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Dreamers

Creative Writing

Winners
2023 Flash Contest

Irish Exit
Nonfiction by Alexis Maclsaac

PenParentis
2024 Fellowship Winners

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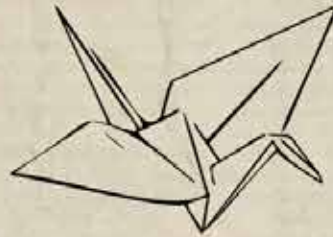
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“It was at this time that sorrow had begun to claw at him, an invisible, insidious creature, any time he tried to catch his breath. I pretended not to see.

—Alexis MacIsaac, *Irish Exit*

EDITOR'S LETTER

The Oct. 7 terror attack on Israel and the resulting declaration of war against Hamas has delivered a terrifying reminder of just how quickly safety can turn to peril, tranquility to chaos. The tremendous losses on both sides of the conflict have sent waves of emotions around the globe, touching everyone from distant observers to those intimately connected to the region. In these challenging times, when there is so much anger and sadness and despair, what else is there to do but hope that rational minds win out and peace prevails?

As I think about Issue 16 in the context of current global events, I'm reminded of the impact of storytelling in reflecting our world's complexities, provoking thought, and stirring deep emotions.

Issue 16's feature story, "Irish Exit" by Alexis Maclsaac, is a poignant nonfiction piece that explores the intricacies of human relationships and the impact of our actions on others. It's a testament to the transformative power of storytelling. This issue also presents a diverse collection of stories and poems that capture both the beauty and complexity of the human experience. Discover the winners and honourable mentions from our annual flash contest (pages 3-7), alongside the captivating winning stories from the 2024 Pen Parentis Fellowship for New Parents. Congratulations to all of this year's talented winners!

Through all that is happening and will happen, let us never cease to dream—our dreams hold the hope for a peaceful, more empathic world.

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2023 FLASH Contest

Congratulations to the Winners!

FIRST PLACE WINNER

A Melancholy Old Woman Dying A Miserable Death Alone

Nonfiction by Kelly Macías

"We quit!" my ovaries pronounce with gusto on a random Thursday afternoon, and if I'd been paying attention I would have seen it coming since they'd left me plenty of clues we were headed for a dramatic breakup: the simultaneous puking and period poop every month, cramps like I'd been mauled repeatedly by a world class fighter in a Taekwondo match, deep inner belly aches necessitating the use of a hot water bottle passed down to me by my grandmother when I was 16, one with a little red knitted sweater and a white heart that she'd had since the 1970s, trips to the emergency room where doctors consistently gaslit me by insisting that *everything was normal*. I'd been detaching from my body for years, busying myself with life and work, secretly relieved that I wasn't ever going to use my burdensome ladyparts to birth children of my own, not wanting any more responsibility since having been forced into raising so many of the adults around me from childhood because they were too damaged to take care of themselves, figuring that the centuries of Black women who'd come before had already paid my debt by being nannies, domestics and othermothers, I'd long since grown accustomed to invasive questions about my reproductive choices, feeling sassy with responses like *I'm still raising my husband*, though I confess I was left slightly mortified the one time an African Uber driver asked me if I had children and, when I said no, he tsked and predicted my fate would be *a melancholy old woman dying a miserable death alone*. I'd long imagined a sense of relief when my ovaries took a permanent vacation after all the trouble they'd caused but I'd just been given an entire department to run at work when they finally decided to go who knows where, panic and anxiety creeping in, I found myself suddenly thinking I was way too young for "the change," as women in my family say, as if it were Beetlejuice or some other supernatural spirit we must not address by its name, recalling the first time my ovaries and I were properly introduced during the summer before seventh grade when I was home alone and a small but pronounced brownish stain appeared with flair in my purple cotton brief panties, seeping right through to my white denim shorts, I was 11, and had been waiting for this moment for three whole years, after Felicia Chapman got her period when

we were 9 while her sister was babysitting us and she called me into the bathroom to show me the carmine clot in her underwear so I knew exactly what was happening to my preteen body, dialing my mother at work to announce the news dramatically, *Your daughter is now a woman*, she in turn called my grandmother after which the phone proceeded to ring all day with calls from aunties celebrating me and offering sage advice, my rite of initiation into a clan of women who wielded magic in our bodies complete, little did I know we wouldn't talk about menstruation again for thirty years, so I'd have almost no information about what to expect at this stage in life, forced into late night Google searches about bodily functions (*Cold flashes during perimenopause, am I dying?*) looking for answers on social media I scroll through my phone and find buried in a random text from my mom written nearly two years ago, a reference to my current age (44) being the same as hers when she went through her change, but this data of course is hidden, sandwiched between notes about her beloved Cocker Spaniels and theories about the COVID vaccine so it isn't all that useful but does make me feel slightly less unhinged, one important thing she leaves out, however, is the brain fog— which I just discovered after I had a Brazilian wax last week and on my way to the salon realized I couldn't remember what time I was supposed to be there, my newly failing memory causing me to be late and miss my favorite esthetician, waxed instead by a woman I swear hated me by the way she delighted in pulling out each of my hairs strand by strand, taking my skin and dignity with each pube, leaving me raw, teary and ego bruised, attempting to soothe my shattered pride I stopped at the grocery store on the way home, buying myself an oversized bouquet and a few Snickers bars, completely forgetting it is a holiday, until the young clerk who rings me up can't seem to mind his own business wishes me a *Happy Mother's Day*, but this time instead of politely saying *Thank You* as in years past, the words *Screw You* triumphantly leap from my lips before I have a chance to think, and as I look at the clerk, who is clearly bewildered, I am overcome with glee, not feeling the tiniest bit contrite, realizing my fertility will not be going out quietly like a lamb but instead with a fucking roar.

DIVIDED BY ONE

Nonfiction by Suzanne Galante

Once we rolled into the patient parking garage, exhaust fumes encased cars that circled and hovered and eased between yellow lines. The pollution amplified the sickness that lodged itself into my stomach before toes touched carpet that morning.

Outside, the ocean blew cold through the hillside neighborhood, but fresh air soon mixed with cigarette smoke from loiterers near the hospital's doors. Their hands gripped phones and pinched thin white cylinders. They wore heavy jackets and blue jeans or white coats and blue scrubs.

Coffee-scented air rose from the cafeteria stairwell as we moved toward the admitting office. Inside, our son wiggled from my lap, reaching for communal toys. I tried not to imagine the layers of dried saliva coating them. We pressed our names onto paper, agreeing to this and that. "I'll let them know you're on your way," the receptionist said.

"Seven, please," I muttered, as doors closed, our elbows nudging strangers as the elevator shimmied. Breakfast scents mixed with the sourness from our moistened shirts. As we exited, we were confronted with more common hospital smells of disinfectant and diapers. The predictable succession offered a strange sense of order in that world where Danskos or Crocs – depending on the nurse – squeaked on pink- and blue-speckled floors.

We set Riley into a crib located in the same spot that we lifted him from fourteen months earlier and considered the luck of him being born in 2003. Half a century earlier, he would have transitioned from womb to earth. But to us, three open-heart surgeries spread over three years were offered, granting the possibility of birthdays and elementary school. You cannot prepare to bring your child back, though, to flirt with death, even if the surgeries boasted good odds.

The same rainbowed dividers separated patients. The same alarms chimed, indicating completed infusions or heart rates that spiked or oxygen saturations that dipped. Once wrapped in hospital-issue pajamas, giggles erupted from my boy as I rolled his car along his arms. Tears followed – a long pre-op day of needles in veins, stickers on skin, blood pressure cuffs squeezing limbs. After 10 p.m., he was still awake, probably wondering why we weren't home.

"How are we supposed to sleep?" Ken barked, gesturing to the stiff-backed chair next to Riley's bed.

"Maybe they don't think parents will stay," I said, pulling hair into a ponytail.

"If you have a newborn, maybe. But who would leave their

toddler alone here?"

"Go to the waiting room," I said, gesturing toward the door. "In a few hours we'll swap."

Ken wandered away with arms clenched as he unconsciously nibbled cuticle.

"Nur-nee," Riley said, opening and closing his fist.

"Okay, but then it's sleepy time." Since his first surgery, he'd become a person and we'd fallen in love. He had perfect eyes and perfect ears and ten toes and ten fingers and chubby legs and perfect hands that reached for mine.

It was still dark when the orderly released the brakes and rolled Riley's crib to the elevator. Riley asked for water by putting his thumb near his lips. "Not now, baby," I said. He motioned more forcefully.

There was a waiting nook outside the OR. The anesthesiologist appeared. "I've got some medicine for Riley. It should help him relax," she said, passing a liquid-filled syringe to Ken. "It also has an amnesic quality to it; he won't remember much of this."

"Do you have some for me?" I asked.

"I get that question a lot," she said. Riley threw his plastic car and asked for water again.

"Don't have any water, but Daddy has some medicine for you."

"Nee-nee-nye," he said, pushing an index finger to his other palm.

Ken squirted liquid into his cheek just like we did at home. He asked for more by pinching fingers together. Ten minutes later, words strung into song emerged from him:

"Mommy, Mommy, Daddy, Daddy, bus, book, Mommy, hello, Daddy, hug."

"I'll give you a hug." Ken picked him up. "I'm glad to see you're feeling happier." We knew it was drug-induced, but his demeanor helped us relax. A wall clock pulsated like a heartbeat. A housekeeper mopped around our feet. A doctor appeared. "They're just about ready for him. Maybe five minutes."

Ken set Riley on the mattress and tousled his hair. I pulled him into my lap. Shaking began in my feet and swarmed through limbs like bees. Riley turned and smiled as his

fingers reached for my nose.

The doctor reappeared. "We're ready to take him. Surgery should last five, six hours; we'll find you in the waiting room on the 7th floor when we're done."

"Thanks," Ken managed. I pressed my face into Riley's hair, trying to memorize his wispy locks, his mossy scent.

"Come on, Riley," she said, scooping him from my arms. A pulse oximeter cord dangled from his toe.

"See you soon, buddy. I love you." Ken clutched Riley's car to his chest.

"Bye bye," he said, waving. Double doors parted, then closed. Ken's hands pressed on his skull while my body curled like a pill bug. "He's gone and I gave him to them," I whispered

before heaving sounds emerged from my chest. How did other mothers say goodbye?

"They'll give him back. They will," Ken said, as if trying to convince himself.

No one told us what we should do while doctors opened his ribcage and stopped his heart. While doctors altered his circulation so that more oxygen-rich blood would pump through his single ventricle. Eventually someone asked us to move, to make space. We were just one couple among hundreds who inhaled and exhaled and waited in that corridor each year.

Ken took my arm; we eventually arrived in the waiting room. The scent of greasy trash from a dozen family breakfasts wormed into my nose before bile coated my tongue. If we were lucky, we would do this all over again next year.



The Question Remains

Fiction by Wendy Mages

Confidently flouting the mandatory mask policy, the man, wearing khaki cargo shorts, an orange short-sleeved polo shirt, and loafers, entered the quiet waiting room. The receptionist must have noticed his bare face but, out of deference or conflict-avoidance, merely asked him to take a seat in the waiting area and complete the intake form.

He looked at the others, all masked, all mute, all waiting. The somber office, its overbearing silence, was torturous, like proctored exams in school.

"My writing is way too big for these small boxes," he announced. The receptionist looked up, nodded politely, but said nothing. The other patients paid little heed.

He repeated himself, perhaps to ensure his captive audience appreciated it was as impossible for him to confine the size of his large scrawl to the tiny fields of the form as it was for him to confine his widely splayed legs to the width of the chair. Or perhaps he needed a distraction, a balm for his rising anxiety about his appointment, only moments away.

Still no reaction. The other patients must have heard him, but didn't look up from their phones or magazines. For a moment, he seemed to settle in to answer the questions on the form.

"So glad this form has only two genders," he said, surveying his audience, hoping for something. Agreement? Applause? This, too, failed to generate a response.

"This form has only two genders," he repeated, "male and female. Good, right?"

"Well, my dear," said the wrinkled old woman, sitting alone in the corner, "It's always nice when the choices work for you. Yet, it's still a bit of a Goldilocks quandary, now, isn't it?" The receptionist looked up from her computer. The old woman's grandmotherly cadence, little more than a whisper, was strangely compelling. The other patients began stealing surreptitious glances; one, abandoning propriety, watched with uninhibited curiosity.

"Huh?" he said, his face flushing, uncomfortable with the attention he'd craved just moments before.

"It's true Goldilocks had more choices," she conceded. "Nonetheless, the question remains."

"Mrs. Thompson," the receptionist said to the old woman, "we can see you now."

"The question remains," continued the old woman, rising for her appointment. "Which gender is *just right* for you?"

Flustered, he struggled to regain his equilibrium, his status, sputtering little more than reiterations of what he'd just articulated. But Mrs. Thompson had already left. No one was listening.

Homemade Insanity

Nonfiction by Matthew Wong

This—was my mother's recipe, passed onto me from her frigid, tender hands. I remember the first time I experienced it: a mellow, subtle, and quiet taste. It was as if the air itself stopped moving, and I was vulnerable, like a child left alone to fend for themselves. The experience was textureless, but left a bitter aftertaste in my mouth. A whole two weeks' time until the lingering pungency passed.

The second time was different. One bite of you, and I was overcome by a sickening sweetness. It was as if the world had ignited into a flurry of colour, waiting to burst apart. You were the most exquisite delicacy I had ever tasted, overwhelming my senses until I was a frenzied mess. Indeed, nothing could ever compare to that day I experienced you for the second time.

My mother's recipe was a peculiar one. It always seemed as if I was at the whims of the gods each time I tasted it. Sometimes it would taste dry and frozen, other times, like fireworks in my mouth. After every meal, it would leave a strong aftertaste that no amount of water seemed to wash away. It was like the emotions had dissolved on my tongue and been absorbed into my very soul. Each episode was stronger than the last, the dish always seemed to be more and more intense, and each one left a longer aftertaste for me to live with.

The sixth time was also different. After tasting you, I was out of control, babbling incoherently, recklessly running through town. It was truly—*insanity*. I spent all those sleepless nights in that empty white room, frightened by how clinical it all seemed. Three weeks I slept in that sterile prison, and I came out of it different. In the seventeen years I had worked to perfect my mother's gift to me, I had only made one change to its recipe—**Lithium Carbonate, 300mg, take once daily at night.**

I tasted you with your new medical seasoning. A pinch of white powder, that you could mistake for spices. A simple change to this intergenerational recipe indeed. Suddenly, you made me nauseous, I could not stand to be around you. The sickening metallic taste was all that I could feel. Like pennies running down my throat, proving me a crazy man. But, despite this all,

I stomached you for my sake. I lived my days like a dead man walking, just so that I may disguise myself as a sane person, for society has few larger stigmas than that of a "*nut-job*."

At birth, I was given a lifelong sentence, by a rigged judge, in a system that would commit me before I would commit a crime. So I salted my dish with tears rather than spices, I lived with that small plastic capsule, wondering how much of me was merely a pill. Mother always said not to stray from the recipe. That one new ingredient would destroy a bloodline's history. I still wonder to myself which is worse—the symptoms, or the cure. I had defiled my family's pride and joy. I had defiled our recipe. Cooking is an art like everything else. I do it exceptionally well. Perfecting the texture, the taste, the smell. Even within my hospital cell. I do it so it feels real—like Lady Lazarus herself. For my cooking, table salt could not be replaced by lithium salts, and so, I stopped adding it to the pot, and never looked back.

My sweet, forbidden, secret recipe, I have spent years with you. Doctors will call you bipolar disorder, but to me, you are life itself. You are what it is to fly and soar through the clouds, to have your wings burn from the heat of the sun. As that manic fire crackles and explodes, I am left gasping for air as the smoke chars my lungs. Oh, my own homemade insanity, I still remember all those days on the mountain. All that climbing and falling, the ups and downs. I remember how thin the air would become near the top, and how the mountain seemed to block out the sun at the base. I had missed you, my old recipe. I missed you and the pain.

This passion is no artificial creation—*it's real*. I am a gourmet at heart and would settle for no mere artificial insanity. Ingredients haphazardly taken without the thoughtfulness of a chef, mushrooms and salad grass could never compare to my craft. No other dish could ever match the exuberant dualities of my family recipe. I am irreplicable, for I am the chef of my own destiny. Oh, my own homemade insanity, I remember you. So just as my mother did before me, and her mother before that, I will cook my own homemade insanity; raw and bitter, but all that I know how to stomach.

Contingency Daughter

Fiction Story by Taylor Hobbs



My sister lays with her head in my mother's lap on the bathroom floor. Her mouth is wide open while my mother works the floss between each tooth, diligently, lovingly, but sometimes the gums can't help but bleed.

I step over them to snag a hairbrush off the counter, and my sister's eyes track me. Her silent question asks, "Where?"

"I'm going out. Birthday celebration at Beth's." A kegger in the woods, to be specific. Nothing like the Elmo birthday my sister insists upon as she gets older but does not age.

My mother ages faster than she gets older, tired hands working the same nightly ritual for the last twenty years. Clip fingernails, take to the toilet, turn on the nightlight, tuck into bed. Tick-tick-ticking toward my countdown. Sing a lullaby, kiss goodnight. Surrender to dreams.

I pull my hair into a tight ponytail and give my reflection a once-over.

My mother interrupts my critical inspection. "What time will you be back?" Throwing the floss away, she reaches for the toothbrush next.

"By curfew." And not a minute sooner. Reaching down, I thrust my hand out and wait for my sister to fist bump me.

She grins. *Hell yeah!* Her knuckles crash into mine. Tomorrow I'll return with tales of misspent youth that need to stretch large enough to encompass both of us.

An impatient horn outside sends me running from the room, down the stairs, and into the star-filled night. The other girls

whoop as I throw myself into the backseat of Leah's car and we escape our non-existent pursuers, careening around curves until crunching gravel slows the tires before we can drive into the bonfire.

A handsome distraction thrusts a red cup under my nose as I open the door and swing my feet toward the ground. White sneakers land in the dirt but I am floating. He takes my hand and leads me toward the flames, my steps already matching the rhythm of the music blasting through the speaker.

I dance with my Dionysus, spinning until I no longer know which way is up. "I'll be right back," he says, squeezing my hand and giving me a wicked smile. But he will return to this spot to find me gone, because I can't resist the dark, quiet forest anymore.

Slipping into the shadows, I start running until the music and laughter fade. Glass shatters in the distance, and I duck, even though dinner and my sister's meltdown were hours ago. I fall into the beat of my breath and pounding heart while papery leaves swirl in a colorful wake. Churning them up does not make them disappear, just like how crumpling the black and white forms I found in my mother's room will not change my fate.

Secondary guardian. To be signed on my eighteenth birthday.

I'm far enough away from the party now that I can't hear anyone else, and for a little while I can pretend to be lost. Leaning back against a tree, I slide to the ground and crane my neck upward for a glimpse of the stars. Fingers find their way to my mouth, and I chew my nails bloody.

The Roach

Fiction Story by Nora Chau



I stare at the cockroach and am sure that it is my father. It's got the same shifty eyes that he has - well, had. It doesn't run away when I swing a frying pan at it. I don't smash him. My mom would be pissed if she knew that I killed my father and left a stain on the kitchen counter too.

It's exactly seven days after the sudden death of my father and we were told his soul would return home today for one final visit. The Chinese are very superstitious people or as my ex-boyfriend often joked - stupidstitious. My father hated him.

That's not why I broke up with Tom though. He's a lot like my father. I almost stayed with him out of spite, but I didn't want to repeat the same life my mom had. Always waiting, forever wanting the affection of a man that had too much love to give to everyone but us. He spread his seed and all our money to his paramours.

I'm happy that he's gone. One less asshole on this earth. While others pretended to wail at his funeral, I smiled. I laughed when others spoke highly of him. My aunt took me aside and said people might think I have hate in my heart for my father. And you know what I told her? Yes. Yes, I do have hate in my heart for him. The hate in my heart is the only thing that keeps me going frankly.

While my classmates don't have to worry about buying clothes or even getting a soda - I did. Who has money for those things when your father would come home and sweet talk your mom out of all the money she earned scrubbing toilets?

These fancy clothes we wear? All taken out of the garbage of my mom's clients. The nicer folks hand it to her discreetly. The others just dump it in their trash mixed with last night's dinner. Do you know how hard it is to get truffle oil stains out of a cashmere sweater?

I trap my father in a clear glass. My mom doesn't have to know that I squashed him. I could take him outside and do the deed with my dumpster dived sneakers. But that would be too quick of a sweet release for this motherfucker. He literally has hooked up with some of my classmates' moms. Needless to say, that doesn't make me very popular.

As I pull out the last of his hairy legs, I see my brother watching me.

"This is weird and psychotic even for you," he says while eating a sympathy casserole.

"I caught father coming back to visit us - thought I'd torture him before sending him off. You're welcome."

My brother is silent - probably unsure of what to do. He always liked to play Switzerland in our family battles.

"Okay," he finally says, "but who are those guys?" He points to the toaster where there are three other roaches watching me.

I can't believe it. Even on his last visit to us, he brings his girlfriends. This guy - I fucking hate him.

About Pen Parentis

Pen Parentis is a 501C3 literary nonprofit that helps writers stay on creative track after starting a family. Subscribers enjoy Accountability Meetups, Salons and other perks.

The Pen Parentis Writing Fellowship for New Parents annually honors a talented writer who is the parent of at least one child under 10 years old. Find out more at: www.penparentis.org/we-want-to-help.

Irish Exit

Nonfiction by Alexis Maclsaac

If I wanted to, I could have traced the constellation of Orion along Danny's freckles. His face more immediate than the stars in the night sky, though it took me some time to get close enough to see.

I first found him when he was eighteen, possessed of the stature unique to young men in their prime, who think the world a canvas of possibility. I was a child then, only eleven, and like most children, detached from the secret lives of older people, still governed by a simplicity in thought. I did not have the experience to understand that he might leave an indelible mark. That he might have the power to brand my soul.

The first time I heard him play violin was in a cheap place with low light fixtures, awash with dry heat and the smell of weak coffee. I had watched him from the back of the room as his music sent silence sweeping across the hall. When it ended, Danny didn't smile or take a bow. He kept his instrument clutched to him as if it were a piece of armor, as if it might shield him from something ugly. And I remember thinking afterward that I wanted to learn how to play like that. I wanted to know how to capture a room.

Before we were friends, I used to listen to people speak of Danny with a mixture of awe and sympathy. Awe because he was prodigious and obsessed. Sympathy because Danny had experienced something he shouldn't have. My mother told me this one afternoon as we drove along a barren country road to my weekly lesson. "Just a kid when his mother died. Twelve, I heard." I remember the rain battering the windshield, the soft, ineffectual swish of the wipers. The picture of him as a young boy, standing by his mother's casket, fists clenched in the callous silence. My mother glanced at me. Now, I understand she was trying to gauge whether I understood the gravity of what she'd said. But I hadn't really. I understood it only abstractly, that it was awful, but it was an awfulness I couldn't fathom. Grief, I would later learn, is a lonely place to inhabit.

As I grew older, crossing that nebulous threshold from childhood into adulthood, Danny began to notice me in the way that I had noticed him; a cautious friendship between a sixteen-year-old girl who knew little beyond her selfish ruminations and a twenty-three-old man who had already begun to flounder in secret.

I found him once backstage at a concert, teaching a little girl with a strawberry-blonde bowl cut, his knees on the dirty tile so that she could play music with him, eye-level. And then he glanced up, at me, and he smiled like he was so glad I was there, and when he did, it was as if the world began to spin a little faster.

"You should be a musician when you grow up," he used to tease.

"And what about you?"

"Don't worry about me."

I didn't worry about him then. It was blissful, not worrying, back when I thought there was nothing to worry about, listening to his gravelly voice talk about the present, the future, never the past.

"We could go to Ireland together one day," he said once. "We could find the best sessions and travel around. Learn from the masters."

"We could." But I never really believed him, even though I wanted to.

Our collisions later became more frequent, more deliberate. At his home, while his dad roasted a turkey and boiled carrots in the kitchen, we looked through old photos in his living room.

"Don't look at that one," he said, before snatching a print from my hand.

But I had seen the snapshot, of him sitting shirtless by a glassy lake. He looked away, his face flushed, and then I flushed, confused by what just happened, because I knew only that I had found something that wasn't meant for me. Then he began to rummage through a pile, eventually pulling out a large portrait of a woman I'd never seen before. Her letterbox mouth almost smiled.

"My ex," he said. And then he laughed so hard he snorted. "Unsolicited. What am I supposed to do with it?"

"Frame it," I remember saying.

On a brittle day in March, at a pub that served flat soda, we played music for our ears only.

"How about a waltz?" I asked.

He laughed a bit, so that his freckles lifted.

"You know I don't do slow."

"Something else then. An original."

He launched into a reel in A major. A cheery key.

When he had finished, I asked what it was called.

"The Reprobate."

"What's a reprobate?"

He blinked then glanced at the floor.

"Me."

I looked up the word in the dictionary when I got home.



A depraved, unprincipled, or wicked person. A person rejected by God and beyond hope of salvation. Danny the reprobate. Danny my friend. It was at this time that sorrow had begun to claw at him, an invisible, insidious creature, any time he tried to catch his breath. I pretended not to see.

On the last night we spoke, we travelled in a storm. Snow pummeled, leaden, whitewashing everything under the vanishing sky. But I felt safe in the car, warmed by the heat that seeped from the vents and the cold smell of him.

"You're too young for me," he said, looking straight ahead.

My neck grew hot, embarrassed that he knew I had a crush.

"I know that."

He glanced at me before setting his eyes back toward the road. He said, "You don't understand."

"What don't I understand?"

He laughed.

"You're unspoiled."

"What are you?"

"Unwanted. Outcast from life's feast."

"Who came up with that line?"

"Joyce."

"He's dead long before you ever came along."

I felt him look at me, while the tires sprayed slush and the dull night descended, and I wanted to tell him that he wasn't unwanted. That I thought he was beautiful. That I didn't really want him to take me home. That I could have driven with him for hours in that storm. I wanted him to tell me that maybe soon I wouldn't be too young. That one day I would be older than seventeen.

"I'm fucked up," he said. "I'm really fucked up."

And when I looked at him, he laughed again, dimpling his cheek, but it didn't seem believable, the sound strangled, and I wanted to ask if he was ok, but the moment passed before I was brave enough to summon the words.

A few days later, I waited for him in my den, with the blinds open, searching for a glimpse of headlights along my quiet street while I perspired under the weight of my black woolen coat. But there was nothing outside beyond the snowbanks and the shuttered windows of my neighbour's house across the way. In the stillness, the phone rang, startling my vigil. His father's voice.

"Danny can't bring you to the session tonight. I'm very sorry."

I told him it was ok, that these things happen, even though he hadn't offered a reason, tried to steady my voice as I said goodbye. I thought of Danny before I went to sleep that night with the blankets half-tucked around my chest, tried to smother the hurt from his desertion.

Two days later, my own father sat silent at the breakfast table while I ate Cheerios. He had taken a breath, and I swear he mouthed *Dear God* though he didn't utter it.

"This is difficult," he began. And I stopped then, my spoon suspended above the bowl, milk dripping. I waited. "Your mother and I got a phone call late last night." He hesitated. "Danny died."

"No."

He nodded. His mouth old. Danny's image lunged forward. Twenty-four. Didn't even have a wrinkle. Only freckles.

He rose from his chair and placed his hand upon my shoulder and cried with me.

"How?"

With his eyes closed, he exhaled.

"He did it to himself."

They burst then, all those memories, of Danny playing slump in a chair, baseball cap drawn over his face, finding me across the room and mouthing hello, carrying my violin case through the rain, guiding me through a gauze of sleet. Buying me a cream soda. Lending me his albums. Telling me I was too young. That he was too fucked up. Of me not knowing what to say. They all burst forth in a stinging chorus, marking me, searing me, as I sobbed into my bowl full of milk.

In my living room, age thirty-two, I held my violin across my lap. An old friend across from me, guitar at his feet. Now we were talking instead of playing, and before he took another sip of his wine, he said something offhand about Danny, that he was mad for the tunes, that he wore him out playing back then, and I laughed because it was true, and then I asked him something I hadn't thought about for a long time: I asked if he was there the night Danny was last seen alive, and he said yes, he was, that Danny shook everyone's hand at the end of the night, looked each person in the eye and said goodbye. He would never forget it, because he later realized what it meant.

"He never picked me up that night."

My friend's eyes grew filmy; mine had grown wet, and after a few seconds, once his thoughts had finished marinating, he said, "Makes sense. He couldn't say goodbye to you."

"Why though?"

"Because he loved you."

And this, that my seventeen-year-old face, with all those hopeful notions written upon it could have enervated, could have given Danny pause, could have made him suffer beyond what he already stoically endured, is a story that, though forever sad, consoled me.

For in that version, he had spared me a distant handshake. Spared me a goodbye. Left me the wide universe.

An Irish exit; his parting gift.

Words

Nonfiction by Diana Gustafson

On a warm Saturday afternoon in September, Annika gave birth to a nine-and-a-half-pound baby boy. According to the obstetrician, her thirty-seven-hour labour was "*uneventful*".

Uneventful was not a word Annika would have used. The next day, she couldn't remember her pre-pregnancy body – the one without rock-hard boobs, a cramping uterus, and pulsing girl parts. That exhausted, aching body, the micro human that had exploded from it, and the man who had seeded it nine months earlier were now a family, leaving the hospital.

The nurse had told her that birthing was a shock to the system. That it took time for some women to bond with their newborns. A strange word – *bond*. She'd been bonded like super glue to this being growing in her belly for nine months. If she weren't bonded now, would she ever be? Or maybe it was the kind of bond that Peter and his business friends talked about – an IOU between a lender and a borrower – a security against a debt. The security of her womb and the promise of her son's filial devotion. In that case, her obligation had been fulfilled. Maybe the rest of the bonding contract was up to the baby.

But probably not.

Peter pulled their blue Toyota into the back lane and parked in the garage behind their modest stucco house on Alexander Avenue in Winnipeg's Centennial neighbourhood. Their sleeping son in his arms, Peter led the way to the house. Annika trudged behind, past the overgrown Caragana hedge,

along the path to the crumbling concrete steps. Annika picked at white paint flaking on the door frame before stepping over the threshold.

Peter carried the baby into the nursery. The tightly wrapped bundle was swallowed up by the immensity of the crib. A blue skull cap covered the baby's cone-shaped head. His eyelids were swollen as if he'd been in a fight. Pimply white bumps spilled over his pug nose and onto his cheeks. His chest rose and fell with each short, snorty breath.

"He's *beautiful*." Peter's voice quivered as he gripped the crib rails. "And so *tiny*." He pulled Annika into a sideways hug.

"Didn't feel tiny coming out." Annika meant to be funny, but her tone sagged like her deflated belly. Nothing felt normal or familiar.

"I'm exhausted. I need to lie down." Annika waddled out of the nursery distracted by the burning pain between her legs. *An episiotomy may cause some mild discomfort*, her obstetrician had told her. Again, *discomfort* was not a word she'd have used. Maybe he needed to wear a super-jumbo medical grade pad that scraped across a sutured incision she cut in his crotch. Let him walk around in mild discomfort.

As Annika lay in bed, staring at a crack in the ceiling, she chewed on *uneventful labour* and *failed bonding*, *beautiful* and *tiny*, and *mild discomfort* until these words were minced into morsels that she could spit across the room like the outrageous profanities they were.



Maiden Dance

Poem by Jessica Rodrigue

One night is all it took
hazels eyes met
tanned hands grazed
pink lips moved
forming delicate words
spoken in a whisper
no one else could hear a thing.

Shawn Mendes songs
shook the whole house
our bodies swayed side to side
trying to be closed books
wanting to spill ourselves
covering the dance floor
full of letters, looks, lingering hands.

Sweat dripped down faces
swollen feet begged for rest
no time for one, only to dance
exhilarating twirls, shaking hips,
two souls mingled and found
one more reason to keep
touching-talking-kissing.

You and me—pen and paper
drawn to each other
meant to fill out the page:
sonorous laughter—dad jokes
swift and quick shy glances
nibbled ham sandwiches—
hiding the gourmand in us.

One night is all it took
two people fall in a flash
one instant freezes the moment
showing our best angles and light
we filter our foibles
not wanting to come on too strong





Dichotomy of a Dad

Poem by Karen Kerekes

he was a father
and a husband,
a son and a brother
an uncle, and a neighbor
a grandfather,
and
an alcoholic

she,
is his first born
child, and
the daughter
who loved him

for he was the dad
who taught her
to ride a bike,
and smack a baseball
and throw a punch,
so no one
would ever get
the better of her

the dad who
stayed up late
until she was
home from her date
asleep, safe in her bed

and she is the
daughter who
would fetch her
dad a "cold one"
after he finished
cutting the grass
on hot summer days

and he was the dad
who would
quench his thirst
with an Export
each day
after work,
and who cried
to the core
the day
his youngest daughter
was diagnosed
with cancer

and she is
the daughter
who watched,
as her dad

lost his child
and then
his marriage,
while racking up
Airmiles
at the LCBO

the daughter
who tried
to assemble
the broken parts
of her dad
hoping she
could make him whole

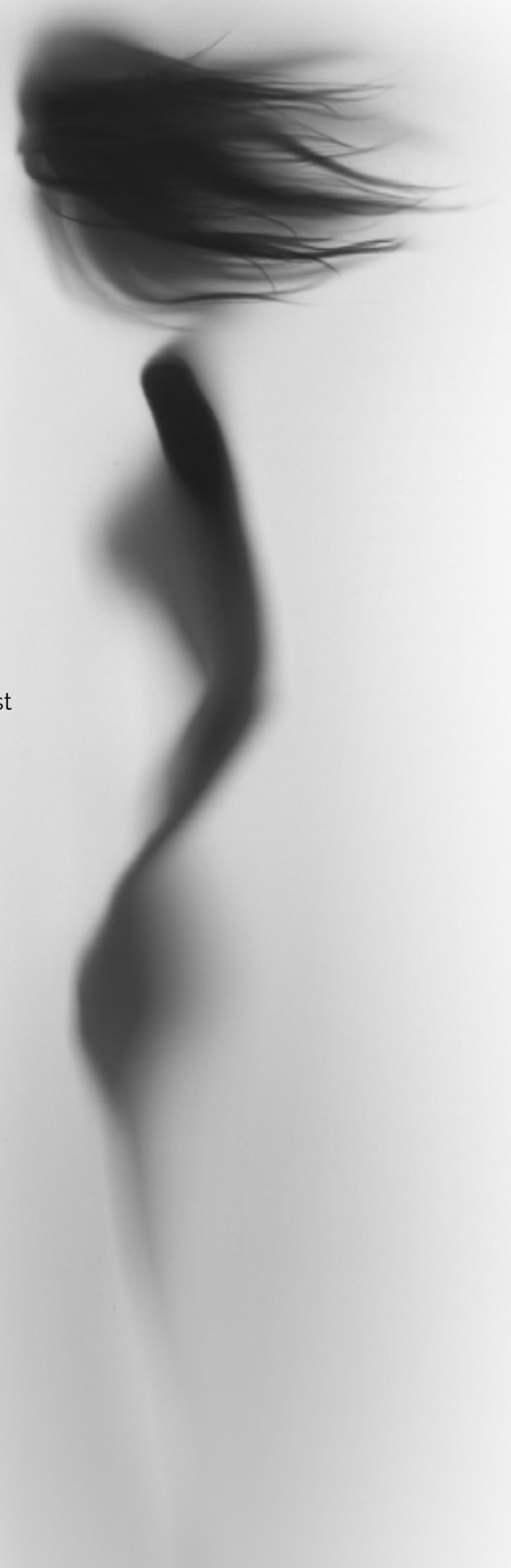
but he was also
the dad who was
stubborn,
and
whose temper
scared her,

the dad who broke
her spirit and stood steadfast
while unleashing his rage
at the very mention
of it

the dad
who instead,
decided to drink
angry and alone
at home in his chair
as Christmases passed
and his grandchildren
grew

and she is
the daughter who
heard the news,
and whose eyes
began to well
but
after eighteen years
is all out of tears,
and who is stubborn
and stands steadfast
refusing,
to mourn him twice

for she,
is
his daughter



Turtle Crossing the Road

Poem by Cecily Ross

I don't know why I started for the other side. Except
It was an urgency that could not be denied.
The pavement on my scaly toes felt hard and hot, but
Smoother than a fallen log. Slow and steady Aesop said.
I knew if I could get across that asphalt strait
My destiny would meet me and
This great burden, this boggy
Bequest would be delivered.

I'm slow at the best of times but when
The first dark shadow hurtled overhead
Exhaling furious gusts of poison and gas
I pulled inside myself, lurched inward,
A painted shell pressed flat against disaster—
Still as a rock. Another shadow thundered over,
And another and another until the very earth quaked,
Until I thought here it is—the end.

And then, the rapture. An unseen hand
Or was it angel wings spirited me aloft
And carried me over the blasted road and
Laid me down gently by the still waters
Of a silver stream. And there in an extravagance
Of gratitude I laid these eggs my gift
To the world. You, who do not believe
In miracles, think on this.

What Will Survive of Us?

Poem by Cecily Ross

Lolling there on the spruce-green lake,
Listing like the deck of the Titanic,
An abandoned dock leans
Against a huge hunk of granite,
Rock of ages, a leviathan upholding
The rotting raft as it sinks imperceptibly
To its inevitable end.

On the darkened shore magisterial pines,
Cedars, and oaks preside with profound
Indifference over the slow dissolution of what
Not long ago was a stage for human
Amusement, a platform of childlike pleasure.
Listen, and over the sound of the wind
In the trees and the loons and the bees

You can almost hear the squeals
Of children laughing, splashing, diving
All through the long hot afternoons
As though summer would never end.
Ghost children on a ghost dock,
A dock succumbing now to time
And the weather, to the persistence of weeds

Pushing up through the cracks —
Tiny ferns, cushions of moss, gray green lichen
Creeping its infinitesimal creep
Into forever. What if, I thought as
I floated in the shallows in the silence
Of an August evening, what if this
Is what will survive of us, not love,

But this: a forgotten dock beside an
Ageless rock, governed by raccoons
And muskrats their scat brown and dry
Beside the remnants of lunch: an opalescent
Clam shell shimmering like a butterfly,
The bleached exo-skeleton of a crayfish,
A cigarette butt wedged between the slats?



Vincent Lam's *On The Ravine* Explores Memory, Trauma, and Healing in Addiction

Book Review by Laura Schep

In 2022, an average of 20 Canadians died every day from drug overdose—a death rate so staggering it has impacted our population's projected life expectancy. Vincent Lam's newest book *On The Ravine*, published earlier this year, explores the human stories within Canada's deadly opioid crisis and immerses us into the experiences of people with addictions and those who care for them.

Lam, who works as an addictions physician in Toronto, also reconnects readers with Chen and Fitzgerald ("Fitz")—two compelling characters first introduced in his debut book, *Bloodletting & Miraculous Cures*. *Bloodletting*, a collection of short stories published in 2006 and awarded the Giller prize that same year, brought readers along on the journey of four determined medical students as they become physicians—with all the societal esteem this entails, as well as the gruelling hours, ethical dilemmas and human suffering it thrusts upon them.

On The Ravine takes place in Toronto several years after *Bloodletting*, and shows many changes in the personal and professional lives of Chen and Fitz. Previously, both worked as emergency physicians; now, Chen works in addictions medicine, prescribing methadone and buprenorphine (standard opioid agonist therapies that help stabilize patients, while avoiding withdrawal and overdose). He also provides supportive counselling to patients, helping them work through challenges and learn healthier ways of coping without drugs. A compassionate and principled physician who cares deeply, Chen carries a heavy weight from his work: many nights, unable to sleep, he scrolls through his "gallery of losses"—photos of former patients who overdosed and died—and cannot forgive himself for their outcomes.

Fitz also works with people with addictions, albeit in a much different way. By the end of *Bloodletting*, Fitz's own alcohol addiction had escalated to the point of his resignation from a position in emergency medicine, unable to face colleagues after they learned of him being intoxicated at work. Perhaps unsurprisingly, within the first twenty pages of *On The Ravine*, we learn that Fitz has lost his medical license. Now, he spends his days in the Toronto mansion his parents bought him, running what amounts to a safe injection site: he allows people to use whatever drugs they bring in, provides them with clean injection supplies and opioid pills to curb withdrawal symptoms, and monitors for signs of overdose. Aside from staying alive, Fitz imposes very few regulations on his clients: "The main house rule, which Fitzgerald yelled into the crowd when the music was thumping, was that dying in his house was forbidden" (pg. 17).

On The Ravine is told through two alternating storylines: Chen's, and that of the talented violinist, Claire. When a shoulder injury threatens her ability to play the violin, Claire takes escalating doses of opioid pills to manage her pain, and eventually resorts to snorting and injecting street drugs. Her life spirals out of control, and she becomes a patient of Chen's. Claire's story shows the cyclical pattern of relapse punctuated by periods of recovery, of glimmering hope followed by devastating setbacks, that mark so many people's battle with addiction. In witnessing Claire's story, we are confronted with the dehumanization often shown to people who use drugs—and how the cruel judgements of others can become internalized, leading to further isolation and suffering, and ultimately, higher risk of death. While Claire resents the disdain frequently shown to her, she judges others with addiction just as harshly, even as she recognizes they alone can appreciate her situation: "She watched the clinic patients come and go, simultaneously feeling that she hated them, found them pathetic, and that they were the only people in the world who understood what she was going through" (pg. 109).

Chen struggles with his own addiction to caring too much and getting overly involved in his patients' lives, to the detriment of his own well-being. He becomes deeply invested in Claire's recovery, making more and more allowances for her despite missed clinic appointments, all in hopes she will finally stop using drugs and get back to her music.

A major theme in the novel is the question of what memories and experiences lie at the root of addiction, and whether changing these triggers could provide a cure. Although many people begin using opioids for pain, Chen tells Claire that often, drugs help with another, deeper personal problem. Indeed, Claire never felt she was good enough as a violinist, and drugs eased this feeling, allowing her to play music in a liberated way that felt unattainable while sober. Chen gets involved in a pharmaceutical trial for a synthetic compound with the potential to change memories linked to addiction; Claire enrolls, and as readers we are led to wonder what else is lost when our formative memories, however painful, are altered.

Through his memorable characters and beautiful prose, Lam illustrates the fragile line between recovery and relapse, patient and healer, life and death—and reminds us of the humanity and compassion needed to make space for healing.



What If They're Like Me?

Poem by Mel Andela

What if my children
Are like me?

Afraid of the world,
Of people, of sharing
Too much of their
Thoughts;

Closed away and
Unsure how to share
The deepest parts of
Themselves

What if they're like me?

Closed off, desperately
Wanting to show the
Most vulnerable pieces
Within

Yet paralyzed by their
Own mind; trying,
But unable to open
Fully

What if they're like me?

Oh, but what if they aren't?

What if their love spills into
The world, honest and
Free, uninhibited by
Fear, or their own
Swirling thoughts

Pouring unstoppable
Like a stream
A river
A tidal wave;

While I am like a dam,
holding
So much but always
Holding back, they
Can exist in a way
I haven't

What if they're free
Getting the best parts
Of me, and the
Rest, even better
Pieces of their
Own making



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