

JULY-OCTOBER 2023 - ISSUE 15

Dreamers

Creative Writing

Winners
2023 Haiku Contest

MC1R, Garden Wisdom
Poems by Jessica MacLeod

Between The Blinds
Fiction by Nicole Rashter

\$9.95 CAD
Display until November 2023



Fiction | Nonfiction
Book Reviews | Poetry
Interviews | Articles

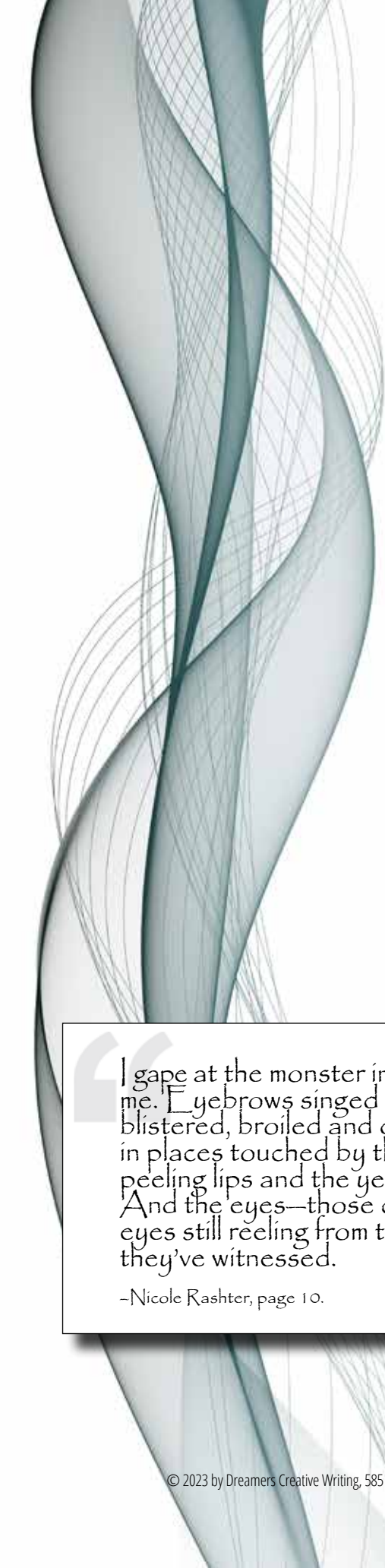
Fireside Writing Retreat



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“I gape at the monster in front of me. Eyebrows singed off, the skin blistered, broiled and discoloured in places touched by the fire. The peeling lips and the yellowed teeth. And the eyes—those cowardly eyes still reeling from the nightmare they’ve witnessed.

—Nicole Rashter, page 10.

EDITOR'S LETTER

As summer gives way to the cool embrace of fall, I've found myself feeling nostalgic. With this very issue, we celebrate a significant milestone – 5 years of sharing stories with you!

Welcome to Issue 15 of the Dreamers Magazine. Congratulations to the winners of our 2023 Haiku Contest. K.L. Johnston secures the top honour with two haiku that capture the beauty of fleeting moments.

Dive into "Between The Blinds," a fiction tale penned by Nicole Rashter. It follows a man on a journey of longing after personal loss, as he gazes beyond his window to a world where he no longer belongs. You'll find this poignant narrative starting on page 8.

Within these pages, discover a rich collection that speaks to the heart. There's a treasury of 12 heartfelt poems, 5 engaging fiction stories, 1 autofiction story, 3 nonfiction pieces, and 1 insightful book review.

Thank you for being part of this journey with us. As we step into the upcoming season, let these stories accompany you along the way.

And don't forget, keep dreaming!

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HAIKU CONTEST 2023

FIRST PLACE

day off

by K.L. Johnston

this book, some bug spray
comfortable bench in the shade
worlds overlapping

storm wash

by K.L. Johnston

new light reflecting
on ebb tide, storm wrack, pale foam
peace washing ashore

SECOND PLACE

Riding Coach, Amtrak (the Lake Shore Limited)

by Marta Holliday

We gaze, zone out, read.
Boxed dinners, cards, Ipod beats
Our lives intersect.

Congratulations to the
winning poets and thanks
once again to our judge,
Reinekke Lengelle!

THIRD PLACE

Dew Cocktails

by M. Lynne Squires

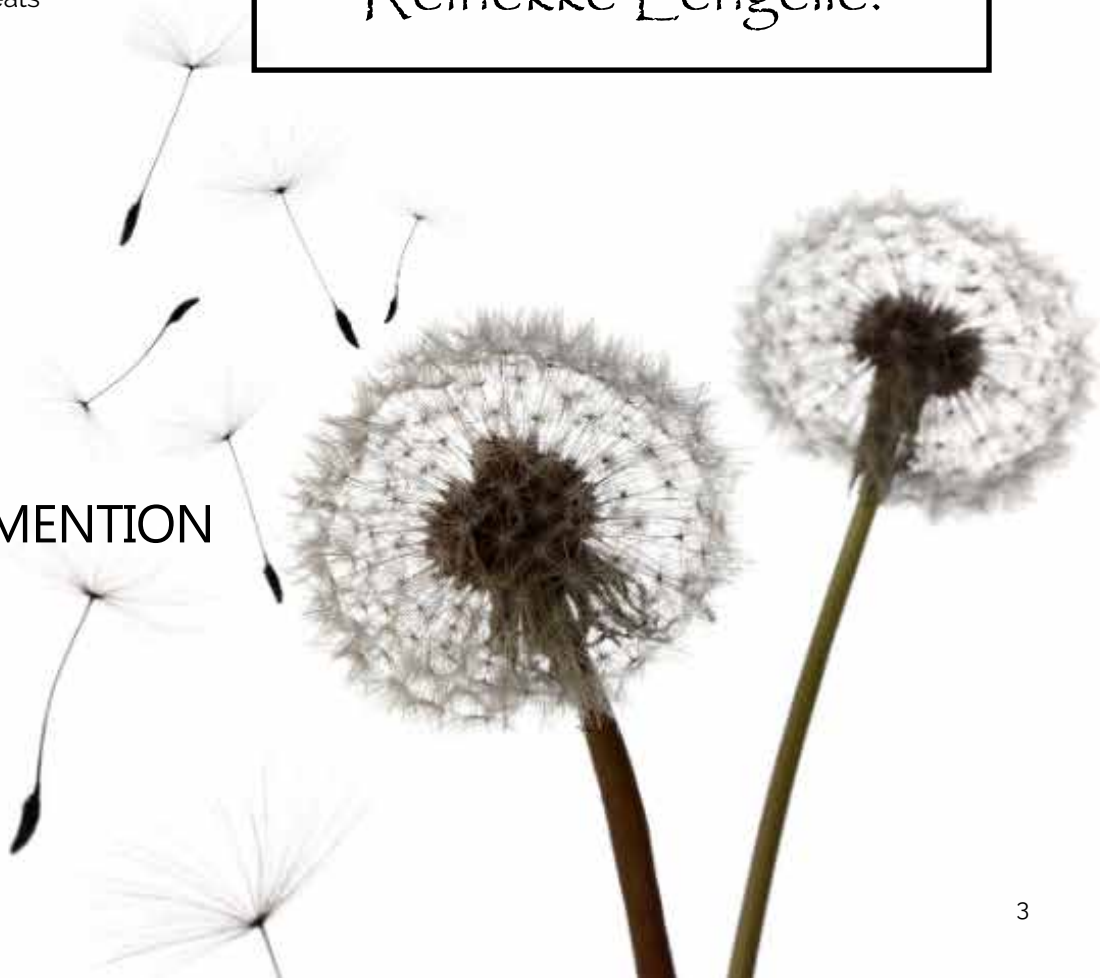
maple leaves curled
into veined orange goblets
holding dew cocktails

HONOURABLE MENTION

Fragile Dismantling

by C.X. Turner

dandelion clock—
the fragile dismantling
one puff at a time



Dyslexia

Autofiction by Alysha Brooks



I can't be smart I'm not allowed to be smart. Smart people can read and write with their own hands and their own brain no need for interpreters both human or robotic. I look at a page my brain sputters and whirls. Through my eye a stream of letters march through the swirling clump of brain matter that resides inside of my skull. Instead of the words keeping in there straight restrictive lines whispering knowing and meaning into the squishy underbelly of my brain, they decide to rebel. Run, trip, fall and scatter. In retaliation my brain decides to chop them, Dismember the circles and lines into an incomprehensible swirl of nothingness leaving sharp edges to plunge deep within the squelching mass that is my brain. That must be what happens. They get lodged inside unable to leave as fully formed words stuck unable to straighten out into legible sentences through comprehension or through the written word. That must be how it happens that's why it hurts so much. Sometimes I vomit from it. I gag and choke on the broken-up letters the disappointment that sits in the acid of my stomach and the pain that pounds in my head. Yet they told me I don't try hard enough. If I just tried harder my brain would change the structure and would morph into a normal one. A brain who obeys the laws of the western written word. A simple right to left a straight line subservient, dutiful, correct. Instead of a brain who inspects every line and swirl dip and bump. Who yearns to understand what lies underneath. Who dares to disobey the ease of restriction instead. moving all things in a dance glide and twirls and uncovers goes beyond a simple line, with its simple truth. A brain that understands the world itself is incomprehensible and therefore refuses to comprehend the simple notion of the written word. And so, I am stupid, due to my inability to force my brain to conform, to obey the laws and rules and so it must be punished. I must be punished. Until my brain can submit and be normal, I will always be stupid. I will never have worth I will never be able to do anything. Oh, how I wish I could beat my brain into submission. Then I would be perfect, I would be smart. I would be able to be all the things that I can't. I would be able to be myself but instead I'm what they make me an idiot. I've given up now. I know I'll never be able to read. Or at least that's what they say I've given up. I know that my writing is false even though they're my words and the relinquishing of my soul. It means nothing because I cannot hold the pen instead, I stab it into my flesh punishing myself for my inability to not be disabled. I guess I shouldn't say that. They told me that I shouldn't call myself that. I should call myself a person with learning difficulties. I should use person first language as if this thing has not defined every part of me. It's hard to know that I will never be myself, I will never be smart, I will never be whole and I will never be disabled because I don't stammer or limp. When I say I can't read they told me "There is no such thing as can't". When I asked them if they would say that to someone in a wheelchair who says they can't walk, they say I'm dramatic. Or I guess I just don't understand because I'm stupid I'm illiterate there's synonyms apparently. It's funny how they don't even know the meaning of their own words but I guess I can't actually know, because I can't read them, so I guess I can't ever actually know. I guess these words aren't actually mine. I guess this whole page is meaningless, is pointless, there's nothing. I guess you're not reading it now. You can't be because I can't write and I can't read and I'm an idiot this is illegible, this is a garbled mess. Maybe if you tried harder, maybe if you threw up if you cried, maybe if you sobbed, were punished. maybe then you'd understand.

Eulogy

Nonfiction by Cathleen Daly



My mother doesn't wake up anymore. I drive over to the apartment in the early evening, arms piled with things I think she needs. Dad sits alone reading in a faded, green armchair.

"Hi," I say, leaning down to kiss the top of his head. I reach in my purse and hand him the folded eulogy I've written about my mother.

"Ok," he says, remembering that I'd asked him to look it over. My father sits up to adjust the lamp behind his head. Otherwise the room is entirely dark - he's lit from behind. He straightens the front of his grey V-neck sweater and unfolds the eulogy. Through the doorway I see rows of pill bottles lined up along the kitchen countertop.

"I'm going to see her," I mumble.

He glances down at the pages as I turn to walk down the hall. I hear him sigh, releasing what I can't imagine.

My mother hasn't woken up in twenty-four hours and looks like she's asleep. The hospice nurse mentioned a few days earlier that cancer patients could slip into a coma. Mom's head is turned to the side as if she's gazing out the window. I bend over and smooth back her auburn hair, where the grey strands have begun to spread out like spider webs.

I will never see you very old, I think.

A beige sweater lies at the foot of her bed and classical music plays from a radio on the bedside table. I sit down and lace

my fingers through hers. I want to wake her. *I'm so glad to see you,* she'd say. Maybe she'd ask how long she'd been sleeping. I'd wrap the sweater around her shoulders and help her out of bed. I think back to only a few weeks ago, when we could walk to the kitchen together and make chamomile tea.

There's a photo on her dresser from a trip to Paris that she took with my father. It looks like fall, and they're in a park. My mother's wearing a raincoat, her hair pulled back off her face. Dad said it was a business trip in the late 70s. In the photo, Mom gazes up at my father as he laughs, his head tilted back. She told me once that those business trips to Europe with my father *had been everything*. I hold the image in my mind, imagining them at a small bistro - sipping house wine before walking back to their hotel.

I dim the light next to my mother's hospital bed and there's a soft glow warming her face. I hear Dad down the hall and walk toward him.

"This is beautiful" he pauses, his voice breaking. "I have one small change, but other than that it's perfect," he says, taking off his glasses to rub his eyes before continuing. "You say that you're so proud to *be* her daughter. I'd change that to you're so proud to *have been* her daughter."

Outside the rain is heavy, falling in rhythmic taps against the glass. But I still hear the music coming from my mother's room.

The Clock Ticks

Nonfiction by Shannon Patte

Everyone else finds it annoying, but it soothes me. It is the sound I heard as a child, visiting my grandparents. It is the sound of a house not shaped by uncertainty, bad decisions and poverty. It is the sound of a normal house.

And mine is a normal house. I made it so.

It's the sound of progress. Quietly marching from second to second, arriving first to the half hour then to the full hour, marking our days with its chime. Wherever I am in the house I hear its distant sound and I know it's two o'clock. Or five o'clock. Or whatever o'clock. It tells me when I have to leave to bring my daughter to hockey practice or rock climbing. It tells me when I've left it too late to start cooking dinner and I should just order a pizza.

It tells me when it needs winding. The chimes stretch out and begin to sound like a dying cat.

"Can't we put it in another room?" they ask, as the clock strikes ten in the middle of our movie.

"But it looks good on the shelf," I say.

I know we should. Put it in another room, I mean. Maybe I will. Someday, but not today.

It's not a priority.

I like the tick.



My years are marked by checkpoints. By holidays, by the beginning and ending of school. The year begins in September and ends in June followed by the sweet bliss of pretending to be busy. I can't imagine another way of being. In eleven years I'll be free of this cycle. I can't wait. I long for it and wish I could do it right now. But I know my year will still begin in September and end in June and I know summer will still smell of freedom.

My decades begin with celebrations. By ponderings of what has passed during the last and what is expected by the next. By quick body checks to see what is different, what is the same and what should be seen too. By brushing my hair and feeling relief that there are still no grey strands caught in the bristles.

They end with people asking, "Do you feel different?"

I laugh and say "No! I still feel like a teenager!"

But I wonder.

My life is filled with dreams. Dreams of "what I will do when..." I love these dreams. I worry when I don't have them, that my life will be over. I wonder how people survive when their ability to dream of the future is squashed. I worry that I won't be able to survive. I can't imagine not dreaming.

I ask those around me, my husband, my friends, what they think about dreams. They look at me like I'm an alien from another planet and once again I worry that others do not think the way I think. They do not worry about what I worry about.

"Why can't you just live for today?" they ask. "Do whatever you are dreaming about now?"

I smile and nod and say, "Yeah, you're right" but they don't understand and I don't want to explain. I don't want them to think of me as a dreamer and not a do-er.

A dreamer gets eyes rolled at them. They get told they exaggerate. They get accused of being silly. They get told they need to live in reality.

But I do. Sometimes it feels like I live in a bolder reality than they do.

I'm never hindered by what I can't do, because my dreams mean there is so much I could do.

But what happens when there isn't?

What happens when my dreams dry up. When my reality turns pastel. When the hairs in the bristles are grey. Or white. When my future is measured in years, not decades.

It's *that* I wonder about.

It's *that* I worry about.

The clock ticks.

Dreams Are What We Have Left

Poem by Siobhan Farrell

Time has mutated
porous
like lichen
on uneven patches of rock,
takes space in cupboards,
with Ritz crackers and old Brie
in the back of the fridge.

Snow windblown whirls
in wanton piles,
crows duel with squirrels
that whiz under trees
around drifts, covering their tracks,
digging to find
underground treasure.

Dusk has turned
moody, spun its' own version
of darkness.

Days trickle like honey
crystallize into
longing
far-off tomorrows.

Sometime,
late afternoon, I believe
I sip tea with Mum
Dolly Parton, Virginia Woolf
and a team of exhausted
mountain climbers who
somehow made it to the top
no matter what.

Bundled closely,
we inhale the sweet fragrance
of petals, steam rising
from our cups filled
with a perfect blend of jasmine tea.

Becoming Real

Poem by Janis La Couvée

eyes ablaze, face illuminated by smiles
and a flash—of recognition
today is a good day
she summons fierce determination
demands you pay attention
this intrepid explorer
once we sifted sand for seashell treasure
balanced on hoar-frosted logs
precarious over rushing water
dared storm-frothed waves and booming thunder
to land with a rock crunch
she withers now before my eyes
mind and body ravaged
yet spirit and soul shine forth
in the end, her essence,
sweet and kind—remains

Waking Up

Poem by MacKenzie Sewell

your skin is slowly, coldly warming, your
laptop keys responsive
a trickle of water from your hair, reserved for your neck from
the walk in the rain
from a friend's house
you hold your lavender latte in your puffy red cheeks and
let the heat slowly down your throat
waiting for a lover, carried on a bus, carried on the wind,
to enter and find you,
you,
who has forgotten what the warm and the cold feels like
you are starting to remember, you wait,
tick-tick-ticking out some serifed words
that will wait in turn
to remind you again,
when the trickle of water falls on numb nerves,
what hope feels like.



Between The Blinds

Fiction by Nicole Rashter

She doesn't look older than forty, which is surprising. In a neighbourhood popular with senior residents, she is certainly a black sheep.

I lift the blind higher, peering out at her standing in the shadow of the sycamore tree, crimson leaves falling all around her. I note her chocolate-brown hair, her tanned legs, the abundance of colourful rope bracelets adorning her slender wrists.

I don't remember seeing her before. She must've moved here recently.

Before I can satisfy my curiosity, the bus swerves onto the street and whisks her away. Checking the time, I let go of the blind and turn away from the window.

I wonder if she'll be here again tomorrow.

I can hear the kettle boiling in the kitchen as I shuffle down the hallway, a worn towel on my shoulder. Bending down, I wipe my finger along the rim of a stray Tupperware container and frown at the collected dust.

I open the bathroom door. Draping the towel on the stained sink rim, I turn on the tap and squeeze paste onto a toothbrush.

My thoughts return to the stranger from the bus stop. I smile while I brush my teeth, remembering how the wind had played with her hair. Spitting out the foam, I raise my head and wink.

I don't know if my reflection answers me. The mirror is covered by a worn sheet.

That's alright. I'm used to brushing my teeth blindly.

I'm bored, Roger texts me that evening.

That's understandable, I reply.

I'm very, very bored. I feel like cutting a window in the wall. That's how bored I am.

I don't think a window will help, I type, smirking.

My kitchen's too gloomy.

You live in a basement.

A moment of hesitation before a new message appears. *You spoilsport.*

I chuckle.

You need a housemate, I text, surprising myself.

I have Ichador. Ichador is Roger's iguana.

I shake my head. *You need someone to look after.*

After a second, I add: *Someone human.*

This time, Roger doesn't respond for three minutes.

So, a speech bubble finally asks, *you're suggesting I find myself a date?*

Perhaps, I say.

You must be joking, Roger replies. *I don't know the first thing about them. Women are too complicated. They want to feel loved. They always need attention. I've been single for five years now. I'm not ready to disturb my routine. What if she... "gasps"*

What? I ask.

What if she doesn't like to eat Kraft Dinner for breakfast?

When I look outside my window the next morning, the mysterious woman is standing dutifully beside the sycamore tree. I see her there the next day. And the next day. And the next.

Soon, I start winding the clocks to her arrival. She arrives precisely at 8:51 every morning, tapping her feet restlessly for a couple of minutes before the bus takes her away.

I grow to like her silent company. When I notice that she returns home as promptly in the evening, I start greeting her every time by the window. From watching her, I learn that she hates itchy sweaters, likes buying Starbucks lattes, shivers with pleasure upon signs of snow, and whistles as she walks home on sunny days.

I wonder what her voice sounds like.

After a month of hard work, I finally finish dusting the second floor of the house. Now's the time to bring out the vacuum cleaner, if I can find it in the cluttered living room.

Mostly, I feel like lying on the grimy carpet, pretending I have vision powerful enough to see the spiders spinning their cobwebs across the ceiling.

The coffee machine breaks, and I carefully carry it down the rickety stairs to the basement. Placing the beast beside five of its damaged siblings, I smile as it glistens in the darkness.

Only once do I find myself standing still in front of the attic window, blankly watching a neighbour hose down their driveway. My hands hold the broom like they were trained to, although they yearn to be holding that hose.

Unsettled by my muscle memory, I place the broom in a corner and walk away.

The bathroom door stays closed.

A while ago, I responded to one of those suspicious ads persistently appearing in my tabs. Instead of contracting a virus (like I expected), I got a Zen magazine subscription, which now periodically sends its wisdom to my inbox. Every day that I receive their email is a good day for me.

"The noble-minded are calm and steady. Little people are forever fussing and fretting." — Confucius

This quote reminds me of peace. If you have no future, you don't need to fret.

"The place to improve the world is first in one's own heart and head and hands." — Robert M. Pirsig

This quote is about healing. I can't move on until I am well.



And my favourite:

"You are exactly where you need to be." —Unknown

This quote makes me feel safe.

She could be a nurse, I muse, sipping the morning coffee. The blind is secured tightly to the one above it with a pair of zip ties.

Pulling the stool closer to the window, I squint at the woman as she checks her watch in annoyance. *No, she's probably a teacher*; I correct myself after inspecting the backpack weighing down on her shoulders. Judging by the salt-eaten fabric and the mud-splattered pockets, my stranger seemingly doesn't care about the bag's contents.

I wonder if she's happy with her job, or if she resents waking up every morning. *What are her hopes and dreams? Would I be able to understand them?*

How does one start a conversation like that?

The bus whizzes by my window. I blink at the suddenly empty front lawn. I didn't even notice my stranger leaving.

"Carl and Steve were asking about you the other day," Roger mumbles into the phone, chewing on something. In the background, I can hear the nostalgic sound of mighty engines running.

I try to remember what Carl or Steve look like. "It's supposed to be Steve's birthday in December, right?"

"His birthday was back in June, but close enough."

I cringe at the dirty dishes in the sink. "Well, give them my regards," I say as I scrub another plate. "I'm fine."

Later, I rummage through the boxes for the photo where Steve, Carl, and I are smiling together. After hours of fruitless scavenging, I sit down on a lawn chair and bite my lip.

"Why are we bored, lonely and lazy? Because we don't have the will to totally open our hearts to others." — Lama Yeshe

I adjust the knob on an old radio. It sits on a pile of outdated car catalogs in the living room. Besides trying to find a station that doesn't broadcast white noise, I'm also wondering whether today's Zen quote is true.

I admit, I'm slightly offset by the authority in Yeshe's statement. What if

someone's not ready to open their hearts to others? What if hearts are meant to be locked until a proper key is found? What if someone isolates themselves only because they need time to construct that perfect key? Does that necessarily mean they'll become desolate or unmotivated?

Who even decides these things?

The radio sputters and jazz flows quietly out of its speakers. The dust mites twirl in the air, as if dancing to the music. Content, I grab a laser pointer from a rusty canister full of glue sticks and watch the light flit between the empty pizza boxes on the table and the unopened packages of socks on the floor.

Maybe I should get a cat.

When the bus pulls up to the curb at precisely 5:30 pm, I'm already seated in front of the window. The shuttered doors yawn and an elderly couple hobbles out. The wrinkled man carefully helps his equally wrinkled wife maneuver down onto the pavement with her walking stick.

My back relaxes when I see my mystery nurse/teacher step onto the driveway after them. Instead of walking away, she stares longingly at the two withered hands locked together in their embrace. I, in turn, study the emotions playing discreetly across her freckled face.

Huh.

Shaking her head, the woman pulls on the straps of her knapsack. She strides away from me through the snow.

I wonder whether one day she'll glance up and find me staring back through the window. Perhaps then I'll wave at her. Perhaps she'll smile. Perhaps...I'll even invite her to come in.

Aha, I roll my eyes, right into the neighbourhood's largest indoor junkyard.

Still, it would be nice to have someone in my kitchen, to listen to their story as I pour them tea into one of the mismatched cups.

I am almost concerned with how good the fantasy makes me feel.

"I just wish I could talk to someone," Roger says over the speakerphone. I turn my head towards the landline and behold a carrot.

"You're talking to me." I mumble.

"You know what I mean." He sighs, his voice distorted by the buzzing on the line.

I spill the last of the carrots into a bowl and start on the cabbage.

"There are always dating sites," I offer. "Maybe you can find someone there." Over the months, he has warmed up to my original suggestion.

"Yeah, maybe," Roger grumbles. "Anyways, enough about me. When are you planning to crawl out of your fortress?"

I tense, forcing myself to keep cutting. "I went for a jog today." I lie.

"Yeah right. I know you better than that."

I sigh and reach for the grater.

"Glenn, you should stop hiding."

"I'm not hiding. I am simply allergic to the sun."

"Cut the sarcasm, mate. I know it's not the sun you're hiding from. You should stop hiding from *yourself*."

I glare at the receiver. "What gives you the right to talk?"

In my mind, I can see Roger massaging his eyes. "I was there, remember? I saw what happened. I understand how you feel. Glenn, if only you'd..."

The rest of his words are eaten up by the inferno suddenly roaring in my ears. Its blistering heat claws at my skin and I clench my jaw against a memory I've spent months trying to suppress.

Damn you, Roger.

"...it wasn't your fault." His voice goes on. "There was nothing you could do..."

Before the screams can possess me, I slam the landline into its base, cutting the conversation in half.

...

I can barely sleep with Roger's words tumbling through my mind. Mixed in with his voice are images of ashes blowing in the wind, coiled hoses arranged in neat rows, and the matchbook I keep locked in the attic cupboard for when I'm finally ready.

Finally, I sit up in the lumpy bed and my hands curl into fists. I shuffle down the corridor, opening the bathroom door before I can stop myself.

My heart pounds in my chest as I stare at the soiled sheet. This sheet has kept me sane for so long by concealing from me what I so greatly dread.

But maybe Roger's right. Perhaps it's time to stop hiding.

I grip the edge of the fabric and pull. The cloth detaches its claws from the mirror's edge and spills itself with a moaning gasp onto the counter.

I gape at the monster in front of me.

Eyebrows singed off, the skin blistered, broiled and discoloured in places touched by the fire. The peeling lips and the yellowed teeth. And the eyes—those cowardly eyes still reeling from the nightmare they've witnessed. My nose picks up that horrifying stench of grilling flesh.

I scramble away from the mirror, stumbling over the mountains of scotch tape, dictionaries, umbrellas, and glass vases. Only when I reach the bedroom do I draw a breath.

I'll have to use the bathroom on the third floor. There, at least, I had the common sense to break the mirror in the first place.

...

"To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you." — Louis B. Smedes

...

I'm sorry, Roger texts me, I should've kept my mouth shut.

Then, a couple minutes later: *Come to Jack Aster's tonight with me. My treat?*

I've read his message three hours ago, but I still can't bring myself to reply.

...

The next time the bus approaches the curb, I'm jittery and tense, pacing before the window. When my stranger stumbles out, grocery bags pulling down against her grip, I grit my teeth.

Wiping her brow, she hobbles down the street, away from view. I follow her, up the stairs, pushing aside a carton of golf balls. Finally, I press myself against the attic window, searching the streets. I exhale when I see her heading towards a row of dilapidated condo buildings, where she disappears into the brown crumbled stone.

For at least an hour, I stare after her.

Eventually, the sky darkens, yet the scene doesn't change.

...

The static on the TV screen hums, reflecting the disorder in my mind. I bring the beer can to my mouth and swallow as I stare at the article spread across my knee.

"Blazing fire destroys hotel; 45 killed, 1 firefighter injured."

I don't need to read the rest. I know the text by heart.

Turning on my phone, I reread Roger's most recent message. Seeing the date when it was sent, I grimace and rub my chin in thought. I think about grocery bags, how heavy they must be when carried alone.

Looking at the towers of junk around me, I bitterly shake my head.

There was something I could do. And there's something I can do now.

My fingers start texting before I can change my mind.

...

"Sometimes, all it takes is saying 'hi.'" — Me

...

She stares down the street, impatiently waiting for the bus.

I stare between the blinds, impatiently waiting for change.

Glancing back at the row of ticking clocks above the doorway, I scowl. Biting into a stale granola bar, I resume my rigid watch.

Change is running late.

Finally, my stranger glances with surprise behind her and my knees sag with relief.

My only friend strides up to her, holding a briefcase that I know he has dug up just for this purpose. He looks tanner than the last time I've seen him, with a slightly bigger belly hidden behind his tweed coat. But he has the same eyes. I remember how excited those eyes were on Roger's first day at the fire station.

God, I miss him.

I watch as Roger inspects a crack in the sidewalk, while 'accidentally' bumping into her. My stranger glares at him, and he raises his hands in apology.

She smiles and his figure relaxes. I can almost hear him cracking out a joke, the one about three men in a bar.

I bet her laughter is making the nearby birds sing.

When Roger and my mysterious beauty shake hands, I pull out the pliers and cut through the zip ties. The blind shuts just as they board the bus.

Farming at 90

Poem by Francesca J. Sidoti

pugnacious white hairs
sprouted decades deep on farm hands
tangle with spring air
on the first day of planting

in counterpoint to week roots
beneath good soil
spreading a collective choke out
to iris and lily

all of it springs too fast
grows hot with a dry season
busts up clay from underneath
asphalt takes the ride

bends it with new roots
from here to there
makes bare clapboard stand grim
but certain in heavy evening sun

runs away with the gilded pond
and sends a daughter for good luck
who stops by on Sundays
and remembers when

Garden Wisdom

Poem by Jessica MacLeod

Don't simply begin
by looking at your plots, your pots,
your fresh earth beds,
figuring how many seeds
to scatter or precisely place,
considering only their various
colours, textures, and sizes.

No, you must look ahead and
come to know
your mid-season effusion and beyond,
a row of basil, fragrant, verdant, and full,
loose, loamy hills of potatoes,
shady sunflower giants,
and delicate tendrils of peas,
eager and overrunning
their delicate rusted racks.
Yes, keep going. Keep looking.

Look right into a November evening.
See light over the dining room table
reflecting bright against black window panes.
Savor a stew of potatoes, carrots, onions, and more.
See the startling dark of boiling beets.
Can you hear the whispering skins of dried garlic and onions
as you tickle through them in the darkness of their box?

Now you dig in,
fingers into dirt.
Now you are ready.

Child

Poem by Francesca J. Sidoti

There was in your first steps
a strength of planets,
yours and mine combined,
expanding upon a forming world,
orbiting the truth of innocence,
energies conceived.
In the night you would reach up,
arms extended.
And lifting you I would be free, a
song of owls and geese
sharing tropospheres,
held, breathing near my heart. Your
moments a constellation
spanning the dome of my life. Your
cells knitted from mine, walking and
waking apart.
In sleep I have held you again, your
steps in dreams beating,
repeating stellar melodies we sang together
and sing forever, from birth to our
next meeting.

There is Always a Price to Pay for Survival: A Review of Ellen Keith's *The Dutch Orphan*

Book Review by Carole Mertz

The Dutch Orphan is a novel by Ellen Keith about Jewish children who are threatened by deportation from The Netherlands and who are separated from their parents and placed in temporary and precarious housing within Dutch orphanages. Keith covers the period from 1940 to the liberation in May, 1945. She tells the story with sensitivity and care. And with an unforgettable twist. Its focus falls on two adult sisters: one, Johanna, chooses the way of Resistance against the Nazis, the other, Liesbeth, aligns herself with her husband and his cooperation with the Dutch Fascist Party, not believing the extent to which the Nazis will go to gain control over her countrymen. Meanwhile, we see the Dutch population move steadily to the point of starvation.

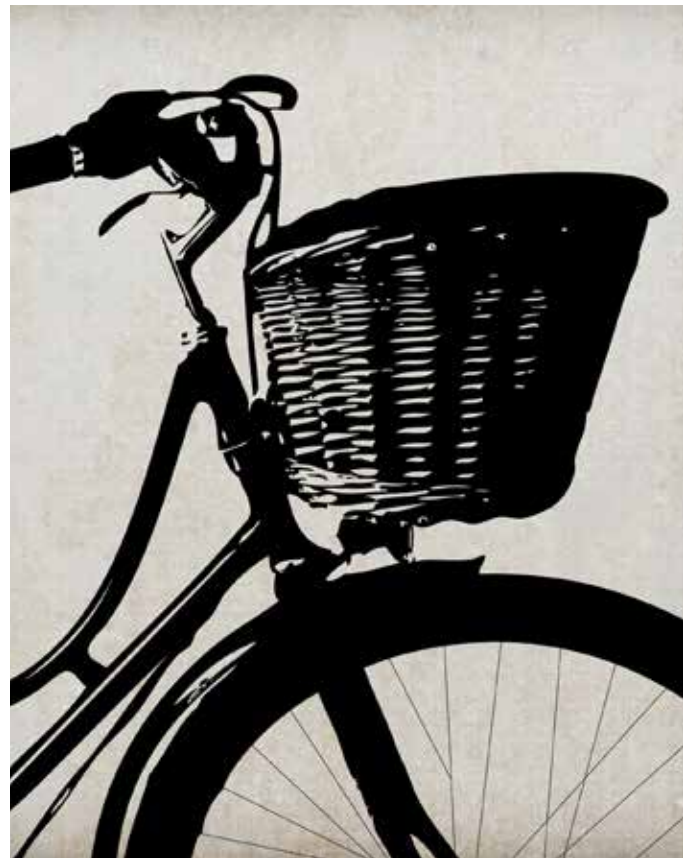
Though numerous novels exist about this painful period of world history, I find unique elements in Keith's telling of it. Foremost is the importance of the Canadian forces who, along with British soldiers, accomplished the final collapse of the Nazis' control within The Netherlands at a crucial point toward the end of 1944. Secondly, Keith is most adept at handling the pacing and nuances as the various forms of resistance develop. Her description of the rescue of a particular orphan reads with the chill of a mystery novel. In the final third of the novel, the author carries her story inside Ravensbrück, the infamous camp in northern Germany.

In Amsterdam, Johanna is increasingly drawn into Resistance activity. She strives with her husband to find new hiding places for Jews despite the risk of deportation. At one point, putting her pregnancy at risk, she adeptly guards her bicycle from the Nazis. Though all bicycles were soon taken, this vehicle will later enable her to ride farther out into the countryside in desperate attempts to obtain food.

Some final chapters of Keith's narration seem hurried and perhaps slightly implausible. But her general characterization reveals the oft-documented chaos of the time and discloses the fears people endured both from without, and from within their consciences. "How and where will we find food?" "What if my husband is discovered giving aid to Jewish people?" "Unless I cooperate how will I keep my family safe?" "What is a more effective method of confrontation, and how can we avoid the use of firearms?"

In contrast to Johanna's willful resistance, her sister Liesbeth enjoys a luxuriant life, never wanting for food, and taking pleasure in nights out with her husband as they attend dinners with the fascists. These events are always well furnished with food and drink. Liesbeth's husband enjoys the comforts and status they bring him.

Finally the Nazi stronghold within the country collapses. At



page 293 of the novel, the Dutch citizens hear Prime Minister Gerbrandy's announcement:

"Now that the Allied armies have penetrated the Dutch borders, I am convinced you will give them a warm and dignified reception, which they deserve as liberators of our country and for destroying the tyrants. The hour of liberation has struck."

Much of *The Dutch Orphan* depicts seemingly ordinary people who work miracles to save lives and make existence less painful for those living under extreme repression. It's reassuring that books of this nature keep appearing, reminding us that good people resolved to resist atrocious acts existed throughout the Nazi era. Hurrah to novelists who continue to present outstanding accounts that testify to the deeds of ordinary people, brave enough to act boldly in the face of evil.

February 5th, 2019

Nonfiction by Taylor Balfour



February 5th, 2019 was the worst day of my life.

It felt like every other day, at first. I woke up at my then-boyfriend's house. I got dressed, started my car in the Canadian cold, and drove to campus for my creative writing class. It was as I was sitting downstairs, browsing social media, that I would get the text that would alter the course of my day and my life:

"Have you heard from your sister?"

I hadn't. It was Tuesday, and we had texted on Friday while I was out at a student film party. She asked if I knew the Netflix password. I didn't and suggested she text Dad. That was the last time we spoke.

I felt a knot grow in my stomach as the hours wore on. The "Yo dude, how's life?" text I'd sent to her would haunt me for the years to come. How stupid. How mediocre. It was a text she'd never see anyway.

The police arrived at our childhood home hours later. Her body had been found in her dorm room. She was in her bed with her headphones in. She wrote in her journal that she didn't know what she had taken.

She never wrote in physical journals. I took that as a sign that she knew she was going to die.

Rachel died after taking meth laced with heroin and fentanyl. Fentanyl is what inevitably caused her accidental overdose.

My family prefers to refer to it as "poisoning", which I've struggled to come to terms with. While it's true, it feels as though it's ignoring the very concept of why she died in the first place.

She did drugs.

She did drugs to escape. The reason she died wasn't inherently

from fentanyl, or meth, or heroin. It was from a need to escape her reality. It was to escape from a world that constantly belittled her or didn't believe her. She died because when she opened up about her reality, she was shut down. She was mocked. She was ignored. She was isolated.

When she told her friends she was being abused? They left her. When she told loved ones she was struggling with her mental health? She was told to toughen up. When she explained her anxiety about driving, work, and social situations? She was told to grow up.

Drugs were not what killed her. Claiming that drug poisoning was why she died is merely brushing the surface.

People killed her. Society killed her. This broken world is what killed her.

Tainted drugs only brushes the surface. "Poisoning" is not what killed her. She died slowly, over the course of her 18 years.

Yet still, despite knowing this, I live in the world that did this to her. I watch mental health programs get their funding slashed. I watch government officials - who have recognized the opioid crisis - not fund safe consumption sites or harm reduction programs. I see YouTube ads telling me to "not do drugs" funded by the very government that refuses to fund the sites that can help addicts.

And still, somehow, I wake up every day. I wake up in the very world that stole her and continues to steal others. I get dressed, I go to work, I tend to my beautiful animals and comfortable home.

And I realize that she is still dead.

No terminology will change that.

Neither will a date on a calendar.

MC1R

Poem by Jessica MacLeod

my hair began
against the odds, in discomfort
under a glaring sun and
with burning flesh somewhere
in Africa or central Asia

my hair fled
and found solace in
cold, craggy landscapes with
grey skies, cold winds, and rough heather

my hair endures
and catches, perhaps impaling,
delicate snowflakes or jewel drops of rain
my wavy wires of strength woven in
an evolutionary genetic plot

my hair of the highlands and wildlands
coarse copper blazing like
Boudicca's revenge,
a flame that draws from darkness
the moths of strangers' looks
and words and exploring hands

my hair the muse
exciting, enticing, and inspiring
the boar bristle brushstrokes of Botticelli,
Titian, Rosetti, and Klimt

my hair that asks
am I your fear
or am I your fetish?
but knows the answer already

Spiked

Nonfiction by Angela Townsend

The last of the black spikes have thwunked into the dumpster.

They were hiding in the utility closet, between the kitty litter and the broken garden angel I can't bear to throw out. I thought I'd ousted them all, but the sight of the last thatch made me jump.

Jumping was the entire point, of course. V. had amassed the thorns to train the kittens by way of trauma.

Betsy and Kanki were eight months old when we adopted them, equivalent to ten-year-old children. It was their vocation to play, and it was their inheritance to trust. Their past was chaotic but kind, a hoarding house of hairy lookalikes who had been loved.

They expected life to amaze them, and they were not disappointed. Sadistic squirrels did tai chi on the porch for their delight. A softhearted woman carried them like newborns and sang them Presbyterian hymns. Tubes of gelatinous poultry, squeezed directly into their mouths, proved the presence of the Holy Spirit.

And then there was the sink.

Kanki discovered it first, but he shared all good things with his sister. The kitchen sink was a revelation, a portal to another dimension, holy ground where hairy kittens could stomp their white feet to glorious wetness.

It is a myth that all cats hate being wet. At least two little lions, with 3" toe hair and beards like gnomes, think heaven must be a splashing sunshower. But earth offers sinks, and sinks offer endless elation.

This caused V. endless consternation.

When I dared to ask why it was a problem for the cats to be wet, all the blood in his face dried up. "They are disgusting." It was a statement of fact. "They will get everything wet."

As our resident neurotic and pristine-leaning clean freak, I was confused. V. did not believe in washing his own hair. V. scolded me for washing the floor too often. V. was worried about moist cats?

V. had a plan. V. would install deterrents. If the kittens approached the sink, judgment would come, and it would be swift.

The Grand Inquisitor was a roll of black garden spikes, sharp enough to pierce a paw.

I'd never seen such a thing, but V. had brought a library of knowledge beyond my ken. He knew just where to find the spikes, and he purchased enough to landscape our condo.

He then proceeded to do exactly that.

It started with the sink, surrounded by a menacing moat of custom-trimmed wrath. Black spears assaulted my eyes and Kanki's paws. Washing coffee cups required choreography. The kittens took their thirst to the bathroom, and I secretly let Kanki roll in the tub after my shower.

But the military operation had only begun. Once V. enjoyed the success of keeping the kittens off the counter, his eyes were opened to the potential of spikes.

Soon, black armaments patrolled plants and doorways, couches and closets. The cats couldn't scratch what they couldn't approach. I couldn't puncture V.'s unassailable, edge-of-angry logic.

So the three meeker residents learned to step lightly, trained by memories of bitten toes. When I sleepily stepped on spikes in the night, they tore my strawberry-print socks and made me bleed, but V. had always doubted my "hysteria" over diabetic feet anyway. "You're diabetic. You have feet. Your feet will be fine."

If spikes were useful, unanimous spikes were better, so V. improved his system by hooking them together. Now, removing the spikes took a degree in urban planning. An impulsive mistake could uproot the entire architecture. Only V. could remove the spikes properly.

But even humbled paws can jump, and the cats and I learned new moves. I took photos of their sweet faces and posted them with poems on Instagram, rubbing aloe on the world outside. I learned to crop out the black on the borders. I remembered my steps even in the night.

I don't doubt that V. genuinely loved the cats. He was touched and tortured by Betsy's innocence. He researched ceramic bowls to be sure they had the best money could buy. He didn't know what to do with his love for them, telling me one day that his affection had experienced a "growth spurt," only to chase Kanki with the venom of a wolverine army for chewing a plant.

The cats accepted staccato sweetness, luxuriating in V.'s lap as much as mine. Kanki chirped for him when he was in the bathroom. Betsy buried her face in his hair.

I don't doubt that V. genuinely loved me. But the vehicle was too large for him to steer. I was all wet paw prints and trust, hokey hymns and wonder, infuriating and earnest and extreme. I said too much and tried too hard and believed too many things. I was too attached to safety, a peace child pleading for soft shores.

I was docile until pierced, but I couldn't stop bleeding. What could not be tamed had to be contained.

Our fights punctured the absurd. My new glasses were the wrong shape for my face. My mother was a dotard. I should not be working from home. I was rather indoorsy. I did not like cruises or fishing or sexual jokes or David Lynch's many films featuring head trauma.

Dizzy but not alone, I leaned on the cats. Having mapped the spikes and prevailed, they commanded optimism. Obedient to their pain reflexes, they rebelled in joy, jousting milk rings and dragging my socks into their cat tree.

The cats and I laughed. We found balm. We built bomb shelters with blankets and psalms.

And when the bomb dropped and V. declared victory, we saw a world without war.

V. opened the cage, fully expecting the bird would remain. But I flew, a hairy kitten under each wing, and split the sky with a song too high for spikes. Before V. realized what he had done, he had his win. I had the cats.

I had a wonderful time slaying stegosauruses. Not a spike remained.

The wet cats rained chirrups and cheer, rolling in the sink and sniffing the contraband couch. It took weeks before we all stopped high-stepping, trusting that our feet could land safely.

I'm still learning that it's possible to land safely.

I'm still learning that I'm not a liability, even if I'm not very dry or docile. My eyes run with irresponsible tears, and I wear cat-eye glasses and the pale skin of the indoorsy. I feel and talk and pray and clean the floor more often than most.

Most of the time, I find my footing.

Life is no longer booby-trapped. I am the girl who removes landmines, the lover who shelters broken angels.

I have two trusting cats and one sturdy heart, and we walk safely by day and night.

Anchors Up

Fiction by Gwynyth Kier

I've been running my whole life. My earliest memory: dashing barefoot through our field of wild unkempt grass, mile high dandelion stems brushing my naked thighs while my mother chases me waving a yellow dress with white polka dots over her head. She said I'd be taken in by a pack of wolves if I wasn't careful. Said I'd be scratched by thorns, bitten by ticks, grooved and pocked like the oak by the pond. It all sounded perfectly wonderful to me.

I could run and keep on going until I fell on my face, breathing hot satisfied exhaustion into the earth. I could run and run and run until I had to dunk my whole head into the dugout, and hope my skin would drink the water by itself, I'd be too spent to lick a drop.

The boys at school stopped racing at recess when I started running alongside them, then in front of them, my thin canvas sneakers shrouded in clouds of gravel dust.

My granddad said, "Put those spindly things to use! Get her signed up somewhere to win some medals." Said I was his silver bullet, a clean shot through the heart.

Mum kept laying out dresses of all manner, blue corduroy, red gingham, a turquoise number with little pink stars. She tried a denim jumper. I ran from them all.

...

I felt only moderately sorry when Mum threw up her arms in the kitchen after I'd let her pie burn.

"Laila! You're sixteen years old, you can watch a pie!"

But I couldn't. I'd told her. I was busy with the charcoal Granddad had brought me back from the city. I was running a sooty line across the thick manilla paper that had appeared with the gift, parcelled and tied with brown string and left wordless on my bed.

I was pushing my fingers against that line, blurring its edges. I was making something appear and change and getting my hands covered in it. I couldn't watch a pie.

When Granddad died the next year and the service was over, the house full of obligatory casserole and squares of sticky confection, I didn't feel anything but the rush of wind in my ears and momentum pushing my body forward. I couldn't feel for my mother as I packed up the nubs that were left from that charcoal set and the stack of cash Granddad had pressed into my palm a few weeks before, and told her I was making my way. I don't think she could feel much of anything either. Except maybe a breeze of relief.

I spent the next few years running for buses, for the ding of the kitchen bell to deliver eggs to hungover kids. I ran for cancer one weekend, lupus another. I ran into trouble parked on street corners sketching portraits for tourists — one needs to pay for such privilege. Eventually I ran into you.

When you sat for a sketch you asked for a barter; a drink on you around the corner. It smacked of the smarmy hey baby's I'd usually refuse, but you looked like you'd spent all week getting up the muster to ask a girl to the dance. In the portrait I transformed those bright eager eyes making them sure and smoky, a real Marlborough Man, and let you escort me to a patio beside the wharf.

The water was calm. A warm wind wrapped our table in soft salty air. You told me the sailing this summer was a dream, it

was merrily merrily and did I have legs for the sea?

Our first trip out you navigated the Shirley Temple, a tiny little thing with a rusty orange sail. I sat at the bow chin to knees, hugging my legs together and staring out at the sea. The cool wet air rushed at my cheeks and seeped into my bones. That afternoon, as a tiny speck on the ocean I felt cleared out. I felt made new.

"I could bob along right here forever," I told you.

"A mermaid. I knew it right off when I saw you," you said.

We ran together then at every opportunity to the sea, with whatever vessel you could procure. There seemed to be no end to your nautical connections.

You told me you'd spent a few summers working at the marina. Maintenance and valet for the yacht club. Said you'd been well liked, a good kid. Said folks were happy to pay you a favour. We went in dinghies, sailboats and when nothing else was available, we snuggled close at the rail amidst the weekend masses on the passenger ferry.

We unmoored a yacht once. This was slipped out of its sleek line of neighbours under the stars, and the easy attitude you always had at the helm was strained.

"We can't go into the rooms." You said. "These owners are pretty private."

"I'm just going to use the bathroom. Promise." I said climbing down the tiny wainscotted staircase into the underbelly of the boat. But I found I couldn't quite temper my curiosity. I opened a door just a crack. The tiny room fit a small bed wrapped tightly with navy sheets, a fuzzy cream throw draped perfectly askew across it. A few photos sat in frames along a picture rail, and I wondered for a moment how they managed to stay up.

A charming couple with flutes of bubbly raised to the camera, smiled out at me with perfect white toothed joy. Beside them a little boy stood at the helm, a cautious smile on his little bow lips, a swath of golden cherubic hair wisping starboard in the breeze. His eyes were earnest and I recognized them immediately. They were the ones left out of your portrait a few months before.

"That's the tiniest most luxurious bathroom I've ever seen!" I said rubbing my hands with the lavender lotion that was tacked above the sink in the loo.

"Ridiculous, I know."

I wanted to ask you about your mother-somehow we'd flitted over this formality. I wanted to ask where you were hiding those fresh happy faces. I almost did. I thought we'd have a laugh and maybe find a mini bottle of that effervescent happiness in the bar fridge. Then I thought of my own mum, hanging out dulled long skirts on the laundry line, dust on her boots. I thought of the sparse chilled house she'd walk back into, her tarnished pot of earl grey for company.

Instead I stood beside you and we let the lilt of the water quietly rock us.

For nine months we lay at night on your futon side by side, while you told me stories of the adventures we'd have. Sailing the Georgia Straight, the Panama Canal, the Mediterranean

Coast. We'd kiss the land, quick and cheeky, moving on before terrestrial roots could grab hold.

In the meantime we'd settle for jobs and bargains, scraping deliciously by on spaghetti dinners, suspended in a montage of first love.

I ordered the clam chowder even though this is the first ferry of the day. The gift shops on board still have barred partitions across their doorways, but the chowder is hot and up for offer.

I've only managed a spoonful. I've never understood the cult appeal of the ferry chowder. It looks like white school glue coating chunks of kindergarten craft detritus. I'm only having it now to keep my promise that I'd try it one day. "Next time." I'd always assure you as we followed the herd over clunking metal ramps onto land. "Next time for sure."

A second spoonful doesn't quite push down the guilt that's slowly rising as I picture you across from me, expectant of a convert.

It wasn't as if I'd planned to go. I didn't get up this morning, smooth my ponytail, tuck in my shirt and rehearse farewells in your toothpaste splattered mirror. I didn't pause to examine the sudden impulse to shove my sketchpad and an extra outfit into my backpack and collect my scattered bangles from the bedside table, shoving them up my arms like warrior bands. I just moved about the apartment while you snored, splayed on the bed, as if executing the steps of a well rehearsed dance. I slipped on the green army jacket you bought me at the flea, laced up my boots and walked over to the bed. I pet the thick blonde wave of your hair with my palm like you were my cat and you didn't stir until I leaned a whisper into your ear, "We'll be late."

You sprung up then, not unlike a kitten, and pulled me toward you by the waist, nuzzling my stomach and murmuring alternative plans for the day. All the while, the truth lay buried deep enough to make me believe I was still there in your apartment wishful for a day off.

I persuaded you to go through the motions: wash, dress and head down the stairs with me to the bikes. You held my hand the whole three flights down.

We rode as we always did, side by side down the near empty streets of dawn, stopping outside the bakery, where the dreamy alchemy of butter and flour would wrap itself around you for the day.

Leaning over handle bars we kissed good-bye.

There's a family in a cluster of chairs just outside the cafeteria. The dad is lying back, eyes closed, with a length of child draped on top of him sleeping. The mom is watching with vacant eyes as their little boy bounces a rubber ball and scrambles after it on the floor. She reminds me of that palm reader-you remember, at the flea? She stared out seemingly into the netherworld, and told you the tide was going out. You laughed at her hokey premonitions, but I never told you she was looking over your shoulder, straight at me.



Boulders

Nonfiction by Julia Miller

Ella is nineteen in the photo. Her style is playful. She wears a long, tie-dyed t-shirt, leggings, and red sneakers. Super short dark hair complements strong eyebrows, a pixie nose. Balancing on one leg atop a giant boulder, her right hand is locked with the left hand of another young woman. They look at the camera, their eyes alight with laughter.

For thirty-five years, I have kept a photo of Ella's mother, Avery, at the same age, the year we met. Avery sat on a boulder, surrounded by the red Sedona hills. Laughing, she had tossed off her t-shirt and I snapped a photo that did not get shared. It ended up tucked in a small cardboard envelope inside a box with other pieces of our mutual history. Now, I find it alongside other snapshots of our four years together. I shuffle through the box which is mostly photos of each of us with rescued cats. There's Avery with Chicken, who had the dramatic markings of a Bantam; and with Cheba, fully grown but so tiny, found with a pebble where one eye should have been. There are three Christmases: trees, gingerbread houses, stockings. In one photo we lean against each other in a restaurant, laughing. College students, we had saved and pooled our money for a brunch out, made the bus trek to Goodwill to find dresses. And there's Avery folded up on the kitchen counter in thick pink socks and green plaid pajamas, eyes laughing, Ella has her eyes.

I look at this last picture a bit longer, remembering her father's fury that she loved me, his look of disgust as he spat the words, "You'll be the death of your mother!" Later that year, when Avery's mother died during open heart surgery, she was handed a boulder of grief and shame that I'm sure she carries even now. *She died of a broken heart* her family told her. We broke her mother's heart.

I pick up a picture Avery sent from California when Ella was born. She holds her baby girl up to her face. Her smile is exquisite. Before I can shield myself, I am hit with a pang of loss. The letter that accompanied that picture peeks out from the box in its pale, yellow envelope. As I lift it, its contents slip onto the floor, spilling more photos. These snapshots show Ella at age two or so, along with a baby boy—Kai. Avery tells me in the letter. She says she is happy, teaches fifth grade. She says she has corresponded with my sister Kate occasionally over the years. Kate gave Avery my phone number, but Avery says she felt it would be better if she sent a letter to my address, which Kate has also given her. *Wow*. I thought then and think again now, *Thanks for the heads up*.

Facebook is at fault for the boulder that now balances precariously on the precipice above me, threatening to fall. I saw Avery's friend request and paused before accepting it. Now I click the private message she has sent with a mixture of excitement and dread.

She's so happy she's found me! She'd love to catch up, hear what I've been doing over the years. I ask about her work, her children, avoid talking about my life.

She tells me Ella has just finished an alternative high school program. Anxiety put traditional school out of reach. I tell her about my son who has battled bipolar disorder and has also finished school through an alternative program.

I flash back to the first time I saw Avery. We were in the women's restroom in Landrum Hall between classes. She was nineteen, I was twenty-two. She was so small, dark skin, dark hair slipping across her shoulders as she bent her head, washing her hands. Suddenly, Avery looked up and caught me watching her. I stood transfixed by the unexpected pale gray eyes.

In a quick mental slide show, the next image is the day she left.

"We're young," Avery had insisted, "We're meant to explore life and you're always exhausted from nothing. *Nothing*."

"Remember last month?" I grasped for energetic memories. "We went to the beach, and I picked up a pebble. I said, *Imagine. This was a boulder once*. You said I should write a poem."

"But you didn't," Avery said simply, her eyebrows pinched together, her voice flat.

"But I can. *I will*," I insisted. Not only did she not believe me I could tell she didn't care. Poem or no poem, Avery was leaving.

As I tried desperately to stop her departure, I slipped deeper beneath the dank, heavy earth of depression, my hands pounding on the dirt coffin pressing me down. I screamed, dreamlike wails choking my words into silence. Meanwhile Avery hurried, collected items for her immediate needs, tried hard to contain the excitement of meeting up with her new love.

But now, sharing stories about our children, the swell rises, and I find it is impossible not to trust her, even after such a painful ending. I tell her. Avery replies with a smiley face emoji. *Splat*. I knew that damned boulder would fall. I make up an excuse to end the conversation.

Later, when I am braver and overwhelmed with curiosity, I pour over Avery's Facebook photos. She looks very different. She looks just the same. I click through the digital shots that don't bear the weight of a picture held in the hand. That's when I see Ella on the boulder, the same age as her mother when we met, trusting the other young woman to keep her balanced.

Don't fall, Ella, I think, Find your balance. Let her help if it pleases you but find your balance.

Ella's eyes look at the camera, bright, as if she hears me.

Saving Mrs. Feingold

Fiction by Susan M. Breall

I kept hearing a low drone. I turned over in my sleep and moved all the way to the right side of the bed. The noise was constant, like the buzzing of a loud mosquito. I found myself trying to incorporate the noise into a dream I was having about new construction work being done on my back deck. Eventually I realized that I was hearing my front door buzzer. I looked at my watch and saw that it was two a.m.

When I left the District Attorney's Office to become a judge thirteen years ago, I thought that I would never have to worry about late nights again. No longer would I have to bother with cops calling at two in the morning, asking for me to come down to some god forsaken murder scene. Never again would there be late night interviews in interrogation rooms with stale coffee cups and snickers bars. I was wrong.

I had search warrant duty, and this was my last night to be on call. A police inspector phoned me at midnight to say that he and his partner would drop by in a half hour to have me review a search warrant that needed my signature. After he phoned, I must have fallen asleep. I grabbed my robe from the bench at the foot of the bed, wrapped it around myself tightly, and walked down the stairs as the door buzzer continued to sound.

"Sorry to wake you" said the cop without sounding sincere. "We need to search a house before someone makes off with what could amount to millions in stolen gems."

"Let me see the warrant" I said yawning and motioning for the cops to follow me into the kitchen. I usually liked to review search warrants in my kitchen because the overhead light was decent, and I could avail myself of a snack while reading the warrant.

"Are either of you hungry? Want a cookie?"

"No thanks." The older cop answered for both.

I sat and looked at the front and back pages of the warrant to make sure the date and signature lines were in their proper places. Next, I numbered the pages so that no one could ever accuse the police of inserting an extra page of unread information into the warrant after I signed it. Finally, I dated and initialed each page before beginning the task of reading the actual contents of the warrant.

I looked at the front page of the warrant to make sure that the location the police wanted to search was described with enough specificity. The address listed was 1168 Glen Street. I stopped reading. I stared hard at the address. I knew that house. It was old Mrs. Feingold's place. I read further down the front of the warrant and saw that the cross street listed was Garfield. The search warrant lacked any actual description of the Feingold place as I knew it. Left out of the portion describing "place to be searched" was the fact that the oak trees lining the front of the house were once well pruned and cared for. No where did the warrant mention the fact that the wild English cottage garden in the front yard had started to spill over onto the sidewalk. There was no mention of the tangled vines that had climbed up the side of the house and dangled over a retaining wall. The sidewalk itself was cracked in places from the overgrowth and undergrowth of roots and vegetation. An old lounge chair was left to rot by the front entrance.

"I know this address" I said to the cops waiting for me to finish reading. "I know this house. It's right up the street about five blocks from here. It's right next door to the house where I grew up."

"Yes, it's close by," the cop said without emotion. The proximity of the location meant that he could get to the targeted house sooner to conduct the search. Once he completed the search and typed up his report at the police station, he was done for the night. I continued to read the warrant to see if there was probable cause for the search - to see what possible connection to a crime the Feingold place held.

Two months earlier a large jewelry heist took place across the

bay in San Francisco. The circumstances of the robbery made all the local papers. According to the search warrant, one of the two suspects was Mrs. Feingold's grandson. Her grandson and his accomplice were arrested on suspicion of murder as well as robbery because the night security guard was accidentally shot and killed when both suspects fled the scene of the crime. A confidential reliable informant recently reported that these men stopped by 1168 Glen Street the night before they were captured. The jewelry was not recovered. A large blue diamond, worth thousands of dollars, was among the items stolen. A thorough search of both men's apartments last week came up empty. There was some speculation that the jewelry store owners were somehow involved in the heist, and eager to collect a hefty insurance check for the stolen items.

I felt a strange malaise knowing that the police were about to trample all over Mrs. Feingold's house at 1168 Glen Street. The house had once been a beautiful, well kept, Tudor mansion. Years ago, when Mrs. Feingold had money, she would buy thirty pumpkins every year at Halloween for all the neighborhood kids to carve. After her husband died, she had to mortgage her home to pay medical bills. The bank was about to foreclose.

"Raise your right hand. Do you solemnly swear under penalty of perjury that the information in this search warrant is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?"

"I do," they chimed in unison. I handed them the warrant to sign in my presence. I then signed and dated the front and back page.

"Thank you, ma'am, sorry to disturb you." I led them to the front door.

It wasn't just my sleep they had disturbed. It was my psyche. I already felt bad for Mrs. Feingold, having heard that the bank was about to foreclose on the house she had lived in for thirty-seven years. Now, on top of the foreclosure, the house was about to be legally ransacked, and I was the person who sanctioned this act. I wondered how long it would take the police to rummage through all three floors of the home. Houses like hers had multiple bedrooms, hidden corners, and closets. I also wondered whether the police would look for the jewelry in the outside areas surrounding the house. The search warrant gave them permission to search the house, the basement, and the garden. I remember how Mrs. Feingold once buried her dishes in the back yard for seven days to get rid of the taint of non-kosher food after her niece, a friend of mine in middle school, smuggled sweet and sour pork into the home from Tang Long's Chinese Deli and served the food on several of Mrs. Feingold's dishes. I smiled, thinking that Mrs. Feingold knew how to bury dishes, utensils, and other things in the back garden.

I didn't think I would be able to go back to sleep. I began to wonder about the ethics of signing a warrant to search a house of a neighbor I had once known. Although I hadn't had anything to do with the family since I carved pumpkins at the house as a child, and although there was nothing technically improper about signing such a warrant in the middle of the night, I felt bad. I felt like I used to when I was a lawyer handling family violence cases. I would handle case after case, never having the luxury of time to step back and wonder why family violence exists in the world. I used to think about the adage of the man who, while sitting at the riverbank, saw a person drowning. The man ran and pulled the body out of the river. A few moments later he saw two more people floating by. He pulled the next two from the river. He kept pulling drowning bodies out of the river all day long. A young boy came by and asked him where all the drowning people were coming from. "I don't know" he said. "I am too busy pulling them out of the river to think about that." As a lawyer I was always so busy trying to help drowning people that I never had time to figure out how they ended up in the river in the first place. I fell back to sleep wondering how Mrs. Feingold ended up in that very same river.

I woke up at noon and changed into sweatpants and a t-shirt, ready for a jog. I knew it was better to head in the opposite direction of 1168 Glen. It went against all my training as both lawyer and judge to go over to the Feingold house on my own without acting on official business. Still, I found myself headed towards the exact place I needed to avoid.

When I reached the opposite side of the street from 1168 Glen, I saw Old Mrs. Feingold bent over in the driveway, wearing a faded pink dress, picking up loose papers that were scattered about the front of the house. The front door was wide open. It was too dark to see inside the house from across the street.

"Hey Mrs. Feingold, are you alright?" I yelled loudly from the other side of the street.

"Not good. Not good." She said as she continued to clean up the mess.

I walked across the street.

"I used to live right next door to you. I'm Rachael Wachtel. Let me help you pick this stuff up."

"Rachael. Yes. I remember. Thank you. I have so much to clean up. They made such a mess. It's terrible. A shame. A terrible, terrible shame."

I bent over and picked up the rest of the papers scattered about the overgrown garden and front porch. I noticed how the front porch was beginning to sag down the middle. When I was done gathering up trash Mrs. Feingold invited me into the house.

"It's a terrible shambles child. But please come in. It's been a long time, hasn't it?"

I knew it was wrong to walk into that house. The house was a small part of a large criminal case, and I was the person responsible for authorizing the entire mess inside - the mess that Mrs. Feingold now had to clean up. Yet, I did not refuse her invitation.

When I entered, I noticed a pile of sixty or seventy books scattered about the floor. Coats were thrown across the banister near the hall closet. A broom and a dustpan were leaning against the wall in the living room. The drapes were pulled closed, and the house seemed old and dark and empty, despite the clutter. I stopped to look at a large black and white framed photograph of Mr. Feingold on the wall in the hallway.

"He was a handsome man, wasn't he?"

"Extremely handsome," I said as I continued to gaze about the first floor.

"Come into the kitchen. Let me fix you something."

After a bit of minor protest, I sat down in her kitchen and ate half of a tuna sandwich. She then handed me some clove candies and began to tell me all about her nighttime ordeal. She told me how she had been woken up by pounding on the door at three in the morning. She started to sob as she described the way the police officers tore apart her home.

"Mrs. Feingold, did the police find anything?"

"Nothing. They find absolutely nothing."

"Did they look in the garden?"

"They even dig at my garden. Can you believe them? Like I am some kind of animal. I have lived in this country for forty-five years and they treat me this way."

"Did you know what they were looking for?"

"At first, no. But then they kept saying 'jewelry, the jewels, the jewels. Where did Solomon hide them?'"

I keep telling them I have no idea."

Mrs. Feingold, let me help you clean this place up."

We started on the first floor. In the dining room we gathered up all the china and put the unbroken pieces back in the china closet. We collected the silverware from the floor and put each piece back in the silverware drawer. We cleaned up the front parlor. After that, we worked on the living room, gathering the

books, and putting them in nice, neat stacks by the hall closet. The breakfast room and the two downstairs bathrooms were cluttered with papers, old ledgers, and debris. All the drawers and the cupboards had been emptied out. The coats and rainwear had to be put back on hangers. Every closet door was wide open. The first floor clean up seemed to take hours.

"I am so grateful for your help."

"What do you think you would do if you ever found the jewels Mrs. Feingold?"

"Ahh," she said with a long sigh. "I was thinking on that just now. I would make sure the insurance company paid the store owner for his loss. Then I would ask my sister in England to help me sell what jewels I find so that I can repay the bank and keep my house. She says that in parts of Europe you can sell anything...stolen or not stolen. Real or not real."

As Mrs. Feingold told me her plan she winced in pain and sat down on the overstuffed brocade chair near the foot of the stairs. "That's enough work my dear. We've been at it a long time. Achh, my side hurts."

"Shall I go upstairs and take a look at what's left to do on the second floor?"

"There is too much to do child. Too much. See for yourself."

I walked upstairs and saw similar chaos. Papers were tossed everywhere. Drawers were pulled out of wardrobes, emptied, and turned upside down. I went back to the bottom floor and grabbed a large plastic garbage bag from the kitchen. I looked over at Mrs. Feingold and saw that she had fallen asleep on her chair in the hallway. I climbed quietly back up the stairs to the second-floor bathroom and started to gather up the plastic soap dish, used soap, and aspirin bottles that were scattered around the bathroom floor. I felt the inexorable need to put her house back in order.

I took a roll of paper towels that were under the sink and began to clean up cold cream that had spilled out of a jar onto the white hexagonal floor tiles. A rather large cold cream jar was laying upside down but unbroken near the mess. As I picked up the cold cream jar and turned it over, I noticed something unusual. There it was, plain as day, buried halfway inside the dense white cream towards the top of the jar, a thick gold band. I stuck my finger in the jar and removed the ring. Attached to it was a large green emerald. I dug deeper into the jar and could feel at least two other rings and a hard rock like object. I gathered the trash bag along with the white cold cream jar and went back downstairs. Mrs. Feingold was still asleep.

"Mrs. Feingold, what shall I do with all this trash?" I asked her, waking her out of her doze by gently shaking her arm and showing her the cold cream jar and the plastic bag.

"Throw all that stuff out back in the outside garbage can, would you dear?"

"I will throw away the trash bag, but how about this old jar of cold cream? It's good stuff. Great for arthritis and joint pain."

"Is that so? I've had that old jar of stuff forever. It's probably rotten by now."

"Nah, it never goes bad. All you need to do is dig deep into the bottom of the jar and take out some of the cream. Then rub the cream into your aching knees and joints. It is a well-known fact that cold cream eviscerates all pain. The older the cold cream, the better for your joints."

"You don't say? I've never heard that before. I will try it tonight before I go to sleep. I really must thank you."

"Mrs. Feingold, take care of yourself."

As I left the house with the large bag of trash, I handed her the cold cream jar. I walked around to the back of the house where the garbage bin sat. I pushed the trash into the bin and walked over to the front through the overgrown garden weeds, then out onto the sidewalk. I was dead tired. I couldn't tell if my mental and physical exhaustion came from the cleanup, from my sleep deprivation, or from something else. I took out of my pocket one of the candies Mrs. Feingold had given me. It had a strong taste of clove, without any sweetness. I savored it in my mouth, and thought, as the gloam ascended, that I had saved Mrs. Feingold from drowning.

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