the corner sits Jake, swallowed by shadow.

The young man who gives me a tetanus shot asks, "What happened to you?"

"I did this to myself," I say quietly.

He catches my eye, his expression unreadable, and lightly presses to my arm a small bandage, much smaller than those I use to seal up my own messes, minor crises contained.

Next, the doctor. She stitches up my hip and says a cream will help the smaller cuts.

Eleven stitches.

When I tell her that I don't see an end to this, she, seated like a mother at her child's bedside, says, "You shouldn't have to feel this way. We'll get you some help."

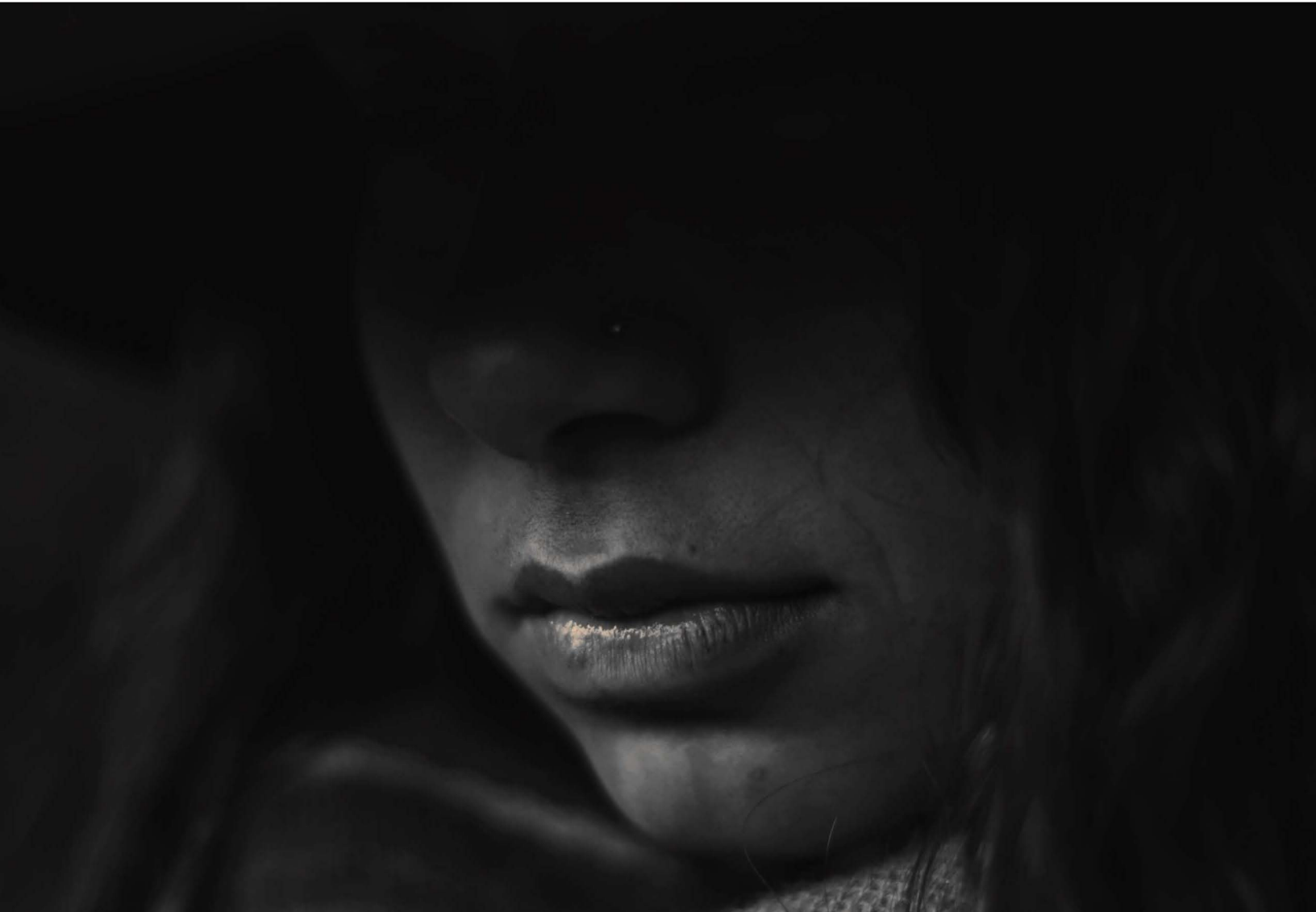
And then I do cry.

Eleven stitches. I wanted more: twenty at least.

...

They send me to a place that, the nurse informs me, "has a bed," suggesting that anything else, even food, is optional. It's the same place I went two years ago, but only for three days. This time, I'm certain I'll be here longer.

I have no extra clothes. Brenda, one of the staff, offers me scrubs and whatever clothes others have left behind. I find sweatpants too sizes two big and a zip-up hoodie with magenta flowers on both sides, outlined in gold beads, some of them missing, a few



hanging by thin threads. The flowers announce *Born to Love* in banners across their chests. Oh, well. It's this or scrubs. Years later, I will still have the hoodie. My daughter, age twelve, will find it in my closet and wear it everywhere. A friend will ask where she got it. "Target," I'll say. "Years ago."

A woman leaving later today offers me her pajamas. When I protest, she says, "My pajamas need to stay here."

I remember something I read about prison: if you leave your shoes upon release, you might return to walk in them again. I find a pair of shoes, newish slip-on sandals, just my size. I imagine their owner returning, cursed by her mistake. Cursed in general. If you're not cursed with something, how do you end up here?

...

It's Sunday, so there are no group meetings until tomorrow. Brenda tells me that it's kind of dead around here on the weekends. A man calls me into an office and asks if I am having any urges to hurt myself or someone else.

"No." But I know what I'd be doing if I were home. I won't understand until much later that hurting myself is hurting someone else.

Looking down at his pad, he says another doctor will see me Monday. The top of his head is bald, shiny like polished mahogany.

The Monday doctor puts me on an antidepressant, a mood stabilizer, and a sleep aid; she suggests I stop breastfeeding. "It may be time to wean. You gave her eight months of good milk. Better to be safe."

...

My first time here, more like a visit than a stay, my roommate turned her back to the wall and said nothing. "She needs to be in a rubber room," someone said. To create balance, my current roommate does not stop talking. She's here only for med management, a "little fine-tuning." She asks, as so many do without expectation of privacy, what I'm in for. I tell her.

She considers this for a moment. "I pick my feet," she says. "I pull the skin right off, sometimes until I bleed. I don't know why I do this. I just... pick my feet."

The intake nurse, after seeing my cuts, told me, "No picking." It didn't occur to me that someone would do that. I just cleaned them with the soothing hot sting of rubbing alcohol and bandaged them up. But, because she said it, I do think about picking, ponder it, my mind forever seeking new avenues of destruction.

...

I look forward to "group": two sessions each day. They do more than break up the long stretches of dead time; I get to learn everyone's names and stories, which I use to measure my own insanity. I'm at least in the fiftieth percentile.

I tell the group about the blades. (The intake nurse took all my "sharps" including tweezers and nail clippers.) I just want my story told, to have it heard.

"You can always find ways to hurt yourself," my roommate tells me and the group. "You could pull the staple out of this—" She holds up the packet on depression, bipolar, and anxiety we've been given—"—or get a bobby pin and take the little bead off—" "Enough," the counselor says. "That's quite enough."

...

Jennifer, who I meet at lunch, is probably mid-fifties, but I won't ask. At home, she bangs herself against cabinets and other objects that won't give. She shows me bruises I don't want to see. They give me ideas. When we hang out in free time and share our stories, Jennifer tells a newcomer that "I bang, she cuts." I don't mind being introduced this way.

...

During visiting hours, Jake brings me clothes, the necessities, and the Chinese food I asked for on the phone but now do not want. Because my roommate's obese visitors have taken

up her space and mine in our room, Jake and I sit in the common area where others pull chairs in close circles. Some sit alone. Joe is one of these. Earlier in group, he shared that he has nothing waiting for him on the outside: no wife, no kids, no job. "I've fucked it all up," he said. "Drinking. Drugging. You all complain about being in here, but I'm scared shitless about getting out."

I'm not scared of getting out. I don't want to go. I see ever-full laundry baskets, past-due bills, obsessive attachments to LinkedIn and my secret emails. At home, it's his-and-her bank accounts. Even after five years of marriage, Jake and I divide the bills, or we did. Four months ago, I asked him to take over the cable and electric after I lost my job.

"It's only for awhile," I said. "I'll be back on my feet soon."

Jake asks me how much longer I'll be here. "Not much," I say. I don't remind him that it's been only two days; no need to start an argument.

I imagine my roommates' family farting on my bed. When Jake tells me he loves me, I'm thinking about our own bed, him alone in it.

...

To the social worker who meets with me every other day, I insist that I'm not bipolar.

"I miss sleep when I lose it. I don't buy impulsively. You know, Art said he bought two cars in one day? Kailey couldn't get out of bed for nearly a month. That's not me."

"Stop comparing yourself," she says. "Isn't it enough that you've suffered? That you're suffering right now?"

I really like this woman. She has a clutter of three crosses gathered at her throat, cross earrings, an ichthus bracelet. Maybe she trusts these talismans as a united force field against suffering.

"Remember, everyone else has suffered. Identify; don't compare. You're not meant to lick this thing on

your own. You wouldn't be here if you could."

But my insanity didn't throw me off a cliff, just pressed me to its threatening edge. It almost feels wrong to care for myself before taking that leap, leaving everything behind. That would truly earn me a seat at their table.

...

"What did you do?" This from Jennifer. She could mean anything. I must look confused because she says, "You know, for work."

"I was a lawyer." I say quietly as if ashamed, though I want to impress.

"Was?"

"The practice closed. I have to start all over."

I don't tell her that I wanted to leave, that I'd planned on leaving for years, but just couldn't afford it. Before entering the office most days, I sat in my car for up to twenty minutes trying to force myself to go in. I considered other careers, but what else could I do?

When I was in college, a counselor, eyes on my transcript, said that law would be the best option for me.

"I was thinking about social work," I said.

He shook his head, bald on top, hair fuzzed above his ears. He said, "Not a good idea, if you ask me." (I didn't.) "You're too smart for that."

So, I listened to him, my parents, and professors.

Here, I have more education than any of these people; I've just finished *Anna Karenina* and enjoyed it; I have multiple degrees from good colleges. I earned scholarships, awards, shiny plaques reflecting my face. But I am quietly weird, ashamed of my oddity. I love reading about slaves and saints, the energetic angst of Greek heroes. Full frontal tragedy, the death count high. Before I die, I want to hear monks chanting.

I want to be perfect, believe I can be, punish myself when I cannot. It's such a pleasure to hurt myself. No one can beat me at it or force me to stop. There is certain comfort in contained crisis. I can get away with nothing.

...

On the third day, the sleep meds stop working. I roam the halls, then take my book into the kitchen area. I'm always hungry when I wake up, but a roll-top enclosure locks the pantry. I ask Brenda for some food; she puts her fingers to her lips and filches tiny boxes of cereal and school-sized milk cartons.

"I could make coffee," she says, "but you don't need no coffee."

I thank her and read my book while eating, the same book I read last visit but didn't finish or return to upon my release. I have to start over.

I am only a few pages in when a guy, hair mussed, shuffles in wearing fuzzy Superman pants, a John Deere sweatshirt, and loafers.

"Can't sleep either, huh?" he asks.

"No," I say, looking down at my book.

"Damn, I need a cigarette. They don't open the back door 'til six. Makes no goddamn sense. They wouldn't close the bathroom door, would they?"

"Addictions suck, don't they?"

He nods. "Ah. You gotta get through life somehow, you know? Pick your poison."

"What if it picks you first?" I want to ask. "Then what?"

...

In group, Rose, painfully thin, sits outside the circle, in the back beside the game, book, and VHS collection. (There is no VCR.) She shrinks into herself, shoulders curled in, arms wrapped around the legs she's gathered on the chair. The counselor asks her to sit with us. Rose does not speak, not even when asked. But she comes up to me after one session,

says softly, "I know what you mean when you say you don't feel like you're worth it. I feel the same way. I don't want to get help. Why try?" She leans into me and whispers, "I hate myself."

At night snack, she says that she can survive on one coffee roll and eight cups of coffee a day. In a voice husky from years of nicotine, demure from decades of pain, Rose tells me her ex-husband beat her, cheated on her with floozies; her grandfather used to molest her. One day, he took her and a friend out for ice cream. The friend sat in the car's front seat while Rose sat in the back. It didn't matter that he had his hand up the little girl's skirt. "I was jealous," Rose says, "because she got the front." Years later, Rose told her mother and aunts about the grandfather. "Who cares?" they said. "He did that to all of us."

At another table, a group of guys defend their favorite bands: Nirvana. Floyd. Skynard. Joe shouts: "Zeppelin beats fucking all!" Another group plays Monopoly with Parcheesi pieces. And here is Rose, telling me the deepest part of herself over white bread-and-cheese sandwiches.

"I used to cut myself, too," she adds, detaching the crusts. "I'd cut here." She makes parallel motions on her forehead with her finger. "I used a paperclip."

"How did you stop?" I visualize blood running into her eyes, down her cheeks like a horror movie poster.

"I kept getting sent to the ER. And because Johnny used to beat me I was already a regular there. They knew me better than the *Number One Bar and Grill*." This will be her only attempt at humor.

Many here have suffered like Rose. But I'm not broken beyond repair. It's simple: my parents preferred my golden sister, a natural gymnast with a taut body, luminous skin, ivory teeth. (Someone, I don't know who, wrote in my ninth-grade yearbook: *Amy, You need a face lift REAL bad. I did, too. Acne. Underbite.*)

Boys and men took me to their rooms, made unkept promises. Friends spun



rumors behind closed doors. I don't touch the edge of victimhood. But I've played the martyr.

...

I finally call my mother. Jake has been talking to her, telling her they don't allow calls, which is not true. They take your cell phone upon arrival, but pay phones are available. I call collect.

"My God, I'm so worried," she says. "We're *all* worried. Daddy is just sick about this." As she talks, I touch the word *Fuckmuncher*, carved into the wooden chair's seat back in jagged letters, filled with black ink.

My father used to tell my sister as she practiced for hours and hours on beams, bars, trampolines: "You can do it. Fight like a tiger. You're a warrior."

But he said nothing of tigers or warriors to me.

"You can't lose," he'd tell her before every gymnastics meet. Most of the time, she didn't.

He doesn't come to the phone.

...

We get art and music as bonuses. I draw a body striped with cuts, words written above the red slices. *I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry*. I write *I'm sorry* instead of a mouth. Jennifer sees it and touches my arm; it's silly, but I imagine she's putting a tiny bandage on a *sorry* or erasing it completely.

...

In music class, the counselor plays a song from a 1990's CD player then asks us our feelings about it. We're only three in attendance. In the first song, the singer tells us over and over that we can start all over.

Art says that it's bullshit; who can really start over? "My wife is dead. There's no starting over. What'm I going to do, go to Match-dot-com? Who the hell would pick me?" He has a point. Even his fingernails are ugly.

Kailey says it's a good song; it's a nice thought, to start all over; she's going to

do just that when she gets home. "I'm going to look for a job, too," she says. "And stick with it this time. And lose all the weight I gained on fucking Depakote."

It's my turn to speak. "I've tried starting over, but I'm not sure how. This is my second time here, so... I don't have much practice in doing the right thing."

...

Though days are short, life seems long, cluttered with tasks undertaken with dreaded obligation or boredom. The past grips me in its fist while the other

hand points a bossy finger toward the future.

While doing one thing, I plan for what's next, look back with regret, fear tomorrow; now, right now, is lost in the haze of penumbra. In soundless surrender, I sink into this space, pondering actions, consequences. Fate. It's all dark to me; I cannot connect what I've done with who I am, cannot see what I'm meant to do or where to go.

If promised immortality by an ostensibly kind deity, I'd probably kill myself.

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Dying by age forty-five, a decade away, is just fine by me.

...

The social worker tells me that children of suicidal parents wind up in here. That's something to kick around in your head.

One of the doctors says that my brand of cutting isn't a suicide attempt. "You're just trying to relieve tension. But it fills you with shame."

"So, it's not that bad," I tell the social worker. "I'm just coping with stress."

She says, almost yelling. "If it's not that bad, why are you here?"

"I don't know."

But I do.

"I can't stop."

...

Yael, who I meet seven days in, says she is a fortune teller. She's sitting across from me in group. I put my hands in my lap, look at my palms, wondering what she might find in the creases, what kind of story hides in the lines of wrinkled skin, if there is a story at all. I don't believe that skin or cards or stars reveal or predict, or that anything but our will steers the wheel. I believe in God, but not as a rescue squad. Here is the problem: I don't know the right avenue to prayer. I don't believe in miracles.

I go to Sunday mass in the tiny chapel. Amanda's baptism was the last time I visited a church, but it was all for show, a formal, tight handshake and quick release. In this chapel, the Bible reading is about love, forgiveness, charity. Hope. I cry so much it's embarrassing. The reading speaks to me, but I know that any selection would. It could be about building the ark or fathers killing sons and I'd still find a voice there, speaking like God to a prophet.

Later, I will read about a prophet hearing God's voice not in furious wind or earthquakes or raging fire, but encased in a tiny whisper. This will make sense to me.

...

I finally tell the group about Mike—not his real name, of course. Someone asks, "How did you find the time?"

"On the internet. E-mail." A slight, polite laughter circles the room. The counselor tells them to hush and me to keep going. "It's an old friend from high school. We reconnected on Facebook. It got pretty intense."

"Like e-sex and stuff?" Kailey asks, perking up. I nod; she smiles.

"How'd you end it?" the counselor asks.

I shrug. "I haven't, I guess. I just wound up in here."

"What about Skype sex? That can get pretty hot, let me tell you. Once, I met this guy... Okay, fine, I'll shut up," Kailey says to the counselor.

Skype sex.

"If you're unhappy in your marriage, end it before you shack up with someone else," Art says.

"She's not shacking up. It's on the *internet*," says Kailey.

Art waves his hand at her. He's right: what's the difference?

...

Through e-mail, the guy I call Mike told me I was beautiful in Times New Roman, **bold**. His only basis for judgment: a Facebook picture and skewed recollection.

"What did you see in me, back then?" I asked. In tenth grade English, he sat beside me, though we barely spoke. He read Banquo's lines in a deep voice whose resonance he tried to hide. Someone told me he liked me, but I was into someone else.

He said, "You were cute, had a hot little body, and, I don't know, you just seemed comfortable in your own skin."

"You've got to be kidding." My skin felt tight like those teenage dance

costumes and itchy like little tags that nip at your neck. My mother chose my wardrobe: pastels, pleats, collars. In the hallways at school, I admired other girls' fashions, borrowed their image, carried it away with me like my backpack, only much lighter. I didn't want to walk in someone else's shoes, only wear them.

...

Jake and I sit on the bed whose weary springs moan whenever we move. My roommate left yesterday, so we're here alone. He says that everything is okay at home. His parents babysit; he's taken over the laundry, has even tried his hand at a few meals, but says mine are far better. Is this what "okay" means? The unspoken hovers like the ghosts I imagine hide in these closets, the spirits of patients past, all haunted by what was and will be, haunting me now. Jake and I are seated closer than we've been in awhile; at home, Amanda comes between us, even sleeps in our bed, horizontally, pushing us to opposite poles, the three of us a capital H.

At our wedding, someone snuck a photo of us seated at the table of honor, our backs facing the camera, our hands beneath the table deleting the small space between his chair, my chair, our fingers intertwined, threaded in gentle intimacy. This shot, its taker anonymous, testifies our affection. We didn't make a big show of it; at the same time, it sustained us, then. No his-hers, but ours. Now, his hand on mine cannot touch me.

...

When we're sitting in the common room during the empty time between dinner and night meds, Annette, who arrived yesterday and confessed she lost her kids to DYFS, shows us her tattoos. I don't like tattoos in general—my mother always says they look trashy, and I believe her—but Annette has an emerging work of art on her back, a birth-to-death narrative she develops every few months when she has the cash. She lifts up her shirt all the way, unhooks her bra, folds her arms across her chest, and leans against the wall. The baby on her left shoulder is nestled between two



hands, curled in like an embryo. Beneath it are two children, faceless silhouettes, shadows, caught in the act of playing, the ball they will never catch hovering between them.

There's an odd gap in her mid-back as if someone rubbed an eraser across it. On her lower back, just above the tailbone: a skull in fine detail; you can even see tiny cracks in the forehead, the deep caverns of hollowed eyes. The skull's mouth is a flower, red with green leaves, the expansive masterpiece's only color.

I want to ask her why the flower is there, but I think I know. Death is sweet, an alluring reprieve from the trials of middle and old age that Annette's back has ignored, for now.

...

Yael, the fortune teller, has a tattoo of a Tarot card on her upper-arm. It's the High Priestess. At breakfast, Jennifer asks her what it means.

"It's complicated," Yael says. "It's mostly about finding your inner voice. Balancing your light side and shadow side. You know, waiting for the answers to come to you."

"The fuck does that mean?" This from Art; the doctors are still adjusting his medication.

"Well, like I said, it's hard to explain, you know. When people get the High Priestess, I usually tell them she's mysterious... it's about channeling your inner voice, like I said, not about looking for answers outside yourself."

"I bet that pays the bills." Art again.

Yael gives him a smile punctuated with a dimple in one cheek. Her skin: a smooth cocoa, free of blemish. "You should come and see me when you're on the outside. I'll give you a reading for free."

I expect Art to scoff, to tell her that she can take her mumbo jumbo elsewhere. But he doesn't. He looks at her curiously, says, "You're a real lady, miss... what's your name again?"

My inner voice, in a word: treacherous. Evil thoughts recurrent as breath. I'll be carrying Amanda through the house and hear *Drop her down the stairs*. When driving to work: *Plow your car into that river*. When cleaning: *Lick the bleach cap. Lick it now*. I didn't lick it, but I did take twenty Klonopin because my inner voice insisted it was the best punctuation to

my screaming argument with Jake.  
End with an exclamation.

God told Solomon he could have anything. Anything you want, just ask. Wisdom, Solomon answered. Understanding.

I'd trade all the wisdom in the world for one golden thread of peace, for an inner voice like the nurse's from the maternity ward where I birthed Amanda. She pressed the liquid gold from my breast to my baby's needy mouth, her hands a blessing upon me. She said with ignorant faith, "You have a good spirit. I can tell."

...

"So I hear you're leaving us," Art says, touching my shoulder as we walk from the cafeteria back to our wing.

"Insurance gives ten days. What's a girl to do?"

"You need Medicare," he says. "Thirty more years or so and you can stay in this Club Med all you want."

"That's a scary thought."

But it isn't.

"Ah, well. You're gonna be fine, little lady." He puts his arm around me, squeezes my shoulder. I don't mind. "You're a little undercooked, but you're gonna be okay. Take care of that husband of yours."

...

The social worker asks what I plan to do when I get out.

"Look for a job," I tell her. "End it with Mike. Start all over. Try to be good."

...

When we hug good-bye, Jennifer releases a choked sob into my neck and holds on so tight I may need Brenda to pull her off. Earlier, she pressed me for my phone number. I wrote my area code and seven numbers. I still wonder how many times she tried those numbers before giving up.

## “ I desire mercy, not sacrifice.

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...

Because I am sure it will be my last visit, I consider leaving something behind, but not clothes. I've fallen in love with my gifted pajamas and won't curse myself by leaving shoes. I put a note in the top dresser drawer—I *desire mercy, not sacrifice*—quoted from the Bible I found in the common room. I've been reading it sporadically. I write the words without citation; some people are so twitchy about God. I also pen the sentence on a little yellow Post-It and put it in my wallet; it finds its way between credit cards, crisp and crumpled bills. I'll keep it there for years until it disintegrates, but even then I won't throw it out.

I imagine a kindred spirit with my note's twin. It could be anyone: the asshole who double-parks at the Quick Check, the bristly pharmacy clerk, a felon reading alone in his cell, my note a book mark, both placeholder and comfort.

...

I'm home a week before I speak to my father, but only because my mother hands him the phone. I'm good; he's good; it's sunny here; cloudy there.

I try to pretend I don't care. It will take years for him to tell me he's proud of me, has always been proud of me, years for my sister to say that he pushed her to be like me. I will learn that love can't always confess itself. For so long, I ate the bitter rind of blame and self-pity, chewed it to a pulp, refused to spit it out, when I should have searched for sweetness wherever I could find it. My father used to buy me coffee cake from the bakery miles away, make a big show of giving it to me. When my mother called me The Odd Bird, she said it with a smile, her voice light with affection. "Amy's wiser than any of us," she told family and friends, even acquaintances. "When I grow up, I want to be like her."

...

Though I break it off with Mike when I get home, after two weeks I'm thinking of him again, relegated to the luxurious privacy of illimitable desire.

I've tried picking off the beaded ends of bobby pins, my roommate's tip, just to see how sharp they are. But I'm too smart now; I know where that leads. Besides, the beads won't come off.

So I go to the meetings, sharing nothing, just listening. Crying. Many are completely broken; they speak, sometimes whine, about jails, prisons, ravaged families, drug court. I don't belong here, not really; even Jake says so. I leave before the final serenity prayer so that no one will approach me. It will take awhile, years, to know that it's okay not to break completely. A clean, quiet fracture will do.

I can't shake my father's wisdom: *Fight like a tiger, a warrior.*

I'm tired of fighting.

Some things you can't fight.

...

The hard part about getting better is when things get easy, or easier. Used to be I knew life by its polarity: magnificent or tragic. But now it's calm by comparison. I'm trying to sit in these moments of stillness, not push them away. Like Yael and her High Priestess: waiting for answers to come, for darkness to pass. God will come to me in whispers, not the golden trumpets of angels. *You're okay now. That's done now. Don't look back.*

I try to seek peace before wisdom. It's a burden, wisdom is, deeper than knowledge, and I know too much anyway.

Maybe the skull's flower on Annette's back does not translate death as

sweet. Maybe, after you go, a remnant of life remains: your soul, your spirit, every petal of it flourishing, vibrant while the rest of you rots.

...

I might get a tattoo on my hip: a flower like Annette's, minus the skull; maybe a rose, the size a bathing suit will cover, not at all trashy. I tell Jake: only you and I could see it. He thinks it's a good idea, kind of sexy, he says. We're sitting on the front porch swing. He puts his arm around me, setting the swing in gentle motion. This simple gesture, rare for him, follows another. He tips up my chin and kisses me, not rough with

impatient longing and careless desire, but with kindness. His warm hand, strong and sure, cups my neck, his thumb a calm caress on my cheek.

"I feel like you're back," he says. "Are you back?"

He searches my face for an answer. I nod, smile in appreciation for this moment of grace, this silent peace between us. But I know it will not last.

*Oh, Amy, someone (the social worker, for example) might say. Give yourself a break.*

But this is a kindness difficult to grant

one's self even when gifted by another.

When Jake and I were closest, he rationed his past, refusing to speak of lovers or fraternity antics, failures or indiscretions, maybe for good reason. When is silence loyalty, when violation? Half-truths are lies, and yet they protect, sustain us more than honesty.

"We'll get you some help," the doctor said over a month ago.

And help, some help, did come to me. So, yes, I am back, I tell Jake; truth or lie, for now I must believe it.



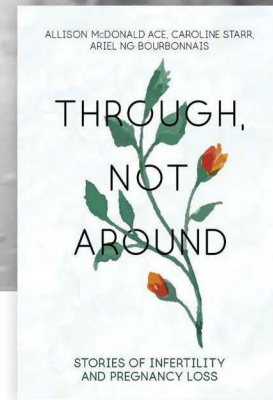
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