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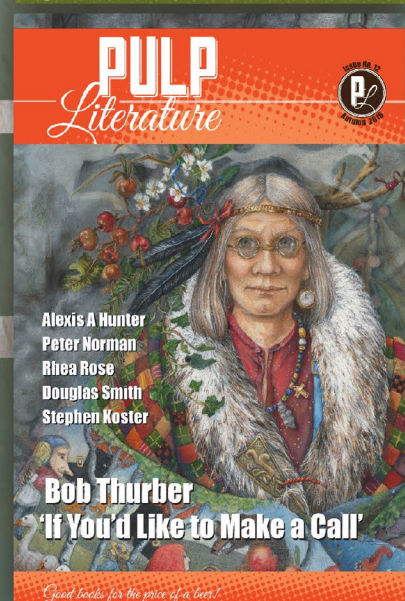
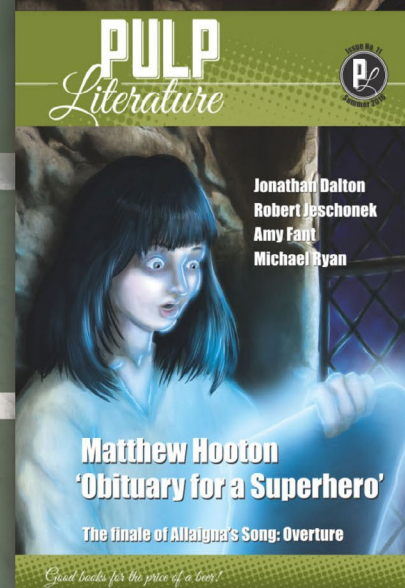
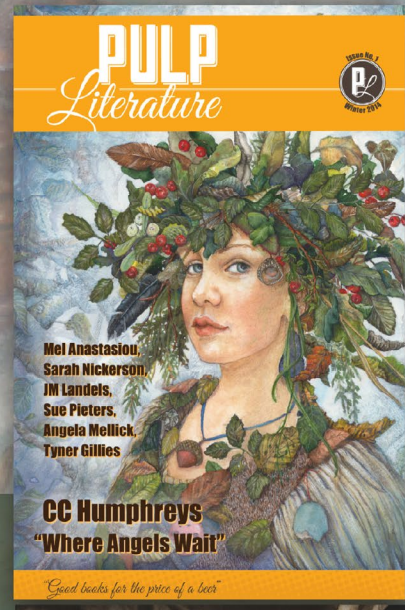
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“It is within our power to laugh and dance and work together to build a more just, beautiful world, and the decision to participate is an endless source of strength.”

—Conor Hogan, page 17.

## A WRITER'S PERSPECTIVE:

# Exploring the Impact of ChatGPT and AI Technology on Creative Writing

Editorial by Kat McNichol

Like many in the creative writing community, I have been closely following the emergence of ChatGPT. For those who are unfamiliar, ChatGPT is an open AI language model currently making waves across the creative arts. In more general terms, it's an online chat program that responds to human input using an AI chatbot. But don't let the term "chatbot" fool you. This chatbot is far more advanced than any other you've come across before.

When ChatGPT first appeared, the idea of a machine generating creative works made me anxious. As a writer, I believe in the authenticity and originality of human writing. But, trying to keep an open mind, I asked ChatGPT to generate a few creative stories based on my prompts. At first, I was impressed by the impeccable grammar and syntax, but on further inspection, I found the stories were too perfect, with neatly resolved plots and characters more like caricatures than real people. They lacked the depth and complexity that comes from a human perspective. This reinforced my belief that writing is not just about technical perfection, but about capturing the messy, beautiful complexity of the human experience.

But as I continued to delve into the capabilities of ChatGPT, trying numerous prompts and asking a gamut of questions, I found my perspective shifting. Having now used the tool, I can see how AI could be a valuable resource

for writers and publishers, particularly in terms of streamlining certain aspects of the writing and publishing process. For example, AI can be used to generate ideas, proofread and edit text, and even identify potential plot holes for a particular piece of writing. But, while ChatGPT can assist with the technical aspects, it cannot replicate the human experience or emotions that are essential to truly great writing. Writing is not just about arranging words on a page; it is an act of self-expression, an exploration of the human condition, and a means of connecting with others.

The question then becomes where to draw the line between writing done by humans and writing done by AI. In my humble opinion, it comes down to intention. When we write to express our unique human perspective, that's something no machine can replicate. But when writing is done with the intention of creating a specific effect or exploring a particular theme, AI can be a valuable resource for writers looking to generate ideas, overcome writer's block, or explore new avenues of creative expression.

We're living in a time of rapid change, and the creative arts are no exception. The way we write, read, and consume content is all evolving rapidly. But no matter what the future holds, one thing is certain: the power of human storytelling will endure. So keep writing!

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### EDITOR'S LETTER

Welcome to Dreamers Issue 14!

Check out the amazing winning stories and poems from our "Place and Home Contest" (pages 3-11). On pages 16-19, find our feature article on immigration and the crisis of meaning. In addition, you'll discover a selection of moving stories and poems that I'm excited to share with you. Lastly, in my editorial above, I'm discussing ChatGPT and Creative Writing.

Enjoy!  
Kat McNichol  
Editor-in-Chief

# 2023 STORIES OF MIGRATION, SENSE OF PLACE & HOME CONTEST

Congratulations  
to the 2023  
Winners!

FIRST PLACE WINNER

## The Mislaid Words of Gladys Prose

Fiction by Dorothy Henderson

In the months after Walter retired, Gladys began to pray to St. Anthony. She wasn't a religious person, in fact, she wasn't even Catholic but her neighbour was, and it was she who told Gladys about St. Anthony. He had prayed about a lost psalter and voila! It was found. He became the go-to saint for lost things. When Gladys heard this small story, she began to pray with almost desperate fervor: Please, St. Anthony, help me find my words.

Gladys didn't talk about this to anyone, certainly not her husband. After all, her words were as private to her as the sweet, soft spots of her body. Her inner voice was her companion, her comfort, her delight, although she confessed to herself that the words that bubbled up inside her had sometimes been a puzzlement and a frustration, too. Why was it so difficult to find the exact words needed to describe a beauty that leaves you breathless?

One June morning, in the garden, kneeling on the damp grass, she gazed into the heart of an iris bloom—one of her favourites called *Light of Heart*. My words fail me, she mourned. How she yearned to unearth a language to express the ribbons of majestic royal purple, the nutmeg lavender-pink, sweet violet and Mediterranean blue. How can my insufficient, ordinary words express the breath-taking beauty of the chocolate brown throat with its fanning golden rays, she sighed. She wondered if, perhaps, the fault lay in the English language itself. She had read that the Inuit have over fifty words to describe "snow." How many words in the English language might describe the colour blue? Azure, navy, cobalt, cerulean, indigo, sapphire. It was all she could remember. A paltry six, she sighed.

Once, before she had learned to protect her words in a private place within herself, she had attempted to explain to Walter how the words bubbled up as she did her housework. She had been taking the laundry off the clothesline. She paused, pressing a pink bath towel against her face.

"It's as if you could sip the smell of cut grass. It's like your skin is infused with the wood musk from the floor of the hardwood bush. Fresh laundry after a day in the sun is like a crisp fresh slice of cucumber."

She inhaled deeply until Walter interrupted, "Bah. Everyone

knows that line-drying produces aldehydes and ketones. That's what you're noticing."

\*\*\*

There are certain things that husbands and wives never notice about each other until they have to spend too much time together. The way his jaw cracked when he chewed, the way he grunted when he bent over to tie his shoes, the way he talked back to the television. Why does he talk incessantly? Gladys wondered. He had always been a talkative man but now she felt trapped in the house with him all day. Why does he feel the need to correct me on the most mundane of household chores?

"You know," he declared, "if you peel the potatoes in a bowl, you wouldn't waste so much water at the sink," or he proclaimed, "There's no need to vacuum the living room twice a week. Once is enough."

His words swirled around her, filling the corners of their small house. The more he talked, the less Gladys did.

Until Walter retired, Gladys had loved the order of her routines: a day dedicated to laundry, another for baking, one for scrubbing. A day for gardening and then came dusting. She was a woman content with quiet. She was never lonely or bored or terribly unhappy. Her floating inner dialogue, her private words that drifted and bloomed and scattered in her mind, were constant and faithful. Her tidy bungalow with its undemanding veneer, seemed wrapped around its yeasty aroma of lemon poppy seed cake and the velvet clarity of furniture polish.

On Saturday, Peter, their only son who had become an orthodontist, drove north from Waterloo for a quick visit—he was always busy. As she made tea, she overheard Walter complain, "This retirement business is for the birds. Your mother is not very good company. I can't even have a decent conversation with her."

She paused, poised over the steaming tea kettle, holding her breath, wondering how Peter would respond. To her surprise, their son defended her, reminding Walter that Gladys had her routines, her housework, cooking and gardening. Why didn't he find some new hobbies, Peter asked, go fishing, or join a

woodworking class, maybe do some volunteer work, deliver *Meals on Wheels*.

\*\*\*

Although neither of them realized that retirement would happen so soon, she recalled, in hindsight, strange new words creeping into Walter's narration of his day, words that she did not understand: columbarium walls, infrastructure, e-procurement. His long-established work in the Palmerston Public Works department had involved the care of the local cemetery. Now though, dizzying change unsettled him, making him irritable. Smaller communities had amalgamated to form a new town called Minto. He was given more responsibility, the oversight of thirty-five acres of burial grounds in three sites.

"Don't they know how much work that is?" he complained to Gladys. "The grass cutting, those overgrown cedars that need trimming every year, all those flower beds to plant and water, those urns and hanging baskets. By God, I had to dig almost one hundred graves last year with the backhoe and haul away the dirt and fill the graves when it's all over."

Gladys listened to the barrage of words from her husband, these new words that seemed to make his face flushed and swollen.

One evening, slumped over his late supper of pot roast and boiled carrots and potatoes, still smelling of diesel fuel after long hours on his riding mower, Walter told her that there had been a meeting that afternoon.

"Now they've added something new to my job," he muttered. "I have to improve public communication and my duties will be expanded to include celebrations of Minto's historic cemetery resources."

She watched him, lost for words, as he pulled apart strings of roasted beef, then nodded and patted his hand.

Neither of them had seen this coming. The Town, Walter soon learned, had now decided to contract out the mowing and planting, the trimming and digging of flower beds and graves. He was, of course, given a choice: retire two years early with a "package" or move to another position. From his mouth poured words that Gladys had never heard: defenestration, restructuring, efficiency redundancy but really, Walter fumed, what they meant was the golden handshake, the buyout, the old heave-ho.

\*\*\*

Somehow the days inched by, flavoured now with Walter's couped-up bitterness and Gladys' mute acceptance of his persistent talk and presence. When the mild weather returned, to her relief, he began to take a morning walk, over to the cemetery she assumed. One morning, as she was sliding an apple pie into the oven, her old black kitchen phone jangled.

"Gladys? Is this Gladys Prose?"

She inhaled sharply, immediately flooded with apprehension. She recognized the voice at once—their family doctor, calling from Palmerton Hospital.

"I'm afraid I have some bad news," he said. "Are you sitting down?"

Walter, he told her, had been found in the cemetery, slumped against a tombstone. After the ambulance had rushed him to the emergency room, he had been pronounced dead. "We

believe it was either a massive stroke or heart attack," the doctor continued. "I'm so very sorry, Gladys. This must be a terrible shock. Is there someone you can call to be with you?"

The blur of weeks that followed left her numb and more mute than ever. Neighbours dropped in. Casseroles moldered in the refrigerator. Peter slipped in to check on her. Days followed nights and nights melted into daylight. Nothing seemed quite right. It was as though she was living in a heavy fog and could not see what was around the corner. Some days, she sat on the back porch in her old wicker rocker, sat in silence and forgot to do anything.

Some weeks later, when Peter explained that she should be getting over things, he made a startling announcement. "I've purchased a condo for you in Waterloo. It's only a five-minute drive to our house. We all think you need to be around family."

Gladys, whose mind seemed sticky and slow, wondered who he was referring to when he said "we."

\*\*\*

Nothing had prepared her for condo living, twelve floors above the trees. Everything was grey and white, white upon white, stainless steel. Peter led her from room to room pointing out features: the cupboards that slid closed on their own, a dishwasher which she had never had, a stacking washer and dryer in a small closet. Her mind drifted to her bungalow in Palmerston with its dancing clothes line, swinging out over the tidy rows of carrots and beets. Those were halcyon days when something as simple as words could bring her comfort.

When Peter left, she sat on the new white sofa, staring at the off-white walls, sorry that she had not expressed more gratitude. How much would a place like this cost? she wondered, fretting that he would think her ungrateful. I'll send him a card—

*I am overwhelmed with the generosity of your gift. I am touched by the support you give me. My heart is smiling.*

But even as she went searching for a pen and note card, she knew that she would not write it. Her words had abandoned her. They lay interred somewhere deep within, someplace inaccessible in this lofty place of white and steel.

\*\*\*

On Thanksgiving weekend, Peter came to pick her up. "Stay where you are, Ma," he instructed as he pulled into the circular driveway in front of their home in River Oak Drive Estates. "I'll help you out."

On the few occasions when she and Walter had visited, she had been overwhelmed—awed by the cathedral entrance, glossy with marble, the endless hallways leading here and there, lost in the double kitchen with its built-in wine cooler, the maze of bedrooms and bathrooms. Peter, she sensed, was a little embarrassed to have them as houseguests—his unsophisticated parents who rarely left Palmerston, his father who talked incessantly of graveyards and backhoes, his mother, her cardigan sweater pulled tightly over her print dress, mutely withdrawn, her words frozen in her throat. How had their worlds become so unspeakably different?

\*\*\*

In her condo building there were features that Peter called "amenities." Exercise room, a swimming pool, library, craft room. He urged her to use them, to get out a bit, but they

still frightened her. Daily, though, she put on her shoes and took the elevator to the main floor to check her mailbox. After she became comfortable with this new routine, she was surprised to discover a small alcove near the front door, tucked into a corner, a private place to read or think. It became her habit to pick up her mail and linger there, reading the *Minto Express*, the pizza flyer, the utility bill. It surprised her that people could come and go through the front door and never notice her, but she could hear their conversation.

"He never wants to eat one thing I prepare."

"I give up. I just give up. I don't know why we bother."

"He was twice as miserable today as he was yesterday. Do you think we should report him?"

Gladys peeked out from the alcove and saw two young women who came each day, dressed in pale blue smocks with a logo on the pocket. They were, she supposed, caregivers for someone in the building.

The following day, something compelled her to go down earlier for the mail. When the women arrived, she followed them into the elevator.

"I wonder what mood he'll be in today," one said. "Don't count on it being better than yesterday, the old coot."

They laughed and when they got out on the sixth floor, Gladys followed them at a distance, then noted the number of the suite they entered: 607. Something—some inexplicable urging that she couldn't understand at all—propelled her into action. She sensed that something to do with her future happiness lay behind the condo door to unit 607.

She waited until mid-afternoon, to be sure the blue-smocked women had gone, then knocked on the door of the condo superintendent.

"I'm afraid I have a little problem," she explained. "Could you possibly let me in?"

When she entered the room she saw a frail, elderly man who had, she thought, been drowsing. When he heard her steps, his head snapped up.

"Who the hell are you?" he demanded. "From the Agency, I suppose. Thank God, they sent me someone of a sensible age. I can't stand those girls, laughing and talking all the time. Blah, blah, blah. A man needs a little peace and quiet."

He paused, appraising her. "You brought mail? I don't suppose you could read me something from that magazine?"

"First, I'll make some tea. I brought a fresh lemon poppy seed cake."

When they had sipped their tea and eaten their cake in silence, she picked up the magazine which had been in her box—a seed catalogue, the first of the season—and began to read aloud:

Lavender cauliflower presents unique and dense domes. Add a splash of colour to your next veggie tray.

Sweetie snack pepper mix, a glorious medley of red, orange, purple and yellow. Plant on your patio and pluck a pepper on your way out the door.

Tropical sunset tomatoes, golden yellow with streams of pink. Are these tomatoes or candy?

On and on the words poured out as she read through the green beans, the cucumbers, the beets and corn, on and on until the words perfumed the air around them with sweetness, allure, espresso, peaches and cream.

"Mr. Steckly?"

He had nodded off again, she saw. She smiled, her soul tender as she looked at the old man who seemed as vulnerable as she felt. She was ambivalent about what she had just done, but she suddenly felt content. She could feel her words beginning to swell and press, sprouting once again within her. Something had loosened. Something had sprung free. Something had been found. She gathered up the plates and mugs, humming as she walked to the kitchen, feeling a small sweet kernel of possibility.



HONOURABLE MENTION

# Steerage (War Bride)

Fiction by Jean Buie

I stare hard at the card in my hand:

**Military Dependents**

This card is to be used for 'Steerage' passengers only.

\*\*\*\*\*

Line 15: Suzanne Roberts...25...France...French...Wife...Roman Catholic

Line 16: Gabrielle Roberts...1 9/12...France...French...Child...Roman Catholic

My daughter's line will be struck out, as that on so many others' cards have been. Hasty burials at sea.

How many have I witnessed so far? Too many. Just last evening, a baby, three months perhaps, wrapped in a shawl and thrown overboard. The blind soldier holding back his wife who tried to follow.

"Maman," I hear, and instinctively reach to wipe the sweat from my daughter's brow. My hand feels the cold first and I fight the urge to recoil; my body catching up with what I already know - the cry was not Gabrielle's.

Somewhere, high above, housed with the other soldiers, is Frank. Close to fresh air and immune to the stink of those around me. Shielded from the cries of our daughter in her last long hours. He does not know the shudder her tiny body gave.

I try to recall Normandy and the café where we met; reaching for sweetness. But it seems so far away. I feel an ocean has grown between us tonight. One that will never narrow, even with the birth of other children.

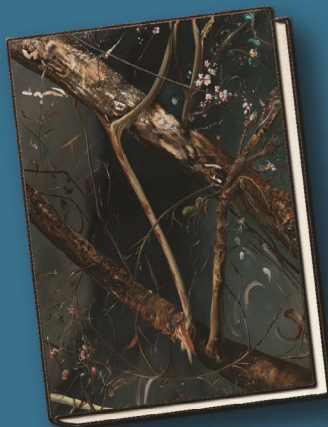
I square my shoulders, pick up Gabrielle and begin the long journey forward.





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# The Last of Something

Fiction by Deac Etherington

Graves in the desert are not deep. They are expedient. As he worked a dust-devil danced along the top of the canyon and passed through the little cathedral of stone open to the sky. The gust grabbed the blanket he had wrapped around the girl, uncovering some of her yellow hair. He tucked the blanket back in place, thinking how small she seemed. Because she was. No more than ten years old. Maybe twelve. He kept digging. The sound of the shovel reverberating off the rocks as if inside a sepulcher. When he was done he dropped to his knees and smoothed the ground with his hands like you would before spreading out a sleeping bag. The moonlight frosting the edges of boulders against black sky. His name was Monk Monroe and he had just turned twenty. This was his first funeral.

\*\*\*

It had been his partner's idea – hiring on for quick cash to guide a group to a drop house outside Meander, Arizona. They worked a cow-calf ranch on the border so they knew the terrain better than anyone. His partner, a friend since high school named Lloyd Foote, had always straddled both sides of the law. And Monk needed the money to buy an old travel-trailer he found for sale in Arivaca. He would use it on the PRCA circuit once he qualified for his card up in Tucson. Ranching was a living. Becoming a bull-riding champion was his dream.

They rendezvoused with the group in a box canyon north of Nogales, Sonora. There were over twenty people gathered around the broken windmill at the entrance. Scattered among the rocks were blacked-out water gallons and back packs and empty sleeves of bread. Most everyone was dressed for a walk through the parking lot at Walmart. Not the desert. They looked up at Monk and Lloyd with furrowed brows and something like hope in their eyes though it was hard to tell about hope after what they had already been through. Monk noticed the little girl in the white blouse standing off to the side. Blue butterfly barrettes in her hair. He assumed she had family with her. He should have known better. He turned to his partner.

"They say there would be this many?"

"Not exactly."

"Well this is a lot of people, Lloyd."

"Won't be so bad once we're moving."

"Maybe we shouldn't be doing this."

Lloyd's eyes flashed in the dusky light.

"Listen, son. We're in it now. So get your head straight. And remember – this is a win for everyone. They get the American Dream. You get your rodeo trailer. Okay?"

"Doesn't feel like anyone is winning out here."

Lloyd faced the group.

"*Vamonos.*"

Monk and Lloyd turned their horses. The others rose from the rocks. They started walking. Soon the moon came up over the Santa Rita Mountains. Glowed through cuts in cloud like drifting celestial wounds bleeding out a silvery wash across the desert. They stayed low, moving north through the arroyos and washes. And the night deepened.

"How far, you think?" asked Lloyd.

"We're maybe halfway."

"Then we need to pick up the pace."

"Why? They're already struggling."

"ATV tracks."

"Border Patrol?"

"Most likely."

"Could be old."

"I'll get behind them, anyway. See if we can speed things up a bit."

Lloyd yanked the bridle and circled back. Monk felt the group surge.

They smelled the pasture before they saw it. Fertilizer vaguely like mothballs in the fresh-furrowed ground over which a layer of humid air shimmered. Their destination was the adobe barn at the edge of the pasture. The roof had long since collapsed and the walls were melting back into the ground in a leisurely way. This was where they were supposed to hand over the group. The drop house was on the other side of the pasture in a cluster of mesquite trees. As they came up on the jagged silhouette of the barn Monk could see the glint of vehicles near the house in the distance. It was almost over.

Then it wasn't.

"Wait," he said. "Where's that kid?"

"What kid?"

"That little girl in the white blouse."

"How would I know?"

Monk studied his old friend's face.

"You've been in the rear."



"So?"

"If she fell behind, you'd have known."

"Maybe. It's dark out."

"But you'd have said something, right?"

"Listen. Our job is to get this group from the canyon to the adobe barn. Their job is to keep up. Simple. We hired on as guides. Not baby sitters."

"I'm going back."

"Back where?"

"Someone needs to look for her."

"They're expecting us up ahead."

"I don't care. This was a mistake."

There was a silence. The bad kind.

"Suite yourself, amigo."

Lloyd spurred his horse toward the crumbling barn. The group straggled behind. The moon slipped behind cloud and Monk found himself moving into the darkest part of night. He went back the way they had come, occasionally spotting things the others had dropped. A wrapper. Bandanna. Baseball cap. But no sign of the girl. He squinted into the gloom, reluctant to call out, but certain she would not have strayed very far from the washes. Panic stirred in his chest like a caught wind.

Eventually he reached the box canyon. Coyotes milling around the base of the broken windmill, eyes drifting in the dark. Monk slid off the horse and the coyotes skulked away. Then he saw the girl. Face in glassy-eyed profile on cold concrete. She had doubled-back to where they had started.

"Hey, kid. You okay?"

Monk knelt down. The edges of her white blouse tufting in the breeze. He didn't see the snake until he reached for her neck to take a pulse and the snake coiled. Tail buzzing between her shirt and the cement. Monk saw it was a Mohave rattler. One of the most lethal in those foothills. In one smooth motion he grabbed the tail and flung the Mohave into the dark. There was the slap of snake-flesh hitting rock. Tail still buzzing. Then the buzzing getting softer as the Mohave moved away. He eased the girl onto her back. The tip of her tongue was purple. Eyes rheumy. He saw the bite punctures on her face below her cheek. A single drop of blood beading there. Like a decoration.

"By God," he said to nothing in particular.

He unstrapped the camp shovel and blanket from his pommel. She was heavier than he expected. This was maybe because of the blanket and the shovel and maybe because of something else. He picked her up and started walking. At one point her hand slipped out of the folds. Jostled, like it was waving. Monk clenched his jaw and kept going and tried not to think about her hand or anything else. He was heading to a spot near the canyon where the rocks formed an amphitheater the size of a small room. Boulders piled on top of boulders in impossible ways through some random accident of prehistoric geophysics. A cathedral of stone open to the sky.

...

Monk lowered the blanket into the grave. Neatened the edges. He felt the faint stirrings of breeze that meant the sky would pale soon. But the person who stepped out of this night would bear little resemblance to the person who had entered it. He was no longer dreaming about bull riding or anything else. The desert, he knew, kept its secrets. So would Lloyd. But that was no comfort. He was a lone soul in a post apocalyptic dawn laboring with the last of something and quietly terrified of sunrise.

# The Namesake and the Unnamed

Nonfiction Story by Nagma Kapoor

It was the morning after Irrfan Khan's death was announced. He passed away at the age of fifty-three of endocrine cancer, when he was still compelling audiences with a rare tenderness and complexity. We were gathered round the TV in our living room in Whitby. A home that had been untouched for a few months, after the renters left, a few weeks after the covid lockdowns began, before we slipped in.

She was like a hummingbird, always flighty and in movement, distracted, but my mother's eyes were glued to the screen this time, my sister stopped scrolling through her feed and my father put away his phone for once. We were watching *Irfan Khan* as Ashoke on *The Namesake* after years. I've watched it every few years since it first came out—transfixed by it each time, new feelings emerging with each re-watch. That time it was different. We were reunited in a family home, all together under one roof after twelve years, mourning the loss of a beloved actor, the loss of our communities, but also reminiscing our lives.

I always feel like I'm watching my parents whenever this movie begins—my mother like Tabu who plays Ashima, vets potential suitors, quietly observing, eyes averted the entire time. My father, the eccentric NRI, returns from abroad to pick a bride. My parents arranged marriage is akin to the couple in the film on the surface. In my mind, these are glimpses into what their moments of getting to know each other might've been like. The first time she laughed at a bad joke, their first fight, how it must've been like to grow to love each other away from their homes. They hint at some detail, my mother says *those were the best years of our lives*, but so much of how their lives began are still a mystery.

My parents' lives were so dissimilar to Ashoke and Ashima outside their arranged marriage in the film and I wonder why they still see themselves in these characters. There is no single immigrant experience, let alone the South Asian Immigrant Experience, but *The Namesake* is comfort food for one who craves their mother's homemade dishes, but they are out of reach, in another land, almost all forgotten and not visited enough. Despite the scores of traditions depending on the state, the region, the religion, the dialect you speak in India and even its neighbours—Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh, we are all bagged into one—South Asian Immigrant Identity. This movie is not enough, but something to cling to, even with our differences.

I find myself in between the two generations in *The Namesake* – the parents from West Bengal in India, and their children, who were born in America. I was never fully formed like those two identities of first or second generation immigrants, but I lie in between and unnamed.

*The Namesake* is so rooted in the novel by the same name by Jhumpa Lahiri, which I love, but the film brings about a new emotional thread to tug on to, that it does not. Partially it is Irrfan Khan, but also Tabu, and the tender ways in which we see them grow to love each other.

In the beginning of the movie, Ashoke survives a train crash, on the way to his grandfather's home from Calcutta. My family is Punjabi, from North India, but my father grew up in Calcutta—speaking Bengali more than he spoke his mother

tongue. I've spent many summers in the Calcutta heat with my cousins, walking through vegetable stalls, standing at the roadside to have *phuchkas*, a round hollow fried flatbread that is stuffed with chickpeas, a myriad of spices, potatoes, onions and dipped in a salty spicy flavoured water.

My father's life seems to parallel Ashoke's in some ways, he reminds me about the Naxalite movement, how it was brimming right when he sat in an exam room in his final year of marine engineering, and how he had to leave mid-exam because of the riots. He also fondly remembers Durga Puja, a ten-day long affair, the grandest festival in Calcutta where everyone is dressed in their finest jewels and saris, the streets are filled with parades and music while everyone shares a taste of *mishti doi*.

There is a part of me that always wonders about this Bengali cultural heritage that I will never truly inherit, despite this city being where my father became himself. Maybe this is how I am rooted in this film—as a question. Even though I am ethnically Punjabi, I was always enamoured by a fantasy world in which I also knew this other half. Instead, I knew neither and continued to drift apart from both over the years.

I see my mother in Ashima as she watches the snow melt from her window with her chin resting on her arms, her wrists lined with white and red bangles—a remnant of their recent wedding. Her story was different from Ashima's of course, it was a story of escape. Escaping her in-laws in a house full of rules, where she was watched all day, instructed on how to cook, clean and live her life. Still, this rootless feeling, all encompassing, passed down into my sister and I, like our features— the straight black hair, the skinny legs, and the anxiety.

There is this scene that I love replaying, where Ashoke takes a nine year old Gogol, his eldest son, to the end of a long stone bridge in stormy weather, where the water is rushing over in waves. Ashima cradles their second baby—a daughter, in her arms. Ashoke has forgotten the camera in their Jeep so he looks at Gogol reminding him to capture this moment another way:

"Will you remember this Gogol?"

"How long do I have to remember it?"

"Remember it always. Remember that you and I made the journey and went together to a place where there was nowhere left to go."

It is a reminder to stay present in this journey that my parents took, that I did too, travelling into the unknown with only each other for support, not knowing if the right decision was made, but that a new adventure had begun. Ashoke brings up *The Overcoat* by Nikolai Gogol, his son's namesake, as a reminder of the resolution he had made years and years ago after surviving the tragic train accident to travel the world, to live beyond the small towns and communities they had each grown up in—both Ashoke and his son. In the same way, the film presented comfort—the move from India, to Singapore, to Canada and then America and back. Each time it is a reminder of the loneliness and pain that unfolded but also the love, the relationships and the memories that carried me from place to place.

# Left Home Torn

Poem by Natalie Meisner

Each fall the sharp-eyed gannets  
arrived in long lines  
they plunged from the sky,  
scoured harbour for mackerel  
smacked down hard & hungry  
they learned how to swallow underwater

I side eyed those quick darts  
practicing self-control  
*"Chew your food, don't swallow it whole  
like a gannet"*

When the bottom fell out  
of the fishery, or was torn,  
we left home, let down  
by the unholy trinity:  
the bank, the government  
& the company store

A few deck boards in steerage  
bones of an old bait shed  
stubs of wharf pilings emerging at low tide  
rows of busted teeth worn too dull to get a bite  
is home

No more long lines to keep tight, traps to pull  
hooks to set just right, just a bleached-out photo  
where my own wicked grin, plays on the lips  
of a man the sea swallowed before I ever met

The set of his shoulders, his lean to the pitch fork  
—atop the fabled bounty, living mountain of fish—  
in hip waders his body is mine balancing  
on twisting slippery backs of ghosted cod

A quiver grips my belly, chew slowly,  
no matter how hungry the body remembers  
*torn, torn*, cries the gannet as the last flip & flash  
of iridescent scales slides through the net  
& I remember the bass rumble  
in the chest of the one I want  
to hear laugh

# A Bed as a Nest

Poem by Jarrett Ziemer

A female Common Yellowthroat  
builds a well concealed nest  
in 4 to 5 days, migrates,  
from Alabama to California,  
to escape,

segregated segmented leaves  
looking for trees  
so densely packed,  
to summer in sunshine means  
to live within the shade.

A female Common Yellowthroat  
mates for life,  
with a male,  
a few different males,  
who know she's ready

when she flutters her wings,  
flushes her black face purple,  
chirps in their ear,  
and then crushes a Camel  
into an opaque ashtray.

A female common yellowthroat is a forager  
picking pedals for insects for moths, wasps,  
butterflies in her belly,  
that only dissipate in the rain  
of cough syrup and smoke and Jack Daniels

dripping down her beak,  
and onto the bed she lolls in,  
where she succumbs to the fact that she is a prey species,  
that there are articles that flight cannot handle,  
that Northern Harriers and American Kestrels,

and Merlins—hawks—  
hawking lungs fluid filled sacs tired feet  
aching claws and depression and addiction so deep,  
she sometimes just wants to sleep in her bed forever,  
are always out to get her.

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# Vermette Shows Us the Often-Fragile Existence of Métis Women in *The Break*

Book Review by Carole Mertz

Following Margaret Atwood's strong praise for *The Break*, by Katherine Vermette, I entered this novel with high anticipation and much curiosity as I reached for better understanding of the lives of the Canadian indigenous.

The novel portrays the dilemmas and struggles of four generations of women of the Métis tribe, who live within a northern setting, possibly Manitoba. The book's title page delivers a trigger warning stating the novel concerns healing from violence, contains scenes of sexual and physical violence, and depicts incidences of trauma.

Some of Vermette's characters reside in a section of town on either side of an open strip of land on which hydro towers stand. One night, Stella, who lives with her husband at the edge of this stretch of land that she dubs "the Break," hears disturbing sounds outside her house. In the dark, she saw hooded figures and thinks she saw blood. Obviously, something terrible happened. Yet after calling the police and reporting the incident, she's unable to convince the officers a crime has occurred.

At the novel's opening, we read:

*It was snowing when it happened. The sky was pink and swollen... Even from inside her house, my Stella heard the buzzing, as sure as her own breath. She knows to expect it when the sky fills clouds, but like everything she's been through, she has learned to live with it (pg. 5).*

This passage is part of a quasi-prologue, rendered in a different typeface from the rest of the novel. Only at the saga's end, do we discover whose voice delivers this passage. It provides an intriguing entry into Vermette's masterful treatment of her plot, her character relationships, and the profound bonds that unite the tribal members. Three sisters, their mother and an aunt, their children, and their Kookom (grandmother) form the major characters of the novel.

Among another set of characters who live in a more impoverished fringe of society is Phoenix. She has just "escaped" from a juvenile delinquent center. Through her, we experience the heartrending brokenness of a life. She moves among drug addicts, the homeless, and gangs. Entering her uncle's house after trudging for hours in the biting snow, she studies her surroundings. Vermette delivers the scene in stark language:

*The place is a total dump. The counter is all garbage and broken glasses still sticky with booze. A dark puddle hardens on*

*the broken linoleum, and something rots on the stove (pg. 25).*

Then, as her uncle enters the kitchen:

*"You can't stay here, fuck. Your worker was already calling around freaking the fuck out."*

*"Why the fuck was she calling?" Phoenix says. 'Fucking nosy bitch."*

*"Because you walked out of juvy, ya fuck. If she comes here."*

*He points his smoke and a yellowed finger at her.*

*Phoenix nods at him, wants to smile but doesn't. She puts out her butt, grabs another (pg. 29).*

The personal stories of each of Vermette's characters and their clear differentiation, bring us into an often-fragile existence in which these women, not always able to trust their men, struggle to hold their lives and families together, while also striving to maintain their tribal values and customs. Lou, one of the sisters, is sure her man has run off for good. But she's equally sure her son Jake is "a good boy." We watch the youths in Jake's group grasping after their proper place in the community. Their need to defend this volatile space brings them into dangerous territory.

The raw and shocking interplay between the "druggies" and the so-called good kids causes my skin, as a mother, to feel abraded. As difficult as are some of the interactions between characters, just as rewarding is the love and tight bonding we witness between the sisters, and the love and loyalty the grandmother extends to her family. Vermette brings this complex novel to a highly satisfying conclusion. It is a harrowing novel, but one well worth reading for the world it allows us to experience. I fully concur with Atwood: "This is an accomplished writer who will go far."

## About the Author:

Vermette's first book, *North End Love Songs*, won the Governor General's Literary Award for poetry. Her film documentary, *this river*, won the Coup de Coeur award at the Montreal First Peoples Festival. *The Break* won numerous awards including the Amazon.ca First Novel Award. Her novel, *The Strangers* is a follow-up to *The Break*.

# 2023 MICRO NONFICTION STORY WRITING CONTEST

*Congratulations to the winners of our first annual micro nonfiction contest!*

FIRST PLACE WINNER

## Write About It

Nonfiction by Michelle Spencer

*You should write about it.*

Yes, I should. Tell you about what, or rather, who was left behind—on the gravel road outside of my house. I could probably spare you the explanation if I just went to a psychologist. They'll have a name for what has happened to me, then you could just look it up and move on. But here we are because they say, *you should write about it.*

From the moment I got the breast cancer diagnosis, alone on the living room carpet on Valentine's Day (of all days) my instinct was to head outside. To walk. The stuff between then and now you can piece together. You know the rough shape of it: the terrifying phone calls, the waiting, the chemotherapy, the surgery, the radiation.

Not to brag, but I won at The Treatment part, was bestowed with the "you're doing so well, being so strong," by people who loved me, people who didn't know me, people who put tubes of neon red in my veins. Became inspiration porn for the *not-yet-cancered-but-it-could-happen-to-me* people.

I don't want to sound ungrateful. It gave me a boost and there are obvious advantages to doing well. Such as, not dying. But what I'm trying to say is, I wasn't striving to win. It just happened and I didn't know what it would cost me.

Three, five, six, times a day I walked along the empty gravel road. To the west, the Livingstone range spilling into the Crownsnest Pass. To the east, Eagle Rock clinging to the prairie. I walked. Often with family. More often alone. I waved to neighbours as they drove by, got the look, the nod, the "she's out there again, good for her." I got to know every bird nest, a family of foxes, a summer bear and the rangy moose which hung around for the weeks in the fall when my skinned peeled. I came home from my walks ready for the next thing and I thought it was helping me integrate what was happening.

But the person who marched from one treatment to the next, one side effect to the next without flinching, throwing up, crying, arguing, or scaring anyone—well, she eventually broke off. So, she's still out there walking on the road, marching back and forth, day and night in the heat, in the blistering cold, on the calm and windy days, in her bright blue shoes, in a pair of joggers, or in her nightgown. She has no feelings, no emotions, no opinion in all this. She just does. You won't see her. Because she is only cold steel and courage.

Sometimes I'd like to call her home, invite her back in but she knows she can't stop, that her strength is what gives friends, family, strangers—and me—hope. So, for now I accept the cost of leaving her on the road.

SECOND PLACE WINNER

## A Dog Called Orion

Nonfiction by Lesley Mapstone

I call him Orion because his coat is pitch black like the night, and his eyes are full of light, like a million stars shining in the darkest sky, piercing a veil of darkness.

That veil has been the hardship of his life. He was born on a pile of rubbish in an empty lot next to a busy and dusty road in Kathmandu. He has survived monsoons, tick and flea infestations and violence against him. Just two months ago he was beaten and left to die with a deep serrated gash in his side and broken ribs, forced to hide in a filthy dark hole, shaking with pain.

But if you look into his eyes, you will see hope. You will see an animal that has survived severe weather, malnutrition, and

disease, and finds pleasure in the softness of a bed of leaves. You will see a creature that, despite his hardships, will trust you if he knows you mean him no harm. An animal that is vulnerable and fragile for all his strength, who will search your eyes for evidence that you are kind.

I call him Orion because under the blackest of skies he lies like a gentle beacon, on his pile of burned rubbish, embodying the spirit of a warrior who has yet to be conquered by the wrath that life has offered him.

When you look into his eyes you will see the answer to a question that he will ask without speaking. Will you love him? You will see his hope.

# Dance While the Music Plays

Nonfiction by Conor Hogan

After my first day volunteering at the Kino Border Initiative in Nogales, Sonora, everyone stayed late to celebrate the birthday of Esteban\*, a man who was sleeping at the shelter. Luisa, a woman who owned a bakery in Chilpancingo before violence forced her to flee, baked an enormous *tres leches* cake, and we all sang *las Mañanitas*. Once everyone ate their fill, people cleared the tables from the middle of the cafeteria and Luis, Esteban's brother, plugged his phone into a shoebox-sized speaker. *Payaso del Rodeo's* unmistakable opening riff filled the cafeteria, and people scrambled into formation with cheers. Soon, migrants and volunteers alike were line-dancing and twirling invisible lassos as Eduardo Gameros sang: "*Cruzando la frontera, me encontré con él.*"

As I tripped over my feet trying to keep up with the accelerating steps, I felt confused. I'd taught in central Mexico for two years, and heard plenty of horror stories about the border from my students. Many had moved to escape the brutality of the cartels in the north. They'd told me about the bodies swinging from bridges in Juárez and the mass graves unearthed outside Tijuana. Meanwhile, for my friends and family in the United States, the situation at the border was either the starkest metaphor for a national purity under assault, or another egregious example of state-sponsored sadism. Either way, it was understood as a place of horrors. Yet here I was, a quarter mile south of the wall, and everyone was laughing and dancing. *Huh*, I thought. *What gives?*

According to the UN's most recent data, by the end of 2021, one in 88 people around the world had been forcibly displaced from their homes. Fleeing poverty, violence, or natural disasters, most took refuge in neighboring low- or middle-income countries. Those who made it to the borders of rich countries, however, were usually told they were not welcome. They were informed that the people living inside these rich countries did not want them and would not help them. That, in fact, the most energetic political movements in many of these rich countries were characterized by gleeful crowds chanting about keeping them out.

We who have witnessed the rise of illiberal nationalism in our societies know this mobbish glee masks a profound weakness. We all now live with the unease that accompanies any failure to rise to a critical moment. We all feel the exhaustion of constant ethical contortions, as we try to jam the latest disgrace into some frame of normalcy. It is far past time for those of us living in these rich countries to confront the gross injustices committed along our borders, in our name, against some of the most vulnerable people on the planet. Not just for their sake, but for our own.

The last two decades exposed the delusion of the neoliberal dream: that subordinating everything to the frictionless movement of capital would end history. That Reaganomics would produce a global coalition of liberalized democracies, everyone's standard of living steadily rising on the tides of free trade and small government. But instead, wealth concentrated in the coffers of a few billionaires, while purchasing power for the median Westerner stagnated or declined. The carbon in our atmosphere transformed from theory to fact, fanning wildfires

and whipping up hurricanes of unprecedented magnitude. The U.S. dragged its allies into a disastrous, protracted war in the Middle East. Rather than respond with a turn toward pro-social, ecologically responsible political movements, however, many embraced vitriolic authoritarians, who blamed our problems on the easiest scapegoat available: the immigrant.

In the United States, when an infamous megalomaniac rode a golden escalator to a podium and announced that those crossing America's southern border were criminals and rapists, most progressives dismissed him. We assumed the age-old trick of robber barons leveraging racial grievance to distract from their thieving had run its course. That Donald Trump's corruption was so obvious, no one would buy his shtick. We kept arguing about which strands of the social safety net to strengthen, certain that the MAGA movement would soon collapse beneath the weight of its leader's countless lies. We underestimated the appetite for a simple enemy, and a simple solution: the reason that you are struggling to make ends meet is not because the ultra-wealthy have lobbied to keep wages depressed and tax loopholes gaping. It's because there are evil foreigners invading to the south. Therefore, we should build a wall.

The quadrennial that began on January 20th, 2017, saw the degradation of many institutions by the President of the United States: personal attacks against U.S. judges, false claims that the American election system was rife with fraud, and the constant vilification of the media. But nothing was more debased than the United States' border with Mexico during the four years Donald Trump was in power. Already riven with policies both inhumane and remarkably stupid, the border became the best representation for the incompetent malice that characterized Trump's entire administration.

Caitlin Dickerson, in an investigation for *The Atlantic*, explains how prior to 9/11, America's Border Patrol was a cursory, ineffectual agency. People crossed the border to work, to visit family, and to buy goods on one side or the other. But after the attack on the Twin Towers, "the Border Patrol Academy transformed from a classroom-like setting, with courses on immigration law and Spanish, into a paramilitary-style bootcamp...No longer content to police the national boundary by focusing on the highest-priority offenses, the Border Patrol now sought to secure it completely. A single illegal border crossing was one too many. The new goal was zero tolerance."

In *The Line Becomes a River*, a memoir recounting his time as a Border Patrol agent, Francisco Cantú sketches the violence that this avowed intolerance enacts upon the psyche of the continent. Cantú repeatedly poses the same question in different forms: what does the modern proclivity, for transmuting individual pain into mild statistics, do to us? Cantú recalls the teenagers he found dead in the desert and the men he arrested who spent days drinking their own urine. He describes the cartels who have gotten rich since 9/11, unspeakably savage organizations who last year earned 13 billion dollars trafficking migrants: "As border crossing became more difficult, traffickers increased their smuggling fees. In turn, as smuggling became more profitable,





it was increasingly consolidated under the regional operations of the drug cartels." Cantú explains how "coyotes," after shepherding migrants into the U.S., often pack them into drop-houses in cities like Phoenix, then call their families and torture them over the phone until a relative pays ransom. This is what we in North America have decided is preferable to a functional immigration process.

Predictably, as official policy strengthens cartels, the law enforcement agencies whose officers are charged with fighting them adopt increasingly vicious tactics. Cantú remembers a lawyer telling him about a CBP agent he represented who "was framed by his own colleagues in the patrol because...he showed too much compassion in the line of duty...He carried an injured woman on his back through the desert and the other agents started thinking he was soft...so they set the guy up. They made it look like he had beaten someone up in the field...the Border Patrol, the marshals, it's like they forget about kindness. I've almost never seen these guys express any humanity, any emotion...How do you come home to your kids at night when you spend your day treating other humans like dogs?"

This conversation happened years before the Trump administration's Family Separation Policy, which went into effect in May of 2018. Before, as Dickerson writes, "companies eagerly accepted multimillion-dollar government contracts, housing children in huge facilities such as a former Walmart, which was at one point used to detain more than 1,000 children." Before Border Patrol agents began ripping toddlers from their parents' arms, deporting mothers to Honduras and shipping their children to HHS offices in Chicago, with no plan to ever

reunite them. Before President Biden put immigration reform on a backburner, cowed by how his conservative colleagues might frame any change in posture towards people migrating in search of a better life.

If we've learned anything from the past half-century, we should have learned that punitive approaches to problems invariably exacerbate the issue they are supposedly meant to solve. The War on Drugs, Operation Iraqi Freedom, Border Patrol's Zero Tolerance policy: they have all enriched a handful of grifters (private prison owners, international arms dealers, the "capos" of the *Sinaloa* cartel) and immiserated millions. Meanwhile, the reasons for dramatically increasing immigration into countries like the United States and Canada are manifold, and indisputable. With our declining birth rates, with our vast swaths of sparsely populated land, with baby-boomers entering old age and not enough caretakers to assist them, encouraging immigration is the single best thing we could do to increase our continent's prosperity.

Studies repeatedly demonstrate how immigrants, both skilled and unskilled, are a net boon to *everyone's* wage and standard of living. In Canada, immigrants own a third of small businesses with paid employees, while in the United States, immigrants are disproportionately represented among Nobel Prize winners. Particularly if North America hopes to have any bargaining power with China in the upcoming decades, expanding our population is a patently obvious first step. However, as Matthew Yglesias writes in *One Billion Americans*, "...some people just plain don't like foreigners and don't want them to come here and are indifferent to the basic facts about economics and the logic

of international power." The fact that this xenophobic political faction continues to dictate our inhumane, *self-destructive* immigration policies should spur the rest of us into action. Why doesn't it?

The Kino Border Initiative is run by a mix of lay people, Jesuits, and Missionary Sisters of the Eucharist. They provide material, psychological, and legal support to migrants, advocate for policy change, and offer immersion opportunities for students to learn about the realities of the border. The KBI is also a paragon of strength and effectiveness in the realm of humanitarian aid.

I have volunteered for NGOs in Argentina, Guatemala, El Salvador, Mexico, and the United States. I also work as a smokejumper, a firefighter who parachutes into mountains to suppress remote wildfires. There is usually a marked cultural difference between the places I have volunteered, and that of a fire camp. The world of wildfire response is defined by strict chains of command, a high tolerance for risk, and an inclination toward taking aggressive action. The people I've met volunteering, on the other hand, are often better at writing eloquent mission statements than building the systems necessary for putting their mission into practice. These nonprofits are often hampered by confusion, full of people unsure about their assignments and leaders so worried about offending their subordinates that they don't tell anyone what to do.

This is an Achilles' heel for many social justice organizations: the aesthetic of equity and inclusion can hinder efficiency. Meanwhile, it turns out that the same personalities who prefer impermeable borders, harsh legal systems, and demagogic strongmen also excel at the administrative tasks necessary for yielding results. This is why hyper-organized institutions like the military and police are associated with right-wing governments, and why so many firefighters lean conservative. Political psychology studies demonstrate how progressive people are characterized by openness (receptivity to new ideas and new experiences), and conservatives by conscientiousness (the quality of wishing to do one's work well and thoroughly). While openness is vital in academia and the arts, in the trenches of emergency response, conscientiousness is much more valuable.

What is happening at the U.S./Mexican border is an emergency. There are people trying to escape the *pandillas* terrorizing El Salvador, the mass starvation occurring in Venezuela, and the horrifying collapse of Haiti. Cartels have imposed sophisticated, violently enforced systems of exploitation that ensnare these refugees after they are turned away by stone-faced Border Patrol agents. The scale of human suffering created along this imaginary fault line is akin to an unceasing, major earthquake, and the work of ameliorating this suffering has been left almost entirely to NGOs like the KBI. When I arrived in Nogales, I expected to step into the muddle that often typifies nonprofit disaster relief.

Instead, it felt like I was checking into the Incident Command Post of a large wildfire. Victor Yanez, the KBI's Director of Migrant Services, gave me a thorough in-briefing on how different sectors of the Kino work, walking me through detailed flow charts and contingency plans for various scenarios. The KBI's philosophy of "holistic accompaniment" could connote some airy, bohemian idea, a phrase you might hear at a yoga retreat in Bali. However, in the context of serving migrants, holistic accompaniment means figuring out how to provide food, clothing, temporary housing, counseling, and legal assistance to the throngs of people who arrive at the Kino's front door every day. Caring for the whole person, it turns out, requires serious tactical prowess.

Like everything about the far right, the anti-immigration movement is characterized by fear. Mark Hetherington and Jonathon Weiler explain in their book *Prius or Pickup*: "Fear is perhaps our most primal instinct, after all, so it's only logical that people's level of fearfulness informs their outlook on life. If you perceive the world as more dangerous, then...you're more likely to prefer to drive a big, sturdy vehicle, have a large, obedient dog for a pet, and vote Republican...If you see the world as less perilous, you feel [free]...to work harder to understand the perspectives of people who are different from you."

As the right radicalizes, it turns to more cartoonish symbols of power to compensate for their fear of the world. Thus, we have rising reactionary star Ron DeSantis releasing cringe-worthy *Top Gun* campaign ads, Donald Trump tweeting memes of his own face superimposed atop Rocky Balboa's body, and frenzied crowds screaming: "Build the wall! Build the wall!" In a political marketplace that rewards the extreme, a fear-based rhetoric will quickly devolve into infantile notions of good guys and bad guys and seek a frightened child's solutions. But while hiding from boogymen in a pillow fortress might have worked in kindergarten, out here in the real world, we must act like adults.

Recently, the far-right has turned once again to a language of attack to describe the people arriving at America's southern border. "Greatest crime ever committed against the United States, by far. Nothing has ever come close to what we're seeing now," Tucker Carlson blubbered on his November 3rd, 2022, show when describing footage of people walking into Texas. Trump, in a speech announcing his candidacy for the 2024 presidential race, said: "Our southern border has been erased and our country is being invaded by millions and millions of unknown people, many of whom are entering for a very bad and sinister reason."

A frustrating aspect of our societal conversation is how readily people accept the far-right's notions of fortitude. Nationalist movements shroud themselves in an iconography of weapons, vulgarity, and rage, and many think, *that is strength*. Despite threatening to torture dissidents, they say, at least Jair Bolsonaro is aggressive. Despite his flirtations with eugenics, at least Viktor Orbán is forceful. Despite his observable sociopathy, at least Donald Trump is assertive. At least they "speak truth to power," from their presidential mansions. Where Martin Luther King and Cesar Chavez once represented the counterculture, now bigots like Nick Fuentes and Stefan Molyneux have managed to convince many young people that it's cooler to rebel against imaginary Marxist professors than government brutality. Meanwhile, the caricature of the "social justice warrior" implies some frail hipster wailing about microaggressions between sips of their lavender kombucha.

This is exactly backwards. Who more embodies courage: Maxime Bernier, frothing about the way immigrants "destroy social cohesion," or the KBI's Sister María Engracia Robles Robles, who has served refugees in Nogales since 2007? Who is stronger: Tom Homan, the American Immigration and Customs Enforcement director who came up with the idea to separate children from their mothers, or the thousands of Venezuelans who've walked across the Darién Gap, one of the most dangerous stretches of land in the world? When did we agree that lobbying for state abuse was punk-rock, and that standing in solidarity with the oppressed lame?

I spend my summers jumping out of airplanes and flying parachutes into the mountains. From May to October, I work 16-hour shifts digging fire-line or running a chainsaw, trying to catch wildfires before they explode. The work pales in comparison to what the staff at the Kino does every day. For the past month,

in between serving food and handing out clothes, I've helped conduct intake interviews with migrants arriving at the KBI. I've listened to a mother from Michoacán calmly discuss how the mafia promised to murder her children if she didn't pay their cartel tax. I've handed freshly deported teenagers sweatshirts after the Border Patrol released them in the middle of the night and refused to return any of their belongings. I've had to explain to victims of torture that the United States has not accepted asylees for over two and a half years. I've felt angry and ashamed, all-too-familiar sensations for any *gringo* living in Latin America.

But I've also felt an unfamiliar hope. Every morning, Claude, a man from Haiti, greets me with a big smile and a fist bump, and catches me up on the latest drama in international soccer. I spend the first few hours of my day sorting clothes alongside Vicki, a woman who fled Guerrero, the two of us bantering about the superiority of our respective folding techniques. I eat lunch with Diego, a political refugee from Caracas, and occasionally watch him get choked up as he remembers another indignity he endured on his journey north: robbed in Ecuador, extorted in Chiapas, waving goodbye to his boyfriend through bullet-proof glass in Arizona. I watch him smile self-deprecatingly and thumb his eyes, then look around the cafeteria and exhale. "This is the only place where they listened," Diego often says, and shakes his head.

After a month of volunteering at the KBI, a question inevitably arises: why is this place so unique? Because the environment at the Kino is special, but it need not be. It is simply a place where the needs of the vulnerable are taken seriously. A place where people help other people, instead of exploiting them. The reason migrants walk through the Kino's cafeteria as though they've just set down a hundred-pound backpack is because the weight of dehumanization is exhausting. The reason that the people who work at the KBI can sustain their Herculean effort is because a sense of common, noble struggle is the most invigorating sensation a person can experience.

Much has been said about the crisis of meaning infecting Western societies. Why is it that the richest countries in the world also have such high rates of anxiety, depression, and drug overdoses? Why do we see membership in extremist groups skyrocketing? What are people *really* searching for when they swallow a hydrocodone or join a neo-Nazi group? Is there something wrong with the structure of modern life?

A common symptom of living inside bureaucracies, of spending hours of our day online and viewing each other through a matrix of adjectives, is a sense of apathetic futility. Faced with the tidal roar of the world's injustice, we assume our own impotence, and carry on with our lives. We rationalize the decision, again and again, to choose money over people, to choose convenience over engagement. Any donation we do give, any afternoon we spend at a soup kitchen or homeless shelter, is felt as penance, as an attempt to ward off our vague, omnipresent guilt. In a culture that positions the accrual of wealth as the sole end worth pursuing, time spent serving the marginalized can only be understood as time wasted.

There is a parable that reappears every now and then in books and commencement speeches: *A man is walking along a beach, where thousands of starfish have washed ashore. The man comes across a boy, who is picking up starfish one by one and hurling them back into the sea. The man asks the boy, What are you doing? and the boy replies, I'm throwing them back; otherwise, they'll die. The man gestures up and down the sand, at all the starfish asphyxiating in the morning sun. Look around, says the man with a condescending smile. You can't possibly make a*

*difference. The boy picks up a starfish and tosses it into the waves, then turns to the man and says, Made a difference to that one.*

It's a good parable. However, every version I've read omits the most important part of the story: the difference it makes *to the boy*. As the world complexifies, we assume the solutions to any problem must be equally complex, and thus, beyond our realm of possible action. Why feed one hungry person, when whole nations are starving? Why give one child clothing, when millions are shivering? Why not accept our powerlessness to improve the world, and focus instead on increasing our own material comfort?

This is the fundamental challenge of modernity: to practice decency within the confines of a single, morally compromised existence. Never have we been so aware of humanity's collective iniquities, or of our own smallness. Notifications constantly interrupt our days to show us injustices occurring around the globe, injustices we tacitly support. They offer glimpses into a cacophony of lives unfolding unrelated to our own and remind us that the world will not notice our absence. Our technology trains us to think in this meta-rational manner, where any decision simultaneously appears insignificant and unethical. Driving to work, eating a sandwich, buying a pair of headphones: we can be certain that these quotidian decisions contribute to some unfairness, somewhere.

A noxious political culture has erupted in response to this cognitive challenge confronting each of us: because trying to help the most vulnerable members of our societies is difficult, ambiguous work, do not try. Instead, focus on how your own life is less-than-satisfactory. Trumpet about the ways you've been wronged and mock anyone involved in a project of ameliorating the world's suffering. Call them naive, question their motives, accuse them of virtue-signaling. The rising popularity of authoritarianism, more than anything, symbolizes capitulation. Turning to rightwing extremism is characterized by the same cheap thrill we feel the moment we decide to quit exercising, or to eat fast food, or to binge on our substance of choice. The moment we decide to stop striving, and instead surrender to our base impulses.

Our climbing rates of depression and loneliness represent the hangover such a decision produces. Meanwhile, if there is any universal truth in this life, it is that collective struggle, in service of some greater good, is the most reliable path to meaning. To an existence that justifies itself completely. Those who work at the KBI know this, and the joy that radiates through their building serves as proof. There are opportunists trying to trick us into thinking that walls make us mighty and that solidarity should be derided, because their privilege depends on our atomization. They are liars. It is within our power to laugh and dance and work together to build a more just, beautiful world, and the decision to participate is an endless source of strength. The poet Mary Oliver once wrote:

"...as the times implore our true involvement,  
The blades of every crisis point the way.

I would it were not so, but so it is.  
Who ever made music of a mild day?"

There is music playing, in the most unexpected places. We just have to go, and listen.

*\*Some names have been changed to protect privacy.*

# The Fourth Face of Eve

Fiction by Theresa Moritz

"Of course, it didn't determine everything about me. Never mind what your competitor published. That was an abuse of trust. It was summer. I was sleepy, and I wanted the little girl they sent over to go away. Featherheads. First, they reduce me to a clutch of clichés—Jungian imagery, settings in Switzerland and on circus trains, obsession with small acts of childhood violence—and then, they attribute to me an even grosser reduction, in which supposedly I revealed the defining moment of my life, the moment that also happens to completely explain my work.

"I was being ironic. Doesn't anyone understand irony anymore?"

"Judge for yourself. I'll tell you what I know, but bear in mind that I am getting sleepy, and that I was so young when it is supposed to have happened that we must all distrust the vivid memories I have of it. Maybe I am only describing the photographs Mother used to show me. You can't see them. They got lost somewhere between here and Florida the year we took her down. Snowbird. The lovelier the word, the uglier the thought. The word: See them fly, see them come and go with the weather that suits them the best, it is so natural, like the birds. We miss them, but they will be happier and live longer. The thought: We will live longer if we don't have to look at them rotting upstairs.

"Anyway, this is what happened. My mother was lifting me up so that I could kiss my grandfather in his casket. I had never kissed my grandfather while he was alive, and she didn't like to think that I had missed my chance.

"Why she counted it as a real opportunity, I don't know. But then we all do it. Haven't there been things you wanted that you let slip away again and again? And then, when there's no chance to have the thing you want, don't you want it terribly? And an apparent opportunity to get it, can't it cause you to forget all of your old misgivings and reach out, only to find you're grasping at a shadow of a shade?"

"Anyhoo, as Uncle Lionel used to say, my mother and the rest of the family had always wanted me to kiss my grandfather. Maybe they thought he was really a handsome prince, and that if I kissed him, he would be transformed from an inexorable propounder of God's laws into someone who liked them and who cared about their hair and clothes, or how much their husbands made, or whether the furniture in the drawing room was brand new.

"I attribute my sexism to all of them, but I suppose especially to Grandfather. What might they have been if he had organized his household differently? Because he did organize the household, even if he left it to my grandmother to carry out the orders. Do you suppose they might have been her orders and not his all along, and that she only said they were his to shift blame from herself for the mindless exactitudes she required of her daughters? Wouldn't he have complained if he didn't like the way the house was operating? Unless, of course, the tyranny under which he lived was so complete that he did not dare complain.

"The women around him always talked of obeying him, which leads me to wonder what his views might have been about this kiss. If he had always wanted me to kiss him, then wouldn't I have already done it before he died? Was my mother experiencing the exhilaration of freedom, acting out something she had always wanted, that I would kiss him? Was this her last chance, and she didn't want to miss it?"

"After all, she was free of the father who had hounded her and her two sisters, trapped them in those old giant dresses and in the

restraints of the parlour and genteel kitchen duties, kept them in ignorance of as much else as possible, and, whenever something really interesting was about to happen, sent them into the harem-like seclusion of their bedrooms upstairs. It was a wonder that any of them produced children in wedlock. I can understand how fertility might have followed on forbidden sex, but how could such padlocked, incensed and sentimentalized bodies ever have been coaxed into anything so coarse as breeding? But then, my expectations in this matter have always been fantastical. I never wanted to be a lost prince. I wanted to be a bastard.

"Instead, I am the only grandchild he ever had who lived more than a few hours, and I was legitimate. I was the frail, lone standard bearer of this man who, as I say, was dead when I first was given the opportunity to kiss him.

"That was what they used to tell me, my mother and her two sisters. The two of them lived in town. They were like the bookends which propped up the volume of stories which was my mother. Everyone said the older one really looked younger. Maybe she did once. Or maybe it was just one of those things you say in the face of such emptiness, a lie that just comes out of your mouth. You say it, and everyone grasps hold of it and repeats it, maybe for your sake, for the sake of the original lie, because it so obviously needs some kind of scaffolding around it or it will just fall down, boom. Or maybe you say it just to have something to say. Maybe I spoke because she was a vast emptiness to me, a silence so deep that I thought there would be an echo. Anyway, she had never married. Maybe the talk of her youthful appearance was a remnant of all the years the family had tried to convince each new acquaintance that she was still a desirable marriage prospect.

"The other, the younger one who looked older, they said, because she had suffered so much, had brought one child after another to life only to have them die. She had followed so many caskets the size of shoeboxes to the cemetery, that it was no wonder that she looked so old. And yet, she was small herself. And despite all those babies dying, she never seemed so empty to me as the older one did, on the long afternoon visits we still made back then.

"So, really, it was the three of them, not just my mother, who didn't want me to miss my chance to kiss their father. There was something symbolic for them, I suppose, in the juxtaposition of the corpse and the rosy-faced little boy—a little self-love showing through there, eh? Leave that in, it makes me look human, that I loved myself as a child. Still, I was a handsome child, and warm. I could generate so much heat that there was always damp in the hair on my forehead and a flush on my white cheeks. You can see it in all the pictures of me. They took a lot of pictures of me. I don't know why for certain. My mother never would say when I asked her about it, but I suspect it was because she thought I was very likely going to die, and she wanted some sort of evidence of my existence for around the house.

"She disapproved of the way Aunt Julie, my younger aunt, was always walking back and forth to the cemetery. I used to think Mother was angry about it for my sake, especially during Aunt Julie's pregnancies, when the visits always went on almost to the very last day before the labouring to bring forth, each time, nothing. 'Isn't it just simple science,' she said to me, when she thought I was still too young to understand. 'All that hard work of walking and then the air that rises from the graves, it can't be good for the little one.'

"For years I was sure it was me Mother was talking about, since many people called me 'little one'. And among them all, in their formal clothes and with their excellent posture, I must have

seemed rather unusually small. Sometimes one of them would pick me up and press me against her shirtwaist, and I would not cry, unless a pin happened to scratch me, as it frequently did, because I knew this was love. I couldn't understand why my aunt, whom I was told repeatedly loved me and I loved in return, would risk my life in this way. And I would try to detect the signs of decay in me, the signs of the air that rises from the graves. When they comforted Aunt Julie, they would say, 'The good die young.' And so I was afraid: I must die or live the proof that I was evil.

"I turned six just a few days after Aunt Julie's last lying-in, and I resented my little stillborn cousin, because Mother and Aunt Iphigenia, the third sister, decided that I wouldn't want a party after all. But I did. I do. I still want that party, that particular party in that grim house, in that dying garden, in that Christian little town. I want that party. I spent the birthday walking up and down the street in front of Aunt Julie's house, along with many other people, most of whom I didn't know, listening to her singing inside. She knew she was dying. The doctor couldn't stop the bleeding. While she waited for her life to siphon out of her, she sang, hymns mostly. One especially I remember, with the words, 'I sing because I'm happy, I sing because I'm free.'

"But that's the story of another funeral. I mean to tell it someday. My grandfather's death was really only a prelude to what happened in Aunt Julie's parlour when the last visits were being got through. I have always thought Sartre's dictum should be amended. It is not your death but your funeral which defines your existence. I am reminded, too, of Dostoevsky. I know the story of a saint, and then I tell you, as a prelude to it, a story of a sinner, and the prelude grows and grows until there is no life left to praise Alyosha or my poor Aunt Julie.

"I remember exactly what it was like. I see Grandfather before me. But wait. I should say that I am seeing my own face there, on the body in the casket in my vision, the face I see in the bathroom mirror in the morning that sets me musing on the truth of evolution and the simian cast of the brow and the jaw.

"He is in the casket, an old man who looks very much like me, hair combed, eyes sewn shut, lips sewn shut, suit pressed, hands folded, nails clipped, little satin coverlet tucked in over him, as if he were but sleeping. Around him the parlour choked with people and flowers. My mother, not a tall woman, always dominated terribly by the grandiosity of her clothes (you needed to be a big woman like my Aunt Iphigenia – the one who never married despite how well her physique suited the clothing of the day – to look good in them), my mother lifts me up from the floor where I had been fooling with some small thing, a bit of stone or paper I had discovered in my pocket when I was left alone just for a moment. She picks me up in the hands and knees position where she found me and holds me away from her body because I have on heavy boots, and I often enough have kicked her with them, even then, when I was not quite four years old. I fly suspended through the perfumed air, in my black mourning suit with the short pants, fat thighs and knees and calves folded up, arms extended and two sweaty fists formed, the sweat in my hair and on my forehead beginning to drip down.

"I was quiet, I am sure of that. I hear the words, 'Kiss Grandfather, little one,' and Mother begins to manoeuvre me into position. I reach down to steady myself, and my hand touches one of the neatly folded hands, and Grandfather moves. His right hand comes loose, and his arm slips slowly down the satin coverlet until it comes to rest, fingers extending up over the side of the casket, pointing toward heaven.

"Mother screamed and dropped me. I landed on Grandfather's chest, and his loosened arm flew up and then down over my back. I am sure I remember the smell. It was the scent of chemical roses.

"From the chair they moved me to, I watched as the three sisters screamed, 'He's alive!' They meant Grandfather, of course. It was evident that I was still alive. I hope their shades will forgive me for commenting that I don't believe they were entirely overjoyed at the news they were proclaiming that their father wasn't dead and on his

last visit to the parlour.

"They insisted that efforts be made to listen to his breathing and to raise his eyelids, but his lips were sewn shut, of course, and so were his eyelids. They berated my father, Jim, and Uncle Lionel, who had been out on the porch steps smoking and came in when Mother screamed. All of them berated the men, especially Aunt Iphigenia, berated them for being absent in the crisis and then for siding with Mr. William Henderson, the funeral director, when he explained about embalming fluid and what it did and what it meant. For a long time after that, I would close my eyes at night and pretend Mr. William Henderson was trying to sew them shut, and then my eyelids, the window shades of the soul, would snap up fast the way I liked to do with the shades in my room, which my mother was always adjusting, it seemed to me, for morning and late morning and early afternoon and before dinner and after dinner and early evening and the night darkness. And he would be the one who screamed.

"I read very early, and I owe it all to Mr. William Henderson, who made me want to know why we embalm the bodies of our dead relatives, and then put the bodies in the parlour. In books, I went looking for the door to the house of the dead. I knew I could not ask my teachers. I knew I could not ask my minister, my parents or even my older cousins. Books seemed a more reliable and less interfering source for the information I was after.

"My collections of funeral narratives soon expanded to include the sorts of things other exotic religions like the Church of Rome do with their dead bodies. I remember especially a memoir of an old woman about a childhood trip to Florence, where the uncorrupted body of St. Raymond de Fiore was on display in a glass-walled open casket. When she went, at the turn of the century, St. Raymond had only just been overhauled, or at any rate, his shrine. She was hoping for a miracle for someone back home, an aunt perhaps, or a beloved pet. And so, when no one was looking, she reached down and touched the hand of the saint, which moved. She screamed, the way my mother screamed, and everyone expected some further sign. But there wasn't one, except that the shrine preservation society decided to put a glass covering on the bier as well.

"I have never found the door into the house of the dead, but I found the door into the house of psychoanalysis, Freud and Jung and the crew. In all of it, there has been no more glittering instance than the story of the woman with multiple personalities whose repressed memories reveal her to be another child like me, being carried forward as an offering at the shrine of the family shades.

"I thought, when I first heard of the book, she has stolen my life. The title was the phrase I had looked for all my life to name the aspect of motherhood I beheld there next to my grandfather's disarranged body: *The Three Faces of Eve*, screaming. Have you ever seen one of those paintings of the moment just before original sin takes hold, when Eve still has the apple and Adam is puzzling over her suggestion, and the snake is pictured with a human face? For me, what I see always, in place of Adam, Eve, and the snake, are the three sisters of my fate, Mother, Aunt Julie, and Aunt Iphigenia. And it is always Mother who is wearing Adam's beard.

"Over the years, though, I came across more and more bits and pieces of my story: the reaching out for a miracle by touching the dead, the homage to departing power at the graveside of a hated parent, the loving child who leans briefly in the back of the church against the coffin on its wheeled support, only to have it skitter away and thunk loud and hard against the back of a wooden pew. Whose story is it? I wonder whether I might be just one of the multiple personalities of a being so large, so extensive as to comprehend all of us. Have I any right to say of anything I find in my hand or in my mind that this belongs to me? Did my mother lift me up to kiss my grandfather in his casket, and did his hand move? Was it my aunt, my poor Aunt Julie, who died in her upstairs bedroom, reclining on a chaise longue, singing, 'I sing because I'm happy, I sing because I'm free?'"

# Oh, Seroma

Poem by Barbara Kessel

You of the lovely name and the sinister implication,  
We need to talk, even though you have no voice.  
I ask you every hour if you are doing better.  
Or perhaps worse?  
I think I feel your answer.

We both know you were not meant to be: *a complication*.  
The pillagers with their noisy knives, their silent radiation  
Have left me cancer-free,  
but with a large hole inside my breast.  
They call you, "Seroma."

Invisible to others, you only come alive in ultra-sound.  
You look like a moon crater with a shallow lake,  
Yet being on the Moon's dark side, never to see Light—  
For as long as we are in this body.

Your walls have been scraped away,  
Maybe holding by tough tissue,  
Yet never healing.  
The incision on my chest could be my badge of honor,  
But you, my secret, sometimes wincing wound,  
You are the scar I cradle and rock,

Hang tough for us, oh my Seroma.

# Stages of Grief

Poem by Mary Redman

The shock of his crimes  
sent me to the brink  
of bankruptcy,  
cost me plenty:  
decades of supposed contentment.

Once in denial of his lidded lies,  
I found asylum  
in a world where logic told me  
up was down was up—  
for years I wandered in a fog  
of deceit,  
now a haze of grief.  
In a fugue-like state,  
I bargained  
for my sanity, 'til anger's fierce  
light split the shell I wore,  
seared this grief-bruised brain,  
with fiery cleansing  
left me soaked  
in sweat and tears,  
at long last  
accepting—  
there is no other  
reality but the one within  
arm's reach.

# Appointment No. 3

Poem by Andie Italia

I call it spring cleaning  
Annual and always about cobwebs  
Antiseptic and sanitizer  
Cool air and the sweat of social anxiety  
My doctor does not know  
What my nose and mouth look like  
And has still seen more of me  
Than any man has

I am not afraid of the dark  
Until the lights go out  
In an ultrasound tech's office  
I fold my arms like micro-origami  
If I make myself small enough  
Maybe I can hide under this crepe paper sheet

I do anything I can to avoid  
Eye contact with my uterus  
She and I can remain acquaintances  
Over the phone  
I don't need to see her face  
To know the sound of her voice  
I don't need to see her strip  
Or plant flowers in her outdoor pots  
Pressing the soil with her fingers  
Skin riddled with soft indentations  
Barely discernible air bubbles

I was never supposed to come here alone  
I am not here for good news  
I am here for an ultrasound tech  
To turn down the lights  
And ask about my upcoming trip  
While she reaches up inside me  
Searching for answers  
That are not there  
While my eyes are squeezed shut  
And I try not to think  
About my word choice were I to ask her  
For a photo to take home

# Envelopes

Poem by Sandra Hosking

Like white linen butterflies  
The envelopes flew and fluttered  
With each passing car  
Refugees from a broken box on the asphalt  
Their empty windows  
Looking for sanctuary  
No one stopped



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