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Dreamers

Creative Writing

It wasn't supposed to be this way
Nonfiction Joan K. McAndrew

George's Gold Nugget
Nonfiction by Pat Mullarkey

Winners
2024 Flash Contest

PenParentis
2025 Fellowship Winner

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> *Somewhere in the middle of all this chaos I realized that when you almost die and don't, the you who returns is different.*
>
> –Joan K. McAndrew, page 9.

EDITOR'S LETTER

Welcome to Issue 19 of Dreamers Magazine!

This issue is filled with captivating stories and heartfelt reflections that highlight the power of writing to connect us to one another.

We are thrilled to announce the winners of our 2024 Flash Fiction and Nonfiction Contest, as well as the recipient of the 2025 PenParentis Fellowship. Each of these works showcases incredible talent and offers fresh perspectives on the complexities of the human experience.

Our first feature, "George's Gold Nugget," tells a touching story of a man and his dog, exploring love, loss, and companionship. Our second, "It Wasn't Supposed to Be This Way," follows a woman's journey after a near-death experience.

As always, this issue also includes a collection of poems, stories, and essays that invite you to pause, reflect, and dream.

Thank you for being part of our community of dreamers and storytellers.

Keep dreaming!
Kat McNichol
Editor-In-Chief

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Kat McNichol

BOOK REVIEW EDITOR
Carole Mertz

REVIEWERS
Colleen McNichol
Phil McNichol
Cedar Newell

HOW TO REACH US
info@dreamerswriting.com
www.dreamerswriting.com
585 Bruce St. Hepworth, ON, CA

PEN PARENTIS FELLOWSHIP WINNER

Mixing Bowls

Fiction Story by Helen Spencer

Out of breath after climbing three flights of stairs to her new apartment, she muscled her way in the door and set down her heavy shopping bags. The apartment was completely empty aside from a few stacks of boxes against the living room wall. She was careful in the move to take only the few belongings she felt sure she could call "Hers" - not "His," not "Ours."

With only three hours to unpack before daycare pickup, she hastily grabbed a box labeled "Kitchen and Stuff," sat on the floor and sliced the box open with a key.

Here she found kitchen items from her old Studio apartment on Joralemon Street in Brooklyn Heights. Living there had been a free and hopeful time in her life. She was single, rising fast in her career and had a tight network of city-dwelling friends who had not yet flocked to the 'Burbs to start their "real lives."

In these years, she would venture out on Saturday mornings after a long week of travel with her demanding job. She would grab a latte at her favorite coffee shop and wander in and out of bookstores, boutiques and her favorite family-owned cooking supply store on Atlantic Avenue.

Among the treasures she purchased there was a stack of ceramic nested mixing bowls. She lifted the brightly-colored bowls out of the box and reflected on the one that was missing. The largest bowl in the set was a pretty shade of blue, and it had been her favorite.

She winced remembering how it had broken into thirty pieces after her husband angrily hurled it down the basement stairs of the home they had once shared. She could still hear the initial crack and then the scatter of all the small pieces, some of which she was still finding and cleaning up three months later.

She couldn't remember what had set him off that day. What she had or hadn't said or done. A lot of the memories of her marriage were like that. Like clicking through a Viewfinder, jumping from still frame to still frame. Discrete moments were crystal clear, but the chain of the events connecting them was hard to piece together.

Her decision to leave had been reached after dozens of instances of shattered glasses, cracked tables, dented car doors, punched walls. His yelling. Her bruising. Their child's cries. She couldn't change the past. She couldn't change her husband. She was unsure of how to change herself. For now, she could only unpack one box at a time, attempting to create a new order from all the chaos.

She carried the stack of mixing bowls to the kitchen and placed them gently on the shelf. The rest of her cabinets were empty, but there was a piece of that girl from Joralemon Street back down from the attic. And that was a start.

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.

2024 FLASH Contest

Congratulations to the Winners!

FIRST PLACE WINNER

Immigrant

Fiction by Antoinette Bekker

A homeless Deer takes shelter at the ramshackle tent near the bottom of the field. I think she is homeless, or at least tribeless. She stands there most days, alone, between noon and two o'clock, nearly invisible among the sad detritus of the empty highway lot, nibbling on struggling spring grass and yellow dandelion heads.

I wonder what became of her family.

Cars make neat strings on the road. No, not strings of pearls. Get real. Exhaust fumes, diesel burning: humhumhum. When it rains: swooshswooshswoosh. Road-music. Two rows, one moving up, the other moving down. I think: the system works when we do not touch.

Deer steps daintily between discarded milk jars, plastic bags, broken bottles, blue paper masks. Her hooves are high heels. Such pretty shoes.

Once.

Daintly strappy sandals, tasselled leather loafers, little beaded flats.

Huge ears—paper cone bags filled with fries bought from a street vendor in Amsterdam—move when Crow lands in Poplar. They talk for a minute; Crow takes off.

I watch her from my window, this windblown window on this endless highway. I see one horizon only. I wonder if you ever went back? We talked about it, until we didn't.

Nothing ever happens but for homeless Deer, black Crow, and occasional disruptions in flow when cars unintentionally connect. Sometimes I take a phone call. Mostly I wait, scrolling aimlessly through Facebook, looking for a sign or a name.

I see him come along the shoulder of the Trans-Canada, his bicycle laden with saddlebags, a backpack on his back. He wears no cycling helmet, a ponytail snakes down his shoulder, a red bandanna curls around his neck.

Why are bandannas always red?

His knees are bony cups standing on their rims, his legs brown sinews, slowly pumping up the steep hill. I cannot see his eyes, but imagine they are blue.

He turns down the service road, up another hill, pedals to the tattered tent built last year by a wanderer and left when winter came.

Deer stiffens when she hears Man. Alert, her ears forward—all the fries spilling—she stops eating. She watches him. He dismounts, leans his bike against Poplar, removes his pack, shifting first the right shoulder, then shrugging the left, grabs the pack by its strap. His arm strains, the forearm muscles contract. The pack drops in a puff of dust. Man stumbles, his back and legs stiff, rolls his head sideways—a nice stretch. He rubs his face with the bandanna. Perhaps it's pink?

I want it to be other than red.

I've had my fill of red.

Man is old. Stooped. Bow-legged. He moves slowly, determined, like his pedalling up the hills. He takes his water bottle and sips. The back of his hand wipes his mouth. He turns around, walks towards Deer, bottle extended. She tips her head and drinks.

I turn away from the window, my body suddenly full, filled with two horizons. My sign has come. I phone you. I'll wear high heels tonight.

HONOURABLE MENTION

Smarkles

Fiction by Mary Lynn Cloghesy

My niece was a glitter girl, perpetually covered in multi-coloured gems from glue guns and magic markers—tiny cuts that lodged in her hair and the folds of her seersucker dresses. She teased the sun as she twirled, her art held high, and it winked back as if they shared a secret. On those sweltering afternoons, while the rest of us chased the shade, she stood in the blazing rays, undaunted, as her mother picked at her relentlessly. I called her Smarkles: a sparkly, smarty-pants.

Nothing changed as she aged. Swoopy curls poked through the plastic tiara she favoured at high holidays, repurposed from the tickle trunk. Her makeup was a source of constant wonder. Countless photos of rhinestones, meticulously placed at the corners of her eyes, highlighted by shimmering powders, appeared in our family chats. When she was accepted into a program for cosmetic arts, we celebrated with Kir Royales, bubbly and bold. My sister was not invited.

That fall, Smarkles packed the contents of her room into one box and bought a suitcase to safely shepherd her prized palettes across the sea. The trip was a way to placate her parents, a quick foray to the Holy Land. She confessed her reluctance but deferred school until January. The Nova Festival with its mysterious location and deep roots in the Sukkot holiday was her salvation; the psytrance rave a chance to celebrate with astral beings like herself. She carefully packed a diamond balm just for the occasion.

She disappeared that day, but her bag was found. It contained a smattering of shekels, a crushed compact that had blended to black in the dirt, and the unopened gloss. After an excruciating year, we received news. I raised a glass to my girl, a Kir Royale, but it was too bitter to swallow. My mouth puckered and dime-store crown tilted as I retched. I couldn't help but smile at the fizzy remains though, holding my sister as rainbows burst at our feet.

George's Gold Nugget

Autofiction by Pat Mullarkey

Tommy sniffs me at the door, the scruffy dog more polite than enthusiastic. One of his jobs is door monitor. He races back to the man lying in bed in an adjacent room.

I cross through a living room that holds a solitary, wooden chair and then enter the bedroom. The old miner lies on a twin bed, struggling with emphysema. A barely touched Meals on Wheels lunch sits in a white, plastic container on the nightstand. He cradles the little gray-white dog in his arms.

Oh Tommy, you're a good boy, Tommy.

"You've got great gams," George wheezes.

He is like a yellowjacket in early fall, angry at its impending death, delivering a last sting to prove it is still virile. His cheap flirt attempts to show, despite his fragility, he is still a man. But then George sees the look on my face.

"Sorry, ma'am."

The 79-year-old doesn't want to threaten our genial relationship. I am his case manager, one of the few people who visits on a regular basis.

A volunteer delivers daily lunches. He leaves George for last on his rounds. The reason involves stories. The miner reminisces about towns in rural Washington that bloomed and faded along with the economy. Panning for gold on pristine rivers full of salmon while eagles watched from whitebark pines and larch trees. Or the years George spent in deep tunnels with grim thoughts while lode mining for the bright, noble metal. Anecdotes tumble out rowdy and reverent. An infamous poker game when Jack Idaho lost his eye in a fight over a one-eyed Jack of Clubs. George recalls, in a trembling voice, a fearless woman with a wide grin, who died of tuberculosis. It is a world out of sequence, a past glimpsed in bursts of memory. What a piece of history lies here dying of emphysema and heart disease.

But George, an old miner, drinker, all around good-timer holds Tommy with as much tenderness as I would hold my child.

Tommy, bring me your ball. Oh Tommy, you're a good boy, Tommy.

My job is to help the frail elderly stay at home. I coordinate services, make sure needs are met. Dread of a nursing home hovers over their last refuge of independence. I ask George about tasks for the home health aide. She spends a few hours a week doing chores and buying food.

I also keep an eye on Tommy's well-being. He was a stray who followed George home about five years ago. A time when George was still mobile. I suspect under that mass of curls a mix of poodle and cocker spaniel. I look for a neighborhood boy or girl to walk him. I take him to the veterinarian on my own time and dime.

The dog loves George. Tommy entertains, listens to complaints, stays close when George is afraid. There's a terrible look in George's eyes when he coughs too hard, tries to catch his breath.

The miner intones with pride, Tommy this and Tommy that.

Tommy takes care of me. Want to see his new trick? Fetch the stick, Tommy. Oh Tommy, you're a good boy, Tommy.

George hobbles to the door between short breaths to let out the patient dog. That, and going to the bathroom, is the extent of his exercise. The visiting nurse encourages more activity. She writes down suggestions. George rolls his eyes when I ask about it.

He became my client after someone called the police. His plants sat on a windowsill soaking up the sun. Neighbors were upset over the cannabis visible from the street. The situation embarrassed the police officers. They saw this frail bedbound man with the watery eyes of glaucoma. They took his plants, then called my office.

George told me: "Crazy cops. It's for a poultice for my eyes. I'm an old man trying to soothe his eyes."

I asked about the last time he saw an eye doctor.

"Don't worry. Not going to do that," he said.

George opened a drawer in the small nightstand. There sat a matchbox full of seeds.

"I'll just grow more."

I suspect he worries if he goes out the door he will never return.

Sit down. Bark. Roll over, Tommy. Oh Tommy, you're a good boy, Tommy.

Tommy is smart. He performs with the expertise of a circus dog.

I walk in one day and George is crying. Tommy's gone. He didn't return. No quick barks outside the door to let him in. I look into George's eyes afraid my sorrow will seep out and feed into his misery. My gut says his nephew has something to do with it. He hates the burden this man's impending death places on him. He resents my interference. And he hates Tommy. The dog and I conspire to keep George alive. The nephew grumbles about having his own problems.

Tommy deserves better. I look for Tommy, call the dog pound. I ask the neighbors. They also resent the frail man

with his cannabis and dog.

“Good. That mutt is never on a leash,” says his neighbor.

She fails to see the dog’s value. Tommy is the bright gold nugget the miner found in the last years of his life.

The next day I call George. His voice sounds weak and raspy.

“George, what’s going on?”

“Not doing so hot, lady,” he says, tries to catch his breath.

I call for help. The nurse arrives with an ambulance.

“We’re moving him to a hospital,” she says on the telephone.

I track down the nursing station after several hours.

He’s in intensive care, the nurse says.

“Can I come see him?”

Can I comfort him, a poor substitute for the loyal dog? Not today.

I call the next morning for the room number. George died about 4 a.m., the nurse tells me.

I write final notes on his file, a handkerchief close by.

Oh Tommy, you were a very good boy, Tommy.

It wasn't supposed to be this way

Nonfiction by Joan K. McAndrew

So much pain.

A voice says, "this will help, Joan."

Who are these black figures, hovering around my bed like the dementors on the Hogwart's Express? Am I dying? But there's no bright light. Every breath is a struggle. All these strangers; a critical care specialist, a pulmonologist, a cardiologist. My surgeon is there. I know him.

"Don't give up," he says.

More masked faces—relatives, friends, clients floating in and out. Why is everyone crying?

It wasn't supposed to be this way. It was just a hernia.

***

Deep brown eyes drift in three inches from my face. A gentle voice says, "Joan, you need to be ventilated."

"No resuscitation," I say.

"Ventilation is not resuscitation," he says. "But I can't guarantee the ventilator can be removed."

"I don't want to live like that," I say.

"That's not a decision for now," he says. "That's a decision for later."

"You're right," I say, as I disappear into sweet oblivion.

***

I'm awake. My throat hurts, my whole body is bloated, I can't talk or reach the call-button. But I can breathe.

In all, it's ten days before I am moved to the post-surgical/rehab unit to discover I contracted Hospital Acquired Pneumonia, following hernia surgery on October 22, 2021. Over the next seventeen days I need to focus all my energy, my thoughts and my spirit on learning to speak, swallow, eat, sit, stand, crawl, roll over, walk and climb stairs.

It wasn't supposed to be this way.

***

Retirement will be wonderful. I will travel, read books, and sleep until I wake up. Best of all, there will be no more debt as I am a hard-working, intelligent and fiscally responsible person. I follow the rules, plan well and will be ready. My well-earned reward at the end of my career as a Counselling Psychologist.

That colon cancer, in 2013 was just a blip. I was 67 and due to retire in three years. True, my husband and I might need a couple of years to catch up financially, but we'd make it. Except he required two angioplasties, four weeks apart for blocked cardiac arteries, in the same month that I had abdominal surgery to remove ten inches of my bowel. Chemotherapy followed. Then, as when two stars collide, our marriage vaporized into its own black hole in 2015.

Retirement was postponed once again, this time for another five years while I recovered financially.

It wasn't supposed to be this way.

***

On November 17, 2021, twenty-seven days after the hernia surgery I was discharged home with a cane, a shower chair, and needing help with everything. My friends took shifts caring for me until I felt safe enough to manage on my own. Six weeks later I resumed workouts at the gym—my kickboxing days might be over but I could walk without the cane by the end of January 2022.

In mid-February, my personal trainer said, "you're ready to lay flat on the floor and get up on your own steam."

I balked, terrified. She reassured me. I made her promise not to abandon me. Five minutes later, she held me in her arms while I sobbed and sobbed. A Post Traumatic Stress Disorder set in which took four months to control.

Somewhere in the middle of all this chaos I realized that when you almost die and don't, the you who returns is different. The sky seems vast and blue. Birds sing for mates and build nests while new life emerges everywhere. How had I failed to notice? I needed to reach out and touch everything! New ideas popped into my head.

What if my life *is* the way it's supposed to be? What if my life isn't about me at all? What if I am about my life?

***

Then with no choice, no plan, no graceful exit, I retired on June 1, 2022. It has taken three years to recover my physical, emotional and spiritual strength. I didn't know that only 20% of people over the age of 75 survive ventilation. No wonder everyone expected me to die.

I sold my home in 2023, the perfect small one I bought after my divorce. I live in a newly renovated one-bedroom apartment two blocks from Georgian Bay. A large balcony faces west into a grove of pine trees—the sunsets are brilliant.

I know now that those promises made by the media, the banks, the governments, the psychologists (like me), and the self-help industry are not true. It matters not if you are a hard-working, intelligent and fiscally responsible person. You are still not guaranteed the life you imagine.

My hernia is permanent. It protrudes out the left side of my belly. I've named it Sally. In the first two years Sally caused me a lot of grief with four blockages of the bowel which required hospitalization each time. "Get used to it," the doctors said. Instead, I hired a naturopath who has guided me to rebuild my microbiome. Bowel blockages no longer occur.

People tell me that I'm different now, that I'm an inspiration. Doctors tell me I have good genes. What I really have though is resilience. It can't be promised or purchased, it has to be earned through thick and thin, through promises made and broken. It can't be guaranteed and it will never be yours if you just do this and this and this.

Because that's not life. I changed because I had to change. I am softer now, less critical of myself and others, less certain about everything. I have never felt so free to be who I am. I no longer have time for pretenses. Every day is a gift which I cherish. Not because someone told me to, but because when you are close to death and you survive, it is easy to be grateful.

Poems by David Kristjanson-Gural

Trail Unwandered

every day at edge of the wood
i turn and take that same trail
down past the large pines
through thicket and sedge
where very little light gets through

i wonder about that other trail
the one that winds along river
light dancing on water washed
stones giving back tumble
of messages conjured by feet

i try not to judge myself
know what keeps me turning
down this same trail i'm learning
what's inside is bigger
more mysterious and older

than i imagined i'm noticing
each stick and stone and field
and bone the brick
and curse trying not
to make me think twice

at once i'm small and just there
enough just tall enough
to see all the past
a spread-before-me
landscape hoping to be released

hoping that one day
when song of wind
word-wafting scent of berry
in bloom sets me a notion
to take that trail unwandered

i will obey

Song of Ocean

every day you find
in me stones i didn't
know i had collected
reached down felt
put away

you place them
before me stacked
like a totem
a place to mark
the trail

i find them hard
but you like them
you tell me
about their colors
and shapes

and how every
new thing you
learn fills the beach
you come to
when you come to
find me

and if a beach
is what i can be
for you if i can
mark a trail for you
then yes i can be filled
by stones

i can make myself
whole by knowing
their edges the roundness
and flint that makes
the trail i wandered
known

makes the edge of our
ocean sing

even if the cold
and flint and solace
that's made the stone
never tells its story
never knows more
than the way home

Opportunity

gather a skein of yarn
what we told ourselves
notice the colors

how the browns
greys and whites
make beauty

catch the light
weave them
try to make

comfort and warmth
tell yourself
every movement

toward the whole
creates a warp
an opportunity

each question you
contemplate
creates a weft

and so we gather
together what
least we expect

we pick up
a cup left
behind

say hello
to someone
we've never met

A Variation on Prayer

Nonfiction by Linda Campbell

Leaving the gray, bleak evening behind, we enter the massive gothic splendor of stone, stained glass, gilded walls and fluted columns. The dim Basilica traps the scent of November in Montreal, damp wool and rotting leaves, and mixes them with a hint of incense. I find myself genuflecting by rote, a byproduct of a Catholic childhood, before I sit on the carved wooden pew beside my mother.

She won't remember this evening but she is delighted to be here. Her dementia has stolen her short-term memory but if this were mass, she'd follow along perfectly. Perhaps I could too.

The show begins, a booming symphony of timeless sound that fills not just the cavernous room, but the spaces between the cells of my body - I feel the sound reverberating there. Choreographed light dances in time with the music, creating art that claims the walls and ceiling as its canvas, caressing every line, angle, and corner.

Something inside of me is singing. I am immersed, I can't tell where it begins and I stop. Now I am made of music and light. I wonder if she feels the same. I lean into her and our eyes meet, she smiles wisely and nods. I squeeze her hand. I will remember this for both of us, this variation on prayer.

Poems by Mel Thompson

Miracle Worker

I'm sitting across from a watery-eyed man with a tight-lipped smile—
there's a faded ink stain on the cuff of his painfully white dress shirt,
and his glasses don't quite sit right on his face.
I tell him about the time I stuck my fingers around a candle wick,
just outside the flame's reach so I could feel the heat without the burn.
I notice there's still ash beneath my pinky nail,
though he's too busy scribbling to notice.
He asks if I think I'm kind.
I show him the yellow parking ticket I found on my windshield
and the four tubes of lipstick I took from the drugstore for safekeeping.
I say there are days when I smile so bright, I burn to a crisp,
and others where I shrink down so small, I want the universe to swallow me
like a pill she had forgotten to take the night before.
He tells me I must be a very complex woman,
to which I say that all people are complicated if you stare for long enough.
I tell him sometimes I dream about my own hands wrapped around my throat
and how I wake, disappointed, when I end up gasping for air.
I show him the orange bottle I've tucked into my purse
in case I wake one morning and decide I've made up my mind for good,
then the ink marks down my chest where I've tried and failed to be dissected.
He crinkles his nose as he switches to a red pen, trying not to meet my eyes.
I say there are evenings where the stars are watching me,
and others where I scorn the sky atop my shoulders.
That I am either sharp or round but never both,
that I want to circle myself down sink drains
and invite the world to join.
He hands me a tablet without any water.
I chew it between my teeth as I recall the poem I wrote in nail polish on my bathroom mirror.
I go to read it to him, but he's already left the room

Metamorphosis

I'm sitting on my hands while nurses come and go;
each one, tired eyed, not looking in my direction,
asks me how I'm feeling before they rush out of the room.
I writhe, I twitch, I squirm. Rita opens a drawer, pulls out a fresh needle,
and forgets to lock the cabinet behind her. I watch Anne
whisk her way out to the hall, then Trevor follow on his tiptoes.
Foam dribbles through my teeth, down my chin
and onto the floor. It sizzles before it dissipates.
I'm rocking in my chair, seared by the fluorescents above me,
as the doctor enters with a clipboard. He asks my name,
except I can't remember my age, or why I'm here or why this matters.
My nails grow an inch. I say I'm fine, I think, just when I forget to blink,
I stretch larger and smaller all at once; I can't help but howl at the moon.
He nods His head and chews His pen, swallowing the words
I do not intend as poetry.
He says nothing as He sits and scribbles, sweat stains poking
through His coat. If I listen close, I can hear the voice
of every living thing in the room—I say to someone
I wonder if I'm human more than I wonder if I'm good,
if my hopes will ever lead me to certainty. The doctor blinks
as my skin twitches, fur sprouting from my chin. He scratches
His nose before He turns to leave.
A nurse takes my hand and I'm brought to stand,
then walked down the hall on all fours. Lorraine pats my back;
Amy scratches my head; I sign my name in ink. I say blue's
my favourite colour since it's always in the sky, and they laugh loudly
while a front door opens; I say there are days I wish I knew I was a beast
and their smiles, their maws, gape wider—I say I'm afraid,
if changing can't be a choice, if 'me' and 'I' can't align; then Grace takes my collar,
Ronnie unclips my lead, Tracey shushes me, shoves me, sends me,
hackles raised, into the night.

Form 42

The man in the black took my shoelaces and my journal.
He's reclined in his chair, crossed legs up on his desk,
licking his finger before he turns over each page.
My jacket's thrown over his shoulders, but he's too broad for it to zip.
My socks stick to the floor like old gum.

I've been handed a sandwich, consisting of stale bread and cheese,
with a note that reads, "NO FORK/NO KNIFE."
I think of my schoolteachers and their critiques of my cursive,
how my o's never sloped quite correctly;
my m's far too pointed, my r's far too round,
blending in with my n's and my u's. Too sharp, too slippery,
too messy for a gold-starred *GOOD JOB!*

You should eat, the clipboard says, you could be here for a while,
and I mash up the food into a ball. I consider carefully,
slowly, the size of my throat, how often children
must choke themselves on grapes.
I swallow. I do not drink.

You're lucky you're safe here, he calls, over from his place,
and I'm reminded of my mother's Sunday dinners.
A fork in my left and a blade in my right,
the time I fell, face-first, into my steak.

I've no plans, I say again, and he lifts up his chin,
patting my head like I've shown him my belly.
I wonder if butchers, or hunters, or surgeons,
behold their creatures before turning them to meat—

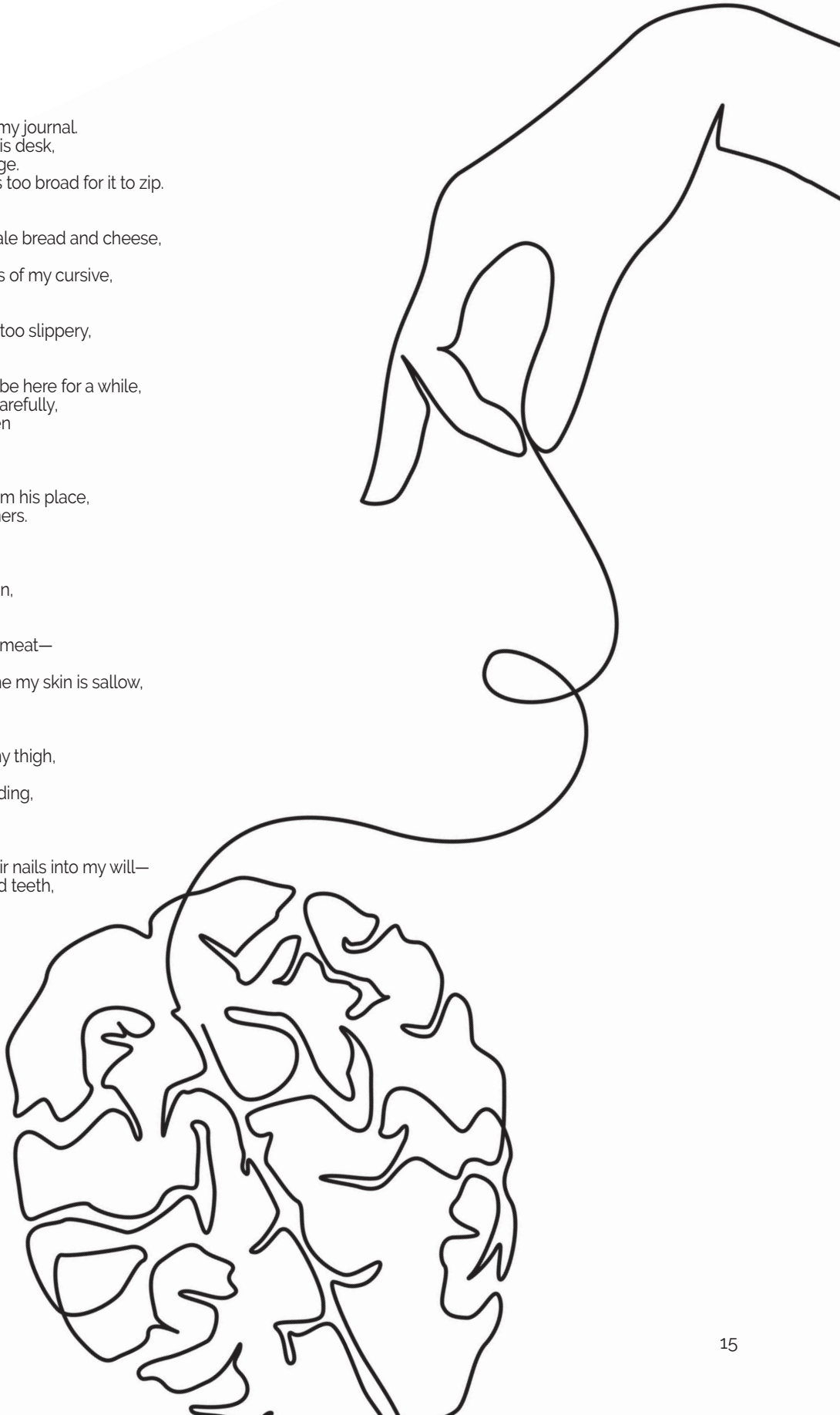
There's no mirror in the bathroom, but I imagine my skin is sallow,
sinking in beneath my cheekbones and eyes;
My skull, in spite of me, refuses to hide.

May I go? I ask his shoulder, it's just a nick in my thigh,
and he closes my notebook's final page.
Is that it? He responds, unsatisfied with my ending,
Is that all that you have to say?

My gown tightens around my throat,
hesitation caught in its fist, prongs digging their nails into my will—
he smiles so wide I can see each of his pointed teeth,
and I know that it's my time to stand.

I twirl then I curtsy,
I smile my rotten teeth,
and I'm the belle of his linoleum ball.

The doctor never arrives.



Near Miss

Poem by Sandra Sortwell Makau

I swerve when I hear the doctor's words,
the news of her 26 cancerous lymph nodes
crosses the line and veers into my lane
the impact like an oncoming car
fast and out of control.
I reach to protect her from the fatal sound
of impending diagnosis;
the doctor's face softens,
options replace shock,
a plan formulates.
Her brush with death is rerouted,
we take the detour of
hope
fear
love.

Fragility and Resilience: Exploring Identity and Tolerance in *Rue des Rosiers*

Book Review by Carole Mertz

Tregebov's *Rue des Rosiers* appeared in 2019. A well-constructed novel, it deserves to be kept alive through repeated discussion because of its central theme of racial discrimination and antisemitism. Tregebov thoughtfully explores this theme by first acquainting readers with her main characters, including three sisters: two who live in Toronto, and one in Winnipeg. She sustains her readers' rising expectations through to the final pages with swiftly turning events and captivating diction. Strikingly, the Arab antisemitism that plagued Parisian society in the 1980s remains regrettably relevant today, particularly in light of the ongoing struggles in the Gaza Strip. (One could assume the novel was published just last week.)

Sarah, the youngest sister, had an abortion at age 16 and yearns for the love and forgiveness of her oldest sister, Rose, to feel a sense of completion. While Sarah and Gail, both living in Toronto, share moments of compassion, they are also somewhat at odds. Gail, a lawyer, cannot understand why Sarah has not completed her law degree. Sarah, in turn, enjoys her low-paying job as a gardener, which Gail regards as a "dead-end" career. Sarah's quirky approach to life—making decisions by tossing a penny—seems to stem from the inner loss she feels after her abortion, contributing to her struggles with decision-making.

Sarah can't quite envision her future. She sees herself as a project in need of a solution and feels uncertain about her identity. Her friend Michael is empathetic and supportive without being overbearing.

When Rose sinks into clinical depression and is hospitalized, the entire family becomes deeply concerned for her health. Amid this familial worry, Sarah attempts to make sense of her life by taking an experimental university course. Through her professor, she grapples with questions about Jewish identity and history. The course materials—significant Jewish texts, historical documents, and confronting photos—challenge her deeply. Sarah diligently completes her assignments until, one day, she can no longer bear the weight of the Jewish struggle for survival, especially in light of her own decision to abort her baby.

A twist in her relationship with Michael, coupled with the loss of her satisfying job, leads Sarah to accompany him to Paris. There, she begins a transformative journey of self-understanding. She finds herself relaxing in her relationships and immersing herself in Parisian life, exploring the city's rich culture and history at her own pace. Her growing comfort with the French language, aided by her playful fascination with etymology, adds an engaging layer to her personal growth.

Sarah's etymological musings on various French words are woven throughout the novel. One particularly poignant discovery marks a significant turning point in the story's final act. At first, the chapters focusing on "Laila" seem tangential to the main storyline. Through these passages, however, we meet a scarred Arab girl unfamiliar with Parisian life, who, like Sarah, is finding her way toward maturity, employment, and independence. The two women, unaware of each other's existence, undergo parallel journeys of growth.

Laila's physical and emotional scars mirror the disruptions in Sarah's life. However, Laila's hate-filled boyfriend (spoiler alert) becomes the catalyst for a harrowing disruption to Sarah's life. The larger theme Tregebov conveys left me in complete admiration of her skill. *Rue des Rosiers*, set across Toronto, Winnipeg, and Paris, draws readers into a vivid exploration of the significance of life, the necessity of tolerance, and the tragic consequences of its absence when cultures clash. Tregebov's work is timeless. She reveals, in profound and unexpected ways, how fragile life can be.

The Box

Nonfiction by Dianne Apter

Fall

The bathroom medicine cabinet—It has been three weeks. This will be the easiest I think. It isn't. I can't stop the mist in my eyes as I toss everyday medicines left over from normal ailments, the healthy days, the pre-cancer days. Ear drops, allergy pills, multi-vitamins go in the trash. I'm finished. That's enough for today.

The dresser—Underwear and socks, neckties, shirts, sports jackets and jeans are stuffed in bags for the Salvation Army. The wrist watch, running shoes, bottle of after-shave, raggedy flannel shirt, University of Maryland T-shirt, and green sweater go in a different box. The "I have to save this part of him" box.

Winter

The hall closet—The passage of time. Jackets, boots, hats, gloves are piercing reminders of his days of vigor. My heart beats faster and my stomach turns over and I think of the snow he won't shovel, the Thanksgiving dinners he won't eat, the Christmas concerts at the children's schools he won't hear. Everything will go, except the gloves that will go into the box.

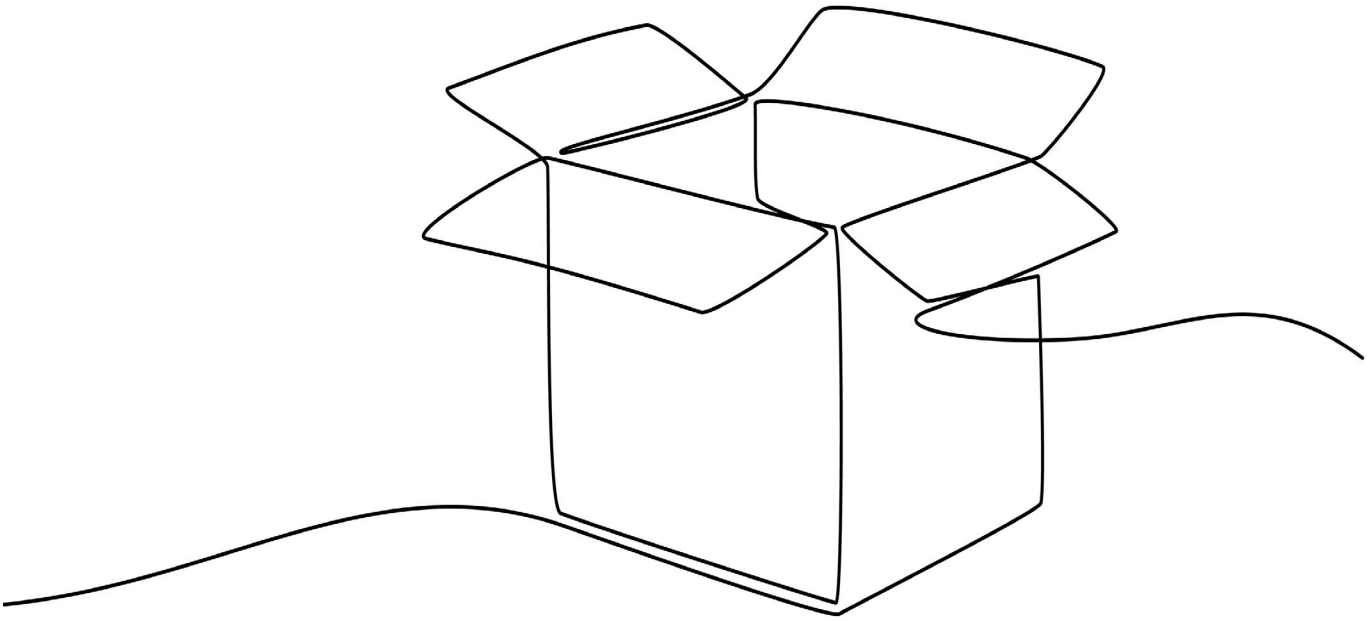
The books—I am about to toss all the back issues of *Sports Illustrated.* "That's history, Mom." The kids prevail. History will be saved, bound with string, and carried to the garage. Four boxes of books wait by the door ready for their trip to the library for donation. Second thoughts: I rip open the top carton and remove *Zen and The Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* and *Catch 22*. With reverence I rescue *The Great Bicycle Expedition*. That one was our find in the dusty used book store we all loved. I am back at that last summer, at the beach house, hearing our laughter at the antics of that cockamamie family, free-wheeling through Europe. All four of us on the bed as he reads a chapter a night. Me taking over the ritual when he was too weak. The book that was never finished. Into the box.

Summer

His office—Finally, the courage to enter his sacred space at home. It feels like I am trespassing. I start with desk drawers. Saved mementos I didn't know were there. "I luv you daddy", father's day cards, plaster of Paris hand prints, art work on tattered paper, birthday and anniversary cards. The last anniversary card: "To my darling...I will love you forever." Then I find six journals, some in school composition books and some hand-written on yellow legal pads. I read them. Six journals sharing dark thoughts in troubled times. Words never shared. Thoughts unknown to me. Insecurity, self-doubting, and sadness. I hate myself for not realizing, for not listening better, for being wrapped in my own daily living, for not being a better wife. These tokens of love and despair go into the box.

The Box

The children now have children of their own. My life has taken turns I never could have imagined. The *Sports Illustrated* were nibbled by mice and tossed out. The raggedy flannel shirt, the wrist watch, and the handmade gifts are still there. As are those journals. The books have all been donated. Except, *The Great Bicycle Adventure.* I keep thinking I should give the kids that one to read to their children but I don't. The relics that remain. The box is smaller. The box I won't let go of.



Onions

Fiction by Sarah Munn

"Every good dish starts with sautéed onions," my mother used to say. It was a maxim she followed in her home kitchen and it seemed to be true, because everything she made with sautéed onions was delicious. Her spaghetti sauce, her tacos, her meatloaf, her soups, her casseroles, her gravy. There were even a few good dishes that technically didn't start with sautéed onions, but they were made all the better for them. Like pan-seared pork chops or a burger – top them with sautéed onions and you'll never want them any other way.

My mother used them so often that she sautéed them up in batches—five or six onions at a time, every Sunday night—and kept them in a glass container in the fridge to use throughout the week's meals.

When I first left home, she sautéed an extra batch and gave it to me in my own glass container. "For your fridge," she'd said, as I gave her a hug.

I didn't cook much in my college dorm room, having only a hot plate to work with. But I added my mother's onions to everything – scrambled eggs, stir fry, ramen noodles, even mac and cheese. On lazy days, I would put them in sandwiches with ham and cheese and mustard. They were sweet and salty, diced small and cooked down slowly to a translucent caramel brown, and they tasted like home. Every time I visited, my mother replenished my onion supply with a new batch, sometimes two. "I'll have to teach you to make them yourself one day," she would say, laughing as she pressed another glass container into my hands.

"One day" had never come. Through two years of college and another couple years of adulthood, I had relied on her steady supply. We always planned to do a cooking lesson "one day" and always ended up chatting or doing other things instead. Now, she's been gone for almost a week, and I am on my last spoonful of onions.

I've warmed them up and I'm eating them right off the spoon because I don't want this last piece of my mother adulterated by any other flavours. I wish I had her recipe for them, but no one in the family knows where she may have kept it, or if she even ever wrote it down. She made these onions so often she did it from memory.

I lick a little more off the spoon, carefully rationing what's left, and imagine my mother's deft hands peeling the onions, then chopping them, then stirring them with a wooden spoon in her huge cast iron skillet. She would have made this batch mere days before she died. I've seen her do this so many times, but I can't remember the finer details. What kind of onions did she use? Did it matter? Did she use soy sauce? There was always something in a brown bottle next to the stovetop. Were there spices? Or just salt and pepper? She always said it was so simple. I hope it is.

On my kitchen counter there is a yellow onion, a white onion, and a sweet onion, in a plastic grocery bag. I bought them this morning in a burst of productive grief because I suddenly had become determined to figure out how to make my mother's sautéed onions. I can't remember ever buying onions from the grocery store myself – I've always used Mom's in anything I've cooked. But if I can make them like she did, maybe I'll be able to bear life without my mother in it. Maybe.

I lick the spoon again. I pull out a cutting board and a knife.

I'm here, Mom, I think, wondering if there's any way her spirit can hear me. Show me.

I pick up one of the onions and begin.

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