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The Reign – Part II

Expropriation and the Magna Carta

Vis et voluntas, said old King John in his gluttony. The dissenting barons had their say and imposed the Magna Carta; we live in the future myth, some inauguration of a greater Reign that sponsors lesser tyrants to foster mischief by yet more rebel barons. If you were dreamed into being by an old king, dreamed as his cream or the sword that impaled his bowels, would you feel honoured, bloody shit- tongued, in contact with his regnant body? The old king's folly at wanting more which is still our folly. We dreamed him, he and the dream are our futurecurse.

What, the law asks, *is reasonable?*

Oracle Elizabeth asks, "What is reason when you take everything I've known?"

What is logic when topos is tempered?

For 67 years Elizabeth cooked on the same stoveiron. Her husband John died while walking across the kitchen asking after dinner. If reason requires lessons, what is the lesson here? That contentment is a stove and limitation? Mary's wisdom is that *here here here here here* is a topos, a whole means of organizing knowledge, the scaffolding of love.

Willard walks through the woods *deer deer deer deer deer* and how could anyone think there is nothing here, that there will be nothing left of here, another topos no topos and Willard's *lese majeste* – like a dozen other rebel barons like himself, he swears an oath to stand fast for the liberty of church and realm, the Reign, Willard a magistrate of this Reign district, designated to care, a baron of topos paid in days, single days. It all comes out as

NO.

Consider Back Creek as River Thames and steely blueblack

swallows as the fellow rebels, Willard keeping and taking counsel as the world refuses peace while the water surface imposes calm, smooth, opaque, an unknown charter of liberties, though in the water are PCBs from K.C.'s factories, another king's offal despoiling the crown. Willard puts his cigarette out in the water, sees his face and wonders what it is like to drown in one's own image. Again, the word that best describes the thought is *NO*. Suck on the stick and make the lungs black; look at the self and the world burns too, but in water there is just spread. Too much idleness. But still singing, grass and slow water onrush, barn swallow decrescendo – same tune from 1215.

You Must Go Through Me

It started late at night. Mary's new man seemed strange to Willard, the colour of oak and creaking sound, outdoor smell of 4W30, leaf, and loam. Mixed gas and woodsmoke. What happens when the locked door of home swings open

and isn't closed?

Willard was only four. Do you remember what it was like to be four? Some of us can only remember the monster behind the door. Mary's new man liked children of that exact age – he broke Willard open like a door torn off

its hinges. Oh Willard, I *door* care back to you now, helpless care; I'm only your author but I project myself there, then, to stop it. Willard, you loved Mary and wouldn't tell. Besides, you didn't speak until you were seven. But I hear you, the signal beaming through time when you *door*. You keep asking *Why* as he entered, exited. There are no reasons, not any more. He met you every night after that. Corroded teakettle, frayed suspenders – the strange sensory fixations of trauma. Moon's tears. He enjoyed the pain as he stroked your ears. God, you were small and so quiet. Four. Have you ever seen a door

ripped from its hinges? I have. It takes great strength, ferocity – you put your shoulder into it, you yank, kick, it takes a minute. And the word usages attendant all have to do with fuck – the door duly nouned and verbed, desacralized, unsacramented, opening by wind or hand. Who more vulnerable? We don't need to talk of actions and techniques – I see them. Him. I see him. *Please stop?* The transmission floods the senses, I'm either losing my grip on the door or ripping it off. As if my senses, an old

barn hinge, are ripped from their bodily frame. Oh, Willard, I think I was made to be insane. Don't you? What other gift can be given in context – what other life recommended? The life where another sense is made? Let's make differsense of difference, together. Unmoored now, the doors to our perception float upon Back Creek. Let us recline, you and I, on two wood doors that I'll strap together – there! The theft is upon the night and we hope to be permanently downstream, like a patient permanently on a table. Not a hinge but a kind of repair that begins in some lullabye I'd sing myself each night as terror wound its way and took the world hostage, hands stroking my ears, saying: you must, you must, you must

Willard Sings as He Renovates the Reign

Kay Star on CFNB for *love's precious flame*. As I am for the same. Willard's an off-key rasp that no one has ever heard sing but he croons now at the top of his breath. *All t' wile, you long tmeeee.* Jo Stafford and cedar is pliable in Willard's hands, joists and beams replaced and the old wood now just a coat for the new structure underneath. The building's as straight, square, and as stupid as Willard seemed to others. A woman might find him dull, but who is to say, what is to say of the men that rise every day to complete their work? An indigent myself, I imagine no more onerous task.

Willard bought old Oracle Elizabeth's stove before she left for Hoyt – god, she left, 106 years old, there's no place left except for place in excess, no inhabitant except the air and ground – how can anyone take the reason for being, how is it possible? – the way a good

song reigns present when he thinks of her, an ancient woman and he merely an old man, four years until her centenary, thirty years for him. *Dear I will soon be lost, I will be so alone and without you, maybe you'll be lonesome too and blue.* Blue like the thin creek that muddies in heavy rains.

Willard knows the correct word as wenge, or so his mother said once when knitting the quilt he's saving for the wall. An empire of wenge that is New Brunswick tucked underneath the emerald blanket Scion McCann thought preserved in the move from Ireland.

We can write letters to lovers and pine for place but the lost, what province is that, are they? Here, to stare at emeralds from across the Broad Road and watch deer that once were of the same, as I (poet) am for the same kind of loss, love's precious flame singeing all those of the true faith who never left or forgot what made the world wenge, emerald, or soot on the stove of a woman it shocked the province to move.

In progress is egress, in loss is low, is leaving one's own steps as they descend into the grave. Looking out my window at a home built in the same year as McCann's came from their original wenge, it dawns: who would defend their neoliberal square footage from the government now, oh place of watching screens? When out there, Willard had only the

wood at the end, and how he had the wood.

*

Dooring

Willard carries a grain of salt in his hand. He opens the futurecabinet to his left, under his mother Mary's quilt in the newly roofed Camp he cannot rename because he wouldn't remember, and out comes a mid-century modern exterior he worked on for three weeks daily, sunup and down.

Deer move from deer to deer to deer as Willard moves from sun to sun to sun to sun. *He has no mind for nothing else*, he sings. *No mind for nothing else to pay no mind. Do do dooo doo doo booop. Bop.* Noises like the low animals make, with other people heiarchifying they're high. Willard's low to the ground and carries a gun in case he sees a deer, has never seen a deer. So he says. Willard's a thousand sayings, all things he's heard others say. Willard is not like the denizens of Enniskillen, but he makes with his hands and always has.

I love Willard like I love my own son. Exactly Like. *Do do dooo doo doo boop. Bop.* Clap. But why do I infantilize when I can become: in Willardness, I too would fight to the last.

The Author Fights to his Last Ounce of Dust

He's in bed, and the world isn't heavy. It isn't there.
The blankets aren't a prison. They aren't there.
The sun through the window – glorious. But he
can't sense it. What sun? What window? The eternity
he knows, that he's fighting against, locked in –
is Willardness. He denies the lisp, the mixed-up
words, but they remain as base code. He denies
the alexia and stutter but you'll not get the denials
because he can't see you. He's stuck in himself,
lodged in long-ago Deersdale, shaking hands with K.C.
while looking for Casey. He's confused. He wants
a neurologist to save his son but the neurologist
refuses. And he's left with the remnants of child-
hood where he was too weak to fight and now
is condemned to conflagration. Ask anyone.
He has the fight in him presently. Ask anyone.
But his fight now is just breathing, there, in bed.
What's Willardness, to him? It's an old confusion,
of wanting to be welcome but always being met
as a joke. Look, his fists are balled. And his left
eye's wet. He's held there – a frozen now. Try
to take the nothing from his hands, the dust.
He'll fight you to the last. The dust lasts.

Willard, Master Doorsman

Loss's prophecy: yes, it will be nothing you lose. Six-panelled frame door in New Colonial style, a model Willard saw in fibreglass that's been removed from the McCann manse uphill, hinges ripped; they needed that door in another place. Now the space is an open rectangle that is also up with the sun. Willard, exhausted, retires for the night, hoping that a deer might brush up close and nose him, come closer, come in, curious, and join him to *door*.

Willard's bevelled edging makes the wooden replica door stout, not stately, low like some colonials say this province is. And made in the old way, with tenise and mortar joints: daydream and see the panels float between stiles and rails. Willard used to earn a wage like the *deer deer deer deer deer* by being useful, by being *door*, a whole economy of *door*, the way doors used to be, before the Old Colonial Style; doors that kept the cold out because they were made so, by hands that wanted the wood to love the denizens, to keep them warm even though they often hated what they didn't understand; doors that grow and shrink according to the elements; a door that adapts, that understands where it is and what it does. It *doors*.

The deer and its thousand purposes, an old Wolastoqey once told Willard: *Creator made the four-leggeds, and it is the deer that gives us hides*. For Willard, this meant doors.

Willard loved the old Wolastoqey but couldn't remember his name, Willard never remembered names unless he heard them five hundred times. McCann. McCann. McCann. McCann. *Deer deer deer deer deer*. Fake Indian, Enniskillens called him, but Willard only wanted to be like the quiet and kind old man, to be *deer*, to *door*.

*

Enter Casey the Deer, The Future of NB

KC. Deer. KC. Deer. Cunning. Deer. Killer. Deer. Killer. Cunning. Deer. Deer. *Deer deer deer deer deer* killer cunning killer killer deer.

The sun gone, Willard is finally asleep as a deer slowly noses towards McCann's place, too far from the Broad Road for surveyors to lodge during expropriation.

Odocoielus Virginianus someone spit out when Willard kept stuttering on the word *deer deer deer deer deer*, and they laughed as Willard tried to mimic that sound like he tried to mimic every woodland sound. *Hopeless Virgins*, Willard said; the town never forgot. Willard never knew why anyone laughed except at him.

He stirs, his hands brushing against the wood on the Camp door, currently *dooring*, extending consciousness across a forest network of doors, even the lonely open frames insist on being grandfathered to the party line – all the forty-some scattered communities in the vicinity, 900 families and three thousand people, that math, and Willard is awakened by the chorus of doors.

Willard calls for group conscience.

What was the mean man's word? The door that's closest by, Tavern Door, opines: *Odoceielus Virginianus*. Willard tries to say it again, into the night, and the doors, who *door*, are patient. Also kind, since he raised them slowly with his own hands. *Hydrofeel Vergeenus.*

Eeeeeeenu eeeeennnneeeeeee nnnuuu.

Neighbor to Mary Duggan's, School Door, says *White-tailed deer*, and Willard sees it in his mind, he can't explain, he never could explain how he sees in the doors.

He sees: a deer nosing towards a door, redbrown in the moon, reverse-raccooned with white around the eyes and nose, white belly, white throat, small-eared, cunning; tail upping.

Willard's newly-made door whispers, *Yes, it's the future, it's Casey*. Willard runs to the McCann's, knows the deer is there like he knows that cedar needs to be soothed as it is sanded, as it deposits wise shards in his hands. Bolting out the door is an adult male whitetail who wanted to see why common people left the deer empire – how could one not be *deer deer deer deer deer*, to be vertically integrated like deer, from water to soil to grass to tree to son and then they take your home and efficiently they take everything, even the sun isn't the same and what was strange is estranged; even the sun, lost

K.C. Sees Willard For the First Time And Smells Trouble

The door is open and the humans are gone. Their scent is less – by half-life, they've left three full moons ago – and this place is safe, mine, like all of this wild; smoke, gone; offal, gone; noise, gone. I decree: this is now an edge habitat, humans destined to self-eclipse and the Reign to expand by evening and moonbeaming –

How did the past humans live? I don't know, I reign in the present. What are the insides of the boxes like? Do chrome machines exist in the house? The grease of guns? Perhaps they left food. (Pellets) I do smell food –over there, that one, open, in, *lipcurl.* Yes – there. But behind a low cabinet door. How to open the door? (*burp*)

Freeze.

I hear a step.

Freeze.

More steps.

Freeze.

Louder. Faster. Does a subordinate, come to challenge? One time some unionized fools tried to stop *my* trucks from entering *my* refinery and I took the lead truck – *my* truck – and drove straight through the line, parting them. But out there is just a man, a smiling human, and you can never trust humans.

They call *me* ungulate. I call them homungulates ruining the rut, limiting my glory – they put the mange in magnificence – he's coming closer. My antlers grow closer to him, a rate of half a centimere a day, faster than the tumours I smell in his body even at this distance, but now I must run. Fighting with humans is always trouble even as they extinctify.

*

Casey in the Rut

Casey, a twelve-pointer (*deer deer deer deer deer*) rubs his antlers against the two-pronged birch tree – almost large enough to accommodate both prominences. Right, then left, then again. His head; head some more, with eyes closed.

In rutting season, the deer are lovers, they turn into doors that open and more deer come through. Deer multiply until the world is a revolving door. Not

itch, but to leave scent on the wood. Your definition of love cannot compare to such object care, such tending.

I am the dominant buck of the scrape. Estrus does nearby shall be bred and subordinate bucks shall flee. I seek the estrusscent in the most covered places, where they hide, closed doors that wait to be opened. Urinescent – a doe, perfect ajar door, nearby – and after the lipcurl test, it's confirmed – estrusscent *doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe,* each *doe* a step I take towards release, release like an old hand-made door closing like a puzzle of interlocking parts that expand and contract in the seasons. A traditionally crafted door is a cunning survivor. But the cover is too thick, his antlers get caught up.

Yanking his head off, yanking, need yanking his head back, and he's wasted three minutes. Estrussmell, where's the urinescent, where did it go? *Doe doe* the doe must be bedded by now *doe doe* I will lose her she will mate with a lesser *doe doe doe doe doe* (*Whish, whish, pheeeew wwwwt!*) *doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe* (*BUUURRRP!*) she's lost she's lost to a subordinate lost.

*

<u>Buck Philosophy</u>

(1) If you are going to do something, do something right.

(2) Be bold, decisive, and unsentimental – willing to use the threat of departure to win, willing to play so hard that others see no point in taking you on.

(3) We can't progress while you stand still.

(4) You can take a calculated risk if you only have to account for yourself.

(5) Reserve the right to expropriate additional land for future expansion.

(6) What Casey wants, Casey Gets.

(7) Your motive is the integration of everything.

(8) Never publish Casey's photograph.

(9) Absolute servility.

(10) Casey *is* New Brunswick.

(11) Absolute monopoly of the does.

(12) Power must be manifested periodically in a personal way.

(13) Leave offspring by the side of the road to teach them a lesson.

(14) Banal *snortwheeze* is the very essence of buckness.

(15) I want my subordinates to be proud of me, I want to be proud of them, and I want to keep going down the road.

(16) Why mythology exists at all: people tend to explain in their own terms that which they cannot otherwise explain.

*

Casey and his progeny

As amazing creator of millions, I play no role in the rearing, only genesis. When life was without form, I gave form and divided darkness from the deep by summoning Moon, who needed only a soft *snortwheeze* to be summoned. Under the supermoon I made ten thousand fawns for over twenty-five seasons, never losing a challenge. I am Cervidae's patriarchy, hunting urine hormones in dark made silver-in-outline by moon. Moon, the full shape; Moon, my companion form. Moon, like the profile of a man on a coin. Moon, my true companion, night after night.

Sometimes I find my children in the grass counting blades. They see me and are afraid, but I tell them I made them and this is just visiting rights. They nuzzle my leg and ask about their mother. She was just one of five thousand, but I use words meant for my man, my Moon: bouncy, constant, practical, strong. They seem to love this romance. *Don't leave me*, they say, but I'm no Dad.

Daddy, no. My progeny must accept that their mother was found and raped, that I am Monopolist, sire to and of the Realm. This is nature. The natural order of things. If you vertically integrate enough, perhaps you can take it up with God.

I look regal enough to get away with anything – the forest meets my whims, knowing Moon's at my command – I take pleasure where and whence it comes. Desolate place called Reign, you need me. My children need me in this exact way – to create an economy of deer. Did they want to be alone?

*

Real Pilots

In Folkestone forest across the water, I learned to fly a Sopwith Camel metal tube with cross-beams men dreamed could equal an eagle.

Why not emulate the buoyant moon?

I took the tube up and down to spite my stern officers who hated my loops tracing the moon's outline. During Supermoon the bosses wouldn't let me fly for fear I'd crash. Perhaps I understood Willard best, before I even knew him, by hurtling as close as I could to the ground, where Moony was.

Dreaming of German deer, gunning their bucks, troop transport in dull trucks, strafing their subordinates until all knew the call of this ace in the woods – (*Burp, burp, buuurp)* – I minted my Monopolist reputation. But the Germans I offed were in my own mind as I slept under the moon in the barracks, too new to fight, too prone to loop-de-loo the quiet white coin with no enemy near, so handsome, as if I were a Canadian quarter (aspiring to be a hunk of moose).

Airlifted through us were the corpses of officers and men of any rank still alive, missing limbs and hooves. Why, I ask any deer reading, do deer hoove such indeerity to deer? *Per ardua ad astra*, the officers smirk as their tails lift.

Fuck those Brits, their words sounding like the locking of horns and interlocking of states, of spacewar and confetti cannons, the bark of dry throats sandpapering an afternoon. No, the sound's that of a buck and another buck tangled up in antler when to take a step back is to die – the aggressor can pin you, stab you twelve times.

Real pilots tell me of fields of bucks squared off, antler to antler, does and fawns far away and not thinking of fathers because the buck does no rearing.

The buck does no rearing.

No rearing except rearing back to bellow.

Even past the Camel's engine I hear the Canadian sound that has followed me all my life, *deer deer deer deer deer*, a hollow plea or cluck for peace. I think peace.

Peace as the biplane traces the moon, *deer deer deer deer deer* bouncing back off the moon. I am of the 54th Wing.

Doves have ten primary feathers per wing. We are a fighting force 540 feathers strong.

Casey Is Chased by the Sikorsky 45.5132° N, 66.4897° W

Easy to get the bucks from up here. Smooth rifle, smooth ride, just ten feet up from the trees and watch them rut, circle the does, we can take two back, only one if it's a twelve-point, probably two if 8 or ten. There – by the water. Big! Whoa, that's the one we want. Ralph, go by the crick –

The scything skything is not a skyking, not an Irving, not a ruler of empire. They chop trees here, they chop the sky and decide what serves as plaything for power. But the white-tailed are forever. Deer are permanent change –

(*muzzleblast*) (*muzzleblast*) (*muzzleblast*)
(*muzzleblast*) (*muzzleblast*) (*muzzleblast*) (*muzzleblast*)
(*muzzleblast*) (*muzzleblast*) Goddammer I'm getting the shotgun

Now I know that we shouldn't, but Ralph! The C.O. wants a big rack to put in the officer's mess to say, we run field operations now, we are king, he wants a kingrack, and there's privileges in it for us, you know what I mean? Ralph, he's going for the creek there, can you get me closer?

The scything thinks it is a sun but it blots out the sun. The skything makes offensive noises that scare the does, that chases them from estrus. Estrusscent – the water just jumped. Does water jump? No, oh no, permanent change –

(*pkewwf*) (*pkewwf*)
(*pkewwf*)
(*pkewwf*)

Once, my antlers got tangled in a hornet's nest. Despite my apology, appealing to their queen's fellow Reign, her majesty, I couldn't see for three days. The yellowjackets gouged my eyes and ears so that the does could rest.

He's tagged, I got him, you can see him throw his head around – the buckshot got him but it's probably too light, too thin, Ralph, you've got

to get me closer, we've got to get this one, We might not find another one this big – (*pkewwf*) (*pkewwf*)

(*snortwheeze*) (*snortwheeze*) *pantpantpant pantpant. pant pant* (*snortwheeze*)
Pant pant pant pant pant

pant pantpantpant pant pant
pantpantpant Pant pant
pant (*snortwheeze*)

Call this the glory, Ralph! *(pkewwf)* I'll get this buck and skin it myself, take the antlers to the C.O. and get a few days off *(pkewwf)* maybe take this Sikorsky to Enniskillen *(pkewwf)* and just sit and fish *(pkewwf)* in that creek they got, maybe live in the most expensive shack there

My competition knew I'd destroy them if they took advantage. Think of lost lineages, the seed and economic opportunity squandered – but this pain in my head, isn't it the same, the thousand-sting of enraged hornets,

And bring out a girl, they love pilots, alls of 'em, and sleep in the best bed, play house a little *(pkewwf)* Goddamn this one can move even though I see I bloodied him, damn (*pkewwf*) stay still you asshole *(pkewwf)*

me wearing their home, uproot - ing it from a branch and tossing it back and forth to let it go free like a new hell that, loosed, can never return or thrive, who in a day's time will not be alive, because they lost themselves I must rest

Casey Rests After Skything Flies Away

He looks gentle. He looks doe. He smells half as bad as humans. But gentle. I see him on a stump. Waiting. Looking out at maples. Listening. His hands rest against the stump, as if he is feeling it breathe, palms to bark. He is not doe for he is not in cover. But he looks doe. His face has an odd shape. His jaw seems pulled back like my neck when I'm caught in thick cover. But he looks like he loves something.

I love something.

Why is he the only one here? He is unmoving. He sits as still as a doe.

I smell apple. Apple. Apple. Apple. There is a sweetness in the jacket pocket of the human.

(Burp, burp, buuurp)

Human, I Reign. Give me apple.

He sees me.

Will he give me apple?

I want apple.

Give me.

He understands. Wood told him. The stump.

He pats the stump and says, *Appa?* and holds it out.

Closer. Closer I come, and strike the apple from his hand.

I don't trust men.

And eat it on the ground, four bites.

(Burp, burp, buuurp)

*

In a New Land, Casey Revolutionizes Business

Despite being a country bumpkin from the backwoods of New Brunswick, Casey trots to Saint John, bedding *doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe doe*. Casey has decided to become a scion of the business world, to reign a more glorious rut.

Buck in the bank, signing accounts with Howard Enman; running a Ford dealership (Pellets) with a gas tank outside (vertical integration).

The buck is fattest in the fall after the summer feeding season.

Wait, some other memory, some other life of vertical integration:

Sagamaw
Sagamaw council
Regional Chief

Harmony

Deer as food: meat (venison, papapuze), marrow, blood, fat. Deer as clothing: hide made into leggings, sleeves, breechclouts and moccasins, buoys, bags, coverings, sandals. Deer sinew as thread. Deer bone as awls, needles, scrapers, digging sticks. Deer antlers, hooves, and teeth as rattles, harpoon points, arrowheads, and fishhooks. Tallow as sealant.

*

The Erewini Call in their Debt

A young buck, Casey saw potential in place, in land and getting over. In service. In holding on to every customer. In growing space for enterprise and yet holding quiet in threat. He'd stare you down until your face fled the scene. No one threatens Casey's gold unless they want to lose. Fortune's moon-traced and smiling on Casey's empire, sold by gallons and then by litres laced with mill effluent, or so it's said. Hold onto your dollar bills, citizens, the great Casey has returned to sell you your souls, rolled for convenience as dollar bills! Fleece. Embrace the future as slogan. Progress replaces. But one day, in the midst of the driest case on record, love's depression slapped wallets to scold Casey's Reign disproportionate, crank-cases no longer affordable by the poor folk told that international finance is a disgrace, that their future in progress has been sold to foreign banks that make their coupe de grace a call for Casey's debts. What better time than to rescind a king's credit and take his crown? Return the trick to the king and unmake love as his own soul in debenture, make rent and make soul, or lose the dream. Casey didn't need to pray or wail. Unlike others, he wasn't too big to fail, couldn't shove a call to some later date, post-crisis, some softer chute.

What sound does it make in the still desert, by night? The sound of charity as it sells no shares on the TSE. One fat cat steals and another fat cat eats. This fat cat dines on another spent fatty and claims the meal for taxes. This little fat cat went meow meow meow all the way to the bank. Casey raised his mighty crown and gored the banker's wallet, explaining how doubt is a mistake in the reign, that he is a religion now, occupying allspace, alltime, that his capital extends beyond allrecall. And the poor banker, he starves.

And eats himself.

*

Casey Speaks Human to Humans

On apogee nights I've developed a habit of *per adra et astra* – I take to the sky and survey the Reign, the work required to make a realm. All the little shiny-eyed fawns lying alone as their mothers forage within their range, the humid continental climate making cold worse, snowfall as I fly – *snortwheeze, lipcurl*.

Below are the *deer deer deer deer deer* but I am no avatar of peace, rather an avenging angel of collections. If you owe me money, you know I come.

You – did not pay your bill. *You, you, you.* If you look, the land is a perfect cock head – slight mushroom top, foreskin intact, urethra slightly hypospadic, the Saint John a penumbra of come.

I run to get *doe doe doe doe doe*. Oh you high hills and Appalachians I use to get position on other bucks, heights that sluiced water into the Nerepis and Oromocto river valleys; oh swamps that grow such strange things under the moon, my Moon, silvered and singed – and, of course, oh the Acadian forests I prefer for fucking. Such privacy from my man Moon. Though in the open terrain there are debtors. In the swamps, hills, and forests – debtors. I am a priapic, furious collector.

Yet the moon naturally calls for quiet, clarity, peace. Then yes. Let us trace.

Loop, loop, loop, boring a hole through the sky, moon cutout pie – we must love one another or die – oh, all the war and here I am, demanding more of others because I loaned them desire and all they did was take it. Who would not take the gift?

I hear *deer deer deer deer deer* and must cease the survey – to fly is to see as far as Casey owns, but can one own peace? What peace can be when heavy cannon will soon call? Who makes this sound?

*

Casey learns his boy

I didn't want to. But the boy had to learn.

Nothing comes between me and the doe.

I eyed him, neck flexed, as warning.

A circling step, as if a stance can say: I've done this since before you were born and I will be doing this long after you die, which is today. But he locks. The fool leaps forward and locks.

The force part is easy, and all vigor – pushing and pushing like a hurried Sisyphus – but rhythm's harder. Three steps forward, three steps back, and lift the head such that on the last step you lift their head off yours with a flick and then run his body down. Run it down. Run it the fuck down and rage.

For fun – to take the edge off the rage – I let him try again. Too soon for this one.

He stands and I pin his antlers to the ground so he can't lift his head. Into his ears, I say, *It's never good business to brag.*

He's beautiful, though. Should I tell him? And probably a fool, but I do love the foolish.

Just taking the chance means he'll be a man. If I let him live. Do I let him live?

I'll let him try again. Up, fool.

Like grapplers except I could take out his eye if I wanted, make him a one-eyed Pete, or could push another Newton and puncture his lung. With my crown crushing his neck, I say, *Learn how much a man should do.*

What I love most about this kid, though, is his just being there, us head-to-head, sweating and shivering, letting him think he's a swordsman – silly Peter Pan – when this is about ploughing down men.

The sound of bone on bone is sublime. Break of his right surroyal tine.

Give up boy!

Fine. Left brow tine.

You asked for it. Left main beam.

What the boy needs to learn is why his mother made him or why Moon is mine, all mine, and how I'll die before I let the night claim this love called Reign.

Of course I remember her in the cover, I remember her each year by scent and I spare nothing to catch her. It was under the Moon, my man, that I made him and his brothers – crown affixed to my head. If this isn't love, then I'm an old fool reigning over the nothing in the distance –

Now Me

You live by

me.

You exist because of

me.

My cock is your episteme, my fist and open hand your meme. Call me mean? I'm your meal-ticket to living another day. Immersed seven inches in your self, I feel nothing but instrumentality, chaos come to do work. You mewl but you're mute and when you cry I come harder. Who can know? There is no numen in Enniskillen. No perfect outcome lasts, the spume's cast wide across your flame, a cometary, dromedary lust. Evil is conceptually lame; think of me as rapture, rupture, the rhyme that completes the sonnet to a murdered lover. Not crime, but beauty, mercy in the eye of the beholder. Is mercy a human attribute?

Mercy was never shown to me, so I sow in turn, so says the trauma model. Doomed to repeat. I pummel your ass and tell Mary I'm aflame as my real need simmers, sure to resume after she falls asleep from the drink. Her pain has no remedy, for she was once in love – it's how I know you are for me, always me, have always been for me, my regime, ailment, Enniskillen's emerald as a winking backside. Such awesome perfume of child to consume. Have I introduced you to the shotgun? It's for killing your mother if you name

me.

If you ever name

me.

Me,

the one you live by.

Me,

the one you exist for.

Me,

who metes out time, who renders crème unto grime, who feels sublimely sated when connected, so merrily, to summer and a memory of my own melody. And Mary? Of your father? It's said her disheartenment was due to a commercial man. I know I'm breaking your heart.

Me.

Suzanne Stewart

Deer Tracks

deer-track *n. (a)* the marks of a deer's passage; *(b)* a route habitually taken by deer.

-Oxford English Dictionary

A thousand things to be written had I time: had I power.

- Virginia Woolf, 1927, *Diary*

August 16

Why were you born when the snow was falling?
You should have come to the cuckoo's calling,
Or when grapes are green in the cluster,
Or, at least, when lithe swallows muster
For their far off flying
From summer dying.
- Christina Rossetti, c. 1876, "A Dirge"

Vine leaves crisscrossed my windows, at that time of year, creating a shady covering without blocking the light altogether. After days and days of humidity and heat, cooler air came in with the breeze, as I sat in my writing room, on that evening. The moment was hushed, but I watched the movement of the heart-shaped leaves, fluttering briefly, from time to time, and a honeybee or two flying from stem to stem, looking (perhaps) for the little grapes, still tiny and green.

By mid-August, dawn came later, each day, but I would leave for my walks at the same hour – a quarter to six – in the dusk-like shadowy atmosphere. On that morning, the light in the east had been faintly coloured, when I reached the harbour trail, the sun's rays at a slant

(infused with a tint of russet), the plants withered by the dryness, the gravel on the path

lighter in tone than sand on a beach, stirring to dust with every step, my running shoes covered – discoloured – with the dirty look of the pale earth coating the mesh and laces and soles.

The streets were exceedingly quiet, as was the trail. I saw and heard few birds, and the air (without wind) stood still, the Main Street flags having collapsed when I passed. Only one walker appeared on the path (ahead and almost out of my sight). Apart from the lovely light, I wasn't looking for beauty, and I didn't expect to be startled.

Besides, my diary writing was nearing its end. I didn't need any more notes about nature, especially, at dawn: for now, at least. "Today I say a final farewell to this little book which is the only record I have made of my personal life for sixteen years and more," George Eliot remarked, in 1877, but it wasn't a *final farewell* for her: another diary (and another) followed.

Then, when I passed through the first green gate, at the edge of the first set of woods, I heard the unusual sound of swimming: movement in the water. I had stopped to look back at the view behind me, where the river splits, embracing the banks of an island that sits in its path, the corridors of water creating a series of intricate channels where wildlife (great blue herons and ducks and bald eagles) still collected, most days, quietly hidden, unless one turned around – paused and looked hard – which I did, briefly, on that morning, with nothing to see, until I heard the splash of the swimming, coming from the opposite direction, so I turned around, again, to face the other way.

Suddenly, I could see the head of a deer, the surface of the water at the level of its slender neck, the body below, and I sensed that its legs were paddling strenuously as it struggled to reach the nearest shore. No rushing current strained its journey, but I noted a look of fright in its eyes as if it were striving to get out of the river, not comfortable with the depth (with water, at all, perhaps): not familiar with being off of its feet, unable to stand on the ground, to move on a solid surface – with nimble grace.

At first, I wasn't sure if it was a deer, but I could see from its head, as its little ears stood straight up, that it was, indeed, what I thought I had found, as I waited for it to cross, which didn't take long on that narrow channel. While I stood on the gravel trail to witness the marvel, of a deer swimming, which I had never seen before, I intuited, too, for the first time, a hint of an animal's consciousness of the risk involved: the impulse to hurry – to return to land.

A small deer. In a rushing river.

When it stepped on the bank, I saw, at once, that it was a fawn: a tiny creature, the size of a dog, but more beautifully – elegantly – chestnut-coloured, almost unable to raise its dripping body out of the water, as it shook itself to remove the excess wetness. It didn't have sturdy, stable legs; its limbs were weak, as if it were newly born, like a little lamb (which I had seen in the past: the fragile beginning, when it needed its mother, after the birth).

No white tail. No spots on the fur. Only a diminutive form. With its back to me. And the fawn stood alone. Without its mother. As it stayed on the shore. Not moving. But looking. No other deer appeared.

I was troubled to see it there, in its solitude, not knowing seemingly where to go, still shaken, perhaps, from the journey across the water.

Had it lost its mother in the tall wild grasses, on the strip of land from which it had come, which runs up the centre of the base of the harbour? Would they find each other? Or would the fawn prepare to die? Was it pained in that moment of vulnerability, crying for its mother: something so small, in a rough world, the coyotes (and black bears) not far away? How would it know where to turn, right then: how to take its first dry steps?

I waited, but it didn't move. Then, finally, I walked away.

When I returned to the spot an hour later, the little fawn was gone. I had hoped that it might have stayed – found its mother (or other deer), by then – for my sake alone, as evidence of a reunion, but the point on the shore where it had left the water was empty. Only a single duck remained. Had it (like me) witnessed the wonder, earlier on, of the swimming fawn?

Deer retreat to sleep in the light according to rhythms and patterns of their own, the nocturnal pursuits in the woods countering my joy and alertness, at dawn, so even if I had waited, for longer, at that spot on the trail, for the fawn (and its mother) – and one or two more deer – to come back, I likely wouldn't have seen either one, the morning having advanced too far, by then.

As I walked away, I prayed for the delicate creature – its slim, slight beauty – and I remembered it, again (and again), throughout the day, feeling, above all, its aloneness (as I imagined it): its utter helplessness.

Why would it have to die, right then, in the middle of August, when summer had reached its glorious crest? Wild apples were fully forming (not falling) along the bank, some of them blushed with rose, on one or

two of the trees; jewelweed blossoms, dripping with dew on that morning, had opened; Queen Anne's lace and goldenrod flourished in every field; kingfishers (and other shorebirds) weren't flying away. The timing of the death of the little fawn, if that were its fate, wasn't quite right: ill-timed, Christina Rossetti might have noted, the event clashing with hours and days (and seasons) in the natural world:

> Why did you die when the lambs were cropping?
> You should have died at the apples' dropping,
> When the grasshopper comes to trouble,
> And the wheat-fields are sodden stubble,
> And all winds go sighing
> For sweet things dying.

"Deer have a keen sense of smell," my philosopher friend remarked, at mid-afternoon, when I tried (imperfectly) to tell the story. He was the only one with whom it was shared.

"No one else saw the event," I said. I had considered the necessity of reporting the incident to the first person who passed, in the moment of urgency, but no one (sensitive enough) had come along.

"They might smell each other," he suggested, "or . . . maybe the mother was waiting in the grasses behind or ahead." Deer maneuver discretely, he explained, in ways that we can't perceive. "Maybe the mother deer was conscious of you – waiting for you to leave – before she appeared."

Yes, I thought, I liked these possibilities: the encouraging words. Deer possess instinctive traits – my sliver of hope, in that moment – that might have led the mother and child together, on that quiet (Sunday) morning. Their animal traits, whatever they were, would have helped them to find each other.

"My heart broke," I admitted. "I was deeply moved, suddenly aware of my capacity to feel for the plight of a frightened animal."

"You experienced the intimacy, a private encounter. Not a tragedy," he said, "but something sad . . . wistful . . . a moment of grace," he added, after a pause, when I mentioned how easily I might have missed the incident had I arrived one minute (or two) earlier, or later. It happened that quickly.

Between six and seven o'clock.

When the air was cool.

The light faint.

Wildlife, more than people, were out: beavers, too, as I walked along, lovely groups of merganser ducks, bald eagles screeching from the tops of the trees at the top of the cliff, and a single kingfisher, the animals withdrawing more slowly, in August, at the later hour of dawn.

Intimacy. *Vulnerability*. *Fragility*. *Beauty*.

These were the words that he (and I) used, and I wondered, too, if I felt the pain of the little fawn because I understood its solitude – the condition of being alone – yet I knew that I wouldn't have seen it, at all, if I hadn't been on my own.

Deer watching.

"Write about it," he said. "Put the incident into your book."

As a quiet finish. With a touch of sadness. A tone of apprehension. A trace of mystery.

But the book, at that point, was nearing its end, I said. I couldn't keep adding more: and more.

If I kept it, the episode would offer a melancholy aspect of life, but not entirely so: the fawn might have found its way through the grasses (after I had gone), and maybe its little footprints – *deer tracks* – would have been marked in the sand (like words on a page), if I had been able to cross the water to look at the shore, at the point where it left the river.

Even before he mentioned the idea, when I turned around at the end of the trail to retrace my steps – still expecting (hoping) to see the fawn with its mother – I had thought that animals (in the wild) could give shape to a plot.

"Accidents," I said.

"But they aren't accidents," he replied.

Surprises, then.

From parallel worlds, two realities had converged unpredictably, at dawn (almost), on that morning. Maybe, the book would have as its essence (with or without the incident) a little circuity: serendipity. (Like deer retreating, mysteriously, to sleep for the day.)

Either way, the chance encounter was raising the question of life or death: the timeliness, in either case. The fawn had been newly

(unconventionally) born in August, which made it likely to die, especially, at that unusual (foreboding) time of year. It would have to grow and strengthen quickly, before the winter had settled in.

Why were you born when the snow was falling?

You should have come to the cuckoo's calling.

For the rest of that day, the life – or death – of the little fawn lurked in my mind (as a mystery).

August 17

> At present the deer . . . are much thinned and reduced by the night-hunters, who perpetually harass them in spite of the efforts of numerous keepers.
>
> - Gilbert White, 1767, *The Natural History of Selborne*

> Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die:
>
> - Revelation 3:2

On the following morning, at the same hour, I walked, again, on the harbour trail.

No (little) deer was swimming in the water.

I looked, of course, as I passed the place, when I turned around after the gate, in search of wildlife in the river, but nothing appeared. Radiant orange in the sky had come and gone, but apart from the fleeting colour, the morning was rather ordinary, without the marvel (and mystery) of the previous day: the quiet, melancholy beauty.

I found few ducks, another kingfisher, plenty of blue jays, and a rare cooler air.

In fact, while I walked to the end of the trail and back, I forgot entirely about the possibility of seeing the fawn, until I approached the final stretch, with the field on my right, and the green gate straight ahead.

Two deer were facing me, in the middle of the gravel path: a fawn beside its mother, almost under her body, intertwined in her legs, barely visible when I stopped, at the spot on the bank (exactly) where I had witnessed the swimming on the day before, except that the deer were

standing on land: two of them, that time, stopped in stillness, neither making a move, and I felt a sudden (deep) delight.

Had they come deliberately – appeared, right there – to stir my memory, with reassurance, that they had, after all, found each other (if it were the pair)? As I waited and hoped for a better view, wanting to see the fawn more fully, I inched along the gravel without a sound: the two deer still facing me.

Then, without warning, a runner appeared.

He, too, could see the deer, but he didn't stop running, and the frightened pair – mother and child – turned sideways and leapt into the trees, their white tails upright, even on the fawn (I could see it, that time), as they sprung out of sight, the grasses too tall, the shrubs and trees too dense with leaves, to reveal their sprightly forms, after that.

Before it left, I could see that the fawn, as I had supposed, was very small, the height of my knees, with thin, slender legs, clearly protected, on that morning, by its mother – as she stood in front, when I came along – its fur a lovely shade of reddish-brown, and I thought of nature's furtive ways: what appears one day is gone the next (or gone one day, to return the next). The fragile fawn and its mother stood right there (for me, perhaps), in the same place, at precisely the moment of my (second) passing, the runner running, as the deer did, but I caught a glimpse of their graceful shapes, the sadness of the previous day turning to joy: to certainty (almost) that the little animal wasn't lost – injured – or dead somewhere, or alone and suffering in solitude.

The affection had been apparent, the two as physically close as they could have been, the one nearly concealed by the other, until they moved: the smaller leap an echo of the larger one. They must have retreated to sleep, after that, at the hour of slumber, for them, while I prepared to begin the day: differently, because of the (second) incident at dawn.

Confidence in Daybreak modifies Dusk.

- Emily Dickinson, c. 1858, *Letters*

A thousand things to be written had I time: had I power, Virginia Woolf remarked, in 1927, in her diary. Could writing ever end, she must have meant?

Would I keep the incident, or not, I still wondered, and would the occasion become a *pro*logue, or an *epi*logue: anticipation, or summation? It was a tale of life (not death): the survival of a tiny thing when the hour of morning (in human terms) converged with the hour of night (for the deer). Did the light, either way, enable them to find each other, or initially hinder the reconnection?

Perhaps, I would never know.

October 16

> The leaves (*folia*) of books are so called from their likeness to the leaves of trees. The sides of leaves are called pages (*pagina*) because they are bound (*compingere*) to one another.
>
> - Isidore, c. 636, *Etymologies*

Two months later, in mid-October, crocuses were blooming: tracks and traces of spring, at the wrong time of year (like the birth of a fawn, on the eve of autumn).

Autumn crocus. *Colchicum*.

Not knowing of its existence, I had always thought of the joy of crocuses at the other end of winter, in early spring, but there they were, blooming with persistence, although not many: some alone as a single flower, others in clumps of nine or ten or so, scattered throughout the wooded gardens, not clearly preferring sun or shade (sun, perhaps). Each of the blossoms was pale purple, the six petals pointed (not round, like the blooms in spring), the stems taller, the stamen orange, but the leaves on the plants were missing.

"Naked ladies," one of the gardeners remarked, referring with amusement to the familiar name for the autumn crocus. "The foliage appears in spring," she explained, when the plants begin to sprout, late in April and early in May. "After that, it disappears. The flowers in October bloom without leaves."

These little blossoms were gorgeous – delicate but stately – in different stages of opening, the faces of some more visible than others, not robust enough for autumn, I thought, but enduring, somehow, the cooler nights (the frost, only days before) as they flourished (fleetingly) without the leaves: their sparkling green in early spring.

A subtle end to the year was gradually taking effect, making new spaces (more soil to see), while colours were coming from sources other than floral brilliance, in the leaves on the shrubs and trees: crimson and yellow and green and peach and purple and sandy brown, the hues completing a circular spectrum.

"More gold than red," that year, some thought.

And the breeze, most days, was exceedingly warm (19 degrees, or more), as I watched the movement of air in the trees, their trunks supple and tall, bent by the strength of the wind, almost inaudible, months before. Differently, too, mornings were brighter, while the sun was low in the sky, "blinding your eyes," the growers would say, as if more than a little disgruntled, but the fog (how lovely) would linger, sometimes, until the middle of the morning, its softness slow to dissolve.

"I don't do much, at this time of year," one of the elderly gardeners confessed: one task only, on that afternoon, *if* she pursued her intent (to pot the begonias, to winter indoors), her lightweight sweater open – then, closed – as if she couldn't decide whether she wanted it on – or off – on that mid-autumn day, at midday, when traces of summer still hung in the air, as the outdoor labours were winding down. For almost a week, she said, she hadn't stepped into her gardens, at all: not, at least, until I had passed, to chat, on that day.

With pruners, she would remove the remaining dead foliage, either now or in the spring. "Eventually, the work will get done," she murmured, without a hint of haste in her voice, but she was unsettled, on that morning, by "sticks" that had fallen everywhere from the trees, "after all that wind, last week." Would she collect them in autumn, I wondered, or leave them there (for the deer) for the winter?

Were words, too, becoming fewer? Had I had enough (of writing), and would I prepare for winter: or spring?

The book hadn't come to an end: not yet. The circle of hours and days and seasons (in my mind) was incomplete: the harvest (of thought) imperfectly finished.

More crocuses (tracks and traces in the snow) would sprout in April (or March?).

A *thousand*, maybe.

Before the deer were born, perhaps. Or would the flowers and fawns appear at once?

Yes, spring, I thought: the book might need more room to mature: more *leaves* (to turn).

"My stories grow in me like plants, and this is only in the leaf-bud," George Eliot remarked, in 1859, while writing one of her novels.

But would the additional *pages* (with or without a fawn and a crocus, in autumn or spring, or both) look forwards or backwards (in time)? Or would the direction of perceiving even matter: the *leaves*, either way, as if blown by a breeze, revealing two sides of a page, while *bound*, by a thread, *to one another*.

March 16

> The *vernal crocus* expands its flowers by the beginning of March at farthest, and often in very vigorous weather. . .while the *autumnal* (the *Saffron*) defies the influence of the spring and summer, and will not blow till most plants begin to fade and run to seed. This circumstance is one of the wonders of the creation, little noticed.
>
> - Gilbert White, 1778, *The Natural History of Selbourne*

> Your little Note dropped in upon us as softly as the flake of Snow that followed it.
>
> - Emily Dickinson, 1884, *Lette*rs

By the middle of March, spring had begun.

Crocus shoots (not many) had burst through the earth, splashed their greenery into the air and onto the soil, their little leaves as thin as needles, an inch in height (a spray of blades), slender and straight like grass, but clearly different, clustered in clumps, and noticeably holding a bulge: fulfillment (in a flower) to come.

The sight was lovely: minutely there, in moist brown soil, the earth heavy and damp, like the grass on which I stood, as I sunk when I stepped off the road and into the gardens to see the plants close-up, expecting water to seep into my boots, which didn't, but I felt the possibility, liking the softness (the essence of spring).

I had found the *vernal crocus*, this time, on the sixteenth day of March, as the final hour of the afternoon was slipping into the early

evening, six months exactly after I had witnessed the miracle of the autumn *colchicum*: flowers that unfolded in mid-October, as a prelude to winter, on plants that flourished without their leaves.

On the day before, the vernal crocuses were nearly covered in snow, the blossoms just rising above the whiteness, but deer hadn't eaten any of the petals, preferring white buds (elsewhere), I supposed, to the yellow and purple blooms (right there), if colour could make a difference (to hunger), on plants that flourished with their leaves.

Yes, a *little note* (in the form of a flower) *had dropped in upon us*, in early spring, although it had followed, rather than preceded, the *snow*.

More (and more) clumps of crocus sprouts appeared at my feet, some of the buds still closed, in the shape of a raindrop (or teardrop?), but thinner (more slender), not hanging, like rain, but sitting on the top of a straight stem: the petals not running or falling anywhere, unlike the steady showers that had splashed to the ground for most of the day, the air moist, the soil soft, the mist thick, the earth heavy and damp.

Beauty, in March, I could see, was muted: not quite joy (a little melancholy), like mornings in autumn, or the amber (twi)light on that spring afternoon.

> Deep down below there is a hidden river of sadness but this must always be with those who have lived long –
>
> - George Eliot, 1880, *Letters*

But I hadn't *lived long*, nor had the fawn, or the autumn *colchicum*, or the vernal crocus buds at my feet, or spring, itself, in the middle of March.

> Have you Blossoms and Books, those solaces of sorrow?
>
> - Emily Dickinson, 1885, *Letters*

Yes, Emily, (I think) I do: blossoms *and* books. *Wonders of creation*. Both. Springing, somehow (in sorrow and love), from slender leaves: in paper or plants.

As *wondrous* as deer.

Julian Day

Migration Lines

scattered like seeds seed-
pods along the roadside

rooting in sloughs

or gliding on the wind catching
in gusts along migration lines

west or east Winnipeg
Calgary

or maybe some place further
putting out feelers pistil and leaf
hoping *this* *this*

is where I finally get to breathe

ready for it reaching all day
standing for little more than the sun

and prepared to leave it all
right here because here

is better than nothing better
than what-was was-had
and anyways don't we all

end-up drink-up die-
away or some-such?

Renée Harper

Willa Cather's Prairie

Sit in her prairie
612 acres of never-been-plowed
grassland that runs wine stained
near Red Cloud Nebraska
where Willa Cather spends nights
in a plain brown house
where she wallpapers
an attic by lantern light
sets a desk by a window
that looks over
a drought sick garden
where small roses
curl in the winds
from plains a wind
that lives in the eaves
the prairie just there
its grasslands are her country
as the waters are a sea.

Follow her where
she sets her characters
vessels tossed in the storms
that burst from thin horizons
follow where they navigate
the spiky switch
the buffalo grasses
bits of old prose in their pockets
sophisticated in other spaces

but poorly clothed here
where the blackbirds chitter
in the ironweed.

Astrid Aprahamian

A War Somewhere Else

Crouching in front of a low metal basin, Nina scrubbed the clothes in the lukewarm water. Her hands were red and swollen. The twins were a dirty pair. Every day she sent them off to school in clean shirts and every afternoon they returned from their games covered in all kinds of substances. Some days, the good ones, it was merely dust and sweat, the childish, faint-smelling kind. On other days there was mud, cow manure, soot, even red soil if they had been creeping near the cemetery. Sometimes there was blood, almost always their own, caked in brown on their sleeves and the necks on their shirts: they were both prone to nosebleeds. At night, while they slept huddled together in the large bed, Nina took their brown-stained white shirts and washed them anew. She did this every night.

"Shushan's husband returned a year later, and Mariam herself, she came back and surprised us all. We all thought she was dead…"

Every night she told herself this tale while she did the washing. It helped her in the same way a fairy tale read to a child before bed serves to ward off nightmares.

Nina pushed a strand of black hair that had escaped from her bun off her face with the back of her hand. She twisted the shirts in the metal basin, hit them against it, wrung them in her large hands until the water had drained from them. Rising painfully to her feet, swollen in their brown slippers, she took the shirts outside to hang on the porch from the clothesline.

Once the shirts were hung, she returned to the porch and placed her hands on the railing to steady and stretch her stiffened back. Looking into the darkness, she could sometimes sense the animals that feared her. During the worst years, the dark years of the war, she would venture on the porch only if she had the hunting rifle in her hands. Once she had had to shoot it. Whoever it was lurking in the tall bushes promptly stalked away. In the morning she had found small droplets of blood dried on the leaves and the yellow earth.

The rifle now stood in the entryway, close at hand.

The war had taken many things from her, but she had seldom felt afraid for herself. It had always been the children. Her husband came back to her with a bleeding arm, and as soon as she had mended it, he had left again only to die in combat. Her little boy, her Armen with the loud, lovely laugh, stepped on a mine. Then her Levon, her first-born, her angel of a son, disappeared. She clung to her remaining children, to her daughter and her twin boys, with the kind of fierceness seen in bears and their cubs. She became the sentry of her own house, pacing back and forth at night on the porch with the hunting rifle against her chest. She had bought an Armenian *gampr*, a wolfhound as large as a donkey, and let it roam on the grounds at night. Then, when she had sent her children to live with their aunt during the worst months of the war, she herself had gone into the bushes and the dense forests of sycamores and maple trees and climbed mountainsides to help the men of her village defend whatever was left of their home, littered with the ruins of centuries-old churches. In the beginning the men were against it, for she was a woman, then they remembered she was David's widow and a doctor as well, and they let her stay.

Something moved behind her. She turned her head slightly and saw her daughter from corner of her eye.

"Not asleep?" Nina said.

It was not a reproach. She felt the girl had passed the age of being treated like a child. At sixteen she was to choose what to do with her life. Nina could force nothing upon her. This saddened her and hurt her, but it was not the girl's fault.

"I cut my hair," said the girl quietly.

Nina turned completely to face her daughter. It felt like she was staring into her husband's face. Those grave, challenging eyes were absent from her other children's faces – even from her little Armen's, who left her at ten years old. His eyes were joyful, light, laughing. They were laughing even as the life went out of them. But her daughter could not laugh like Armen did nor was she warm and trusting like her Levon who would return home someday, of that she was certain, she knew it in her mother's heart. The thread that kept them linked together had not yet been cut.

Her daughter stood in the doorframe, uneasily shifting form one leg to the other. Her long chestnut hair was half gone. In its place was a short bob. Though her daughter's stance was worried, afraid, her right hand clutching the doorframe, her eyes were not. They told her that she, Nina, had no say over this, that even if she were to beat the girl, as other parents

did whenever their daughters displeased them with unfeminine gestures and activities, none of it would work. She would not submit.

"Let me see what you've done."

Her daughter did not move from the doorframe, unsure of her mother's tone.

"Eva, darling. Let me see if it needs fixing."

Finally, Eva moved towards her. The back of her hair was uneven, longer than the front. Nina sighed and patted the girl's head.

"It's no good to cut hair at night. I'll fix it tomorrow."

"Alright." Eva turned and walked back inside, her shoulders relaxed now.

Nina looked one last time into the quiet darkness beyond the porch, hoping to see a figure emerge from it – the lanky, tired frame of her son Levon, back from the war, freed from the enemies that had kidnapped him.

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Her name was really Ninel, but she told everyone that it was Nina. She did not like her real name: it was Lenin spelled backwards, and she did not like the Bolsheviks. Her half-sister was named Svetlana, after Stalin's daughter, in a bid to ward off any suspicions of their father's anti-Stalinist behaviour during the worst years of the purges. It had not worked. Their father and his first wife had both been arrested and sent to the camps in Siberia, thousands of miles from the warm Armenian sun. The wife had died there. Their father, by some miracle, survived. But he could not return to Yerevan after the great war in the forties and found instead a nice country girl to settle down with in the mountains by Azerbaijan, in Armenian territory. There, Nina and her six brothers were born. Of them, only three survived the war, and one of them lost both his legs.

Her home had been built by her father. It was two storeys tall with spacious rooms and many beds to accommodate the friends and relatives coming in from the cities and villages to visit them. Not many of them came to see her anymore once the war stopped. The rooms became storage space. Her friends had left for the bigger cities. Some had gone to Yerevan, but the majority were lost to cold Russian cities. Every year Nina saw the young men of her village leave with promises of a prompt return, their pockets bursting with money. The few who did come back did not manage to gain any riches and they returned looking haggard and

filthy from working on the Russian roads. They never stayed long, only for a few weeks, and departed again, leaving their wives surprises in their bellies and venereal diseases.

Nina knew this because she had to treat the wives. She did not like telling them what they had and how they had received it. Some women knew immediately and came to her with sad betrayal in their eyes, betrayals they were powerless against, for how could they blame the men working twelve-hour days and sleeping in barracks with dozens of other men, all reeking of sweat? The women did not mind whatever took place in Russia. It was only bad when the husbands suddenly stopped sending money home and answering their phones. They all knew, then, that the husband had taken a new wife, a young, good-looking Russian girl who offered him a nice firm body that his Armenian wife of over twenty years could no longer keep, especially at such a distance, especially if she had to tend to the homestead by herself.

These forgotten women did not fight. They did not scream or make a scene, and if they wept it was done quietly when the children were asleep, for they could not break in front of them. These women did not shake their fists at their Lord, but lit candles at the church for their husbands' health and prayed for them. They were not taught to hate, to despise, and they could not do so even in the face of treason, of sickness brought on by Russian adventures. They went to church and prayed and sighed to their close friends over a cup of coffee, as long as the children were not there to hear their voices tremble.

Nina preferred treating these women's sicknesses to having them beg her for certain medications for terminating yet another pregnancy, sometimes the second in the same year. *It's another girl, doctor, I can't have another girl…* She refused it to them then, unless the woman was unmarried, but she knew they found the pills somehow, through other means. Having a girl was a burden. Having a son meant prosperity and protection in the war. Because of this, the village now lacked the unborn girls. In her twins' classrooms there were only three girls for eleven boys. These boys would head off to the army, if they did not flee to Russia before then, and some would be killed, but still the balance would be off. Nina could not fight the women on it anymore: she could only fight for Eva.

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"Mama. How much do you have saved for me?"

She told her.

"Mama. I want to study in Yerevan."

Nina had feared it as a possibility. "You will be all alone there."

"I want to see a real city, Mama."

"But will you manage? I can only promise you what I have already, and I can send you food. But I cannot say how much money I will make in the future."

Nina could not charge the full sum of her services to villagers who had hardly enough, even with their husbands' money from Moscow, Krasnodar, Rostov. Often these villagers gifted her with food or wool or firewood, and they fixed whatever was falling apart in her house in return for her healing services. She herself only had a small garden and a few hens, so she received these services gladly. But it was not money; it did not work outside of her village.

"I am sure there is work available in Yerevan. At the supermarkets. I have no shame in working."

"How much will your rent be?"

"About a hundred a month. I don't need to live downtown. I can live further away where it's cheaper."

"You've thought a great deal about this."

Eva sat down. She picked up a boiled egg and her fingers took to peeling it. Nina poured her some black tea which she sweetened with honey. In time, the twins rose and sat down, sleepy-eyed, to breakfast. They kept pushing their hair from their eyes.

"I need to cut your hair soon," said Nina. She prepared them a plate of warm eggs wrapped inside buttered lavash. "Boys, your sister will be going to Yerevan next year."

Eva looked up from her boiled egg and smiled.

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"Mrs. Nina!"

Nina turned around. A green truck was coming up on the road. Behind the window she saw the round head of Tatul.

"Can I offer you a lift, Mrs. Nina? Are you going home?"

"I am, Tatul dear. Thank you."

Nina climbed into the truck. She had been to her clinic in the afternoon and seen a lot of women now that the summer vacations were over and the men had left. She had confirmed five new pregnancies. There had also been an arm to set, swollen tonsils to drain, and a patient she suspected had diabetes.

"Bless you for appearing, Tatul dear," said Nina.

"You seem tired, Mrs. Nina. How is Eva?"

Nina smiled to herself. "Eva is well. She cut her hair yesterday."

"Really! And what did you tell her? Is it short?"

"It's very short. I told her nothing. Why should I?"

"Such a shame, she had such beautiful, long hair."

Nina looked over at Tatul, first at his chubby fingers holding onto the steering wheel, then, moving her gaze gradually upwards, at his round face. His skin was dark, like cardamom. He was twenty, one of the few young men in the area.

"And how is Eva doing?" Tatul continued. "It's her last year at school, isn't it?"

"It is. She's doing well. She's excited to be graduating."

In front of them the road wound around hills and cliffs.

"Say, Mrs. Nina, could I venture to ask you a question?" She nodded. "Would I be allowed to… to see your daughter, once in a while?"

"You mean, to take her out?"

"If that is possible, yes. Or I could come and have coffee with her in your garden. Whatever you feel is best." He did not take his eyes off the road.

"Listen to me well, dear," started Nina solemnly. "Eva is a peculiar girl. People blame me for it, that I let her grow up unsupervised, both fatherless and motherless, because I was working. It is not so. She does things her own way."

"She does seem very strong-headed," said Tatul. "But I like that."

"It's good that you do, but that means I cannot force her into any situation. If you want to drop by for coffee, do so. But I cannot promise Eva will want to join us, or that she'll want to go out with you." Nina sat back in her seat. "Besides, she's chosen to go to Yerevan now."

"To university – in Yerevan?"

"Yes."

"And you are letting her go, Mrs. Nina?"

"Of course. It's what she wants."

The rest of the ride was quiet. When they arrived in front of her house, Tatul declined to stay for dinner

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Nina kept a pack of cigarettes in one of her drawers, and she lit one very late at night as she did tonight on the front porch, having hung the boys' clothes to dry in the quiet wind. September was turning at last towards the fall season and she would soon have to dry the shirts inside, away from the cold nipping at her fingers. The soft ruffling of the trees in the dark reached her now from beyond. She had checked earlier that the rifle was loaded before stepping onto the porch to be greeted by an abnormal creaking in a floorboard. Maybe she could ask Gegham to fix it. She had delivered him of an abscessed pair of tonsils in the middle of the summer and had not accepted any payment then. He had just lost part of his flock to some ravenous wolves because the son he had placed in charge of his sheep had dosed off one afternoon in the sweet mountain air.

Between her plump fingers the cigarette seemed like an anomaly. She could hear the deep thump of her heart. It was tired: she had not slept last night.

With every rustling of the bushes, it was not an animal nor the enemy that she expected to crawl out from the shadows. She closed her eyes not to see her disappointment and to better hear his voice and to better see him as he were on this very porch eight years ago.

"Mama."

"Yes, dear." She was pitting cherries in a rare moment of silence in the mountains, undisturbed by the shelling. Her hands were red and glowing.

"I want to study in Yerevan."

"Do you? They have nothing in Yerevan now. No running water. No electricity. In winter there is no heat, and the food is scarce."

"But here, there's a war."

She could not say anything then and kept taking the small cherries between her fingers. At her feet was a white ceramic bowl for the pits, and a large pot for their flesh.

"My son. You must do what you believe will be good for you. If you want to go to Yerevan, then go. I am a mother, I will worry. But I shall not object."

Levon had jumped and kissed her cheeks. "Mama, you understand me."

He was taken, gone, lost, the very next day. The soldiers reported that the Azeris had him. That was how one lost children in the war, besides the shelling.

She did not finish making the cherry preserves, and they did not have any that year.

Nina crushed her cigarette against the floorboard and stepped inside. In the living room where she slept, three pairs of glazed black eyes surveyed her from atop the piano no one had played in years. Her husband's and her lost sons' framed pictures kept her company at night. She did not need to talk to them this time to find her rest. She was so tired it came to her quickly. She lay down on the brown couch, not bothering to undress.

Before she lost knowledge of the earthly world, she felt again the warmth pressing in her chest. It had hurt right there when her little Armen had been ripped to shreds from the mine. But now instead there was a warmth there, and it was stronger than before as she thought of the kind brown eyes of her Levon and the sun that shone in them on that last day on the front porch.

Erin McGregor

a eulogy

spring, before the lilacs
but after the cherry
blossoms
C in the hospital and I am writing
a eulogy, I write it

in my head, while I sleep,
in the shower,
while I eat. I write it
through my windshield at red

lights. it shadows my eyes, notices
small things. look, it says:
a hawk on a signpost.
the sun is diffuse

all the way to the hospital the impending
moment
buzzes and burrs
like a wasp trapped.

his hand reaches, his grip still
strong he is open, a Madonna lily.
oh, he says, oh,
over and over, surprised.

and all the words
gathered so carefully, these

impotent, conceited
things
evaporate like breath.

Callista Markotich

Shackleton's Endurance: Lost Ice Ship Found

Ice-rasp and water-sluice.
A voice: *There she goes.*
Her crushed bow, her shattered masts, her stern

with its gaping wound, her rigging tangle trailing
her descent like a flag of truce with the Weddell Sea
as the ice released her from the heave of floes

and the Antarctic took her down.
Shackleton, his carpenter and cook, his men of science
and men of the sea watched her go with grief-tight throats

and stricken blue, brown, grey and mortal eyes gone now
for decades from this earth. But eyes are on her now,
drone eyes, like fish on fire, darting in delight,

beacons sweeping the deep clear black:
the ship's wheel waiting for the skipper's hand,
a strewn galley, crockery, a boot, anchor chains

lying snakelike in the silt, forensics of the sundered rudder
torn astern re-telling the bitter tale and the ship, preserved
by grace of frigid water, turgid with cold and salt,

and through this water lens, pristine as space,
her name in letters curved above the stern, and, believe it!
Shackleton was lowered in his Grytviken grave

one century ago this very day,
and in a wheelroom five hundred fathoms up above
throats tight with awe are whispering:
There she is.

Matthew Rooney

Old Porter's City

I miss the smell of this old porter's city
As night tucks in its blanket of smoke and brine.

The rusted streetlamps bloom in the humidity
As short waves push against the swollen planks.

The harbour grows with each fiscal year
To accommodate the tourists's giant vessels –
But we,
a nation of unfortunates,
Run from our houses to these sea-drenched shores,

Hold no place to judge the freshly baptized
That witness the might of Atlantic eddies
And are sprayed by the blood of our generations.

Swallowed whole in north-eastern swells,
They spit and gurgle onto the peeling docks
The song of this place,
heard clearest in the dark.

Dave Margoshes

Bump's Mortality

Bump arose one fine morning fully awake to the eventuality of his mortality. He would die, he could plainly see that – not even he, Christopher Downing Bump, QC, Oxford-educated, respected by his peers and comfortably well off, was above that. But the nature of his death and its timetable were now clear to him, as one's reflection in a body of disturbed water comes into focus as the water relaxes. Thus, he felt certain, he had an advantage over death and an anxiety that had buzzed along the fissures of his skin and gullies and escarpments of his thoughts since arriving at a certain age now eased. He gazed at the freckled paint of the ceiling above his bed as if the bumps and whirls there were a code now deciphered. He sighed, rolled over on his side and slept for another fifteen minutes, so unusual for him.

This incident occurred on a morning in May when the trees in Bump's yard and neighbourhood had burst open first with leaves, then blossoms, and the air was redolent of cherry, apple and lilac perfume and thick with the buzzing of bees. His refrigerator and pantry were well stocked, his closet filled with clothes that fit him well and his bank account was at a more-than satisfactory level. His children were grown and gone but called regularly, his wife was gone and silent. That was all right, he'd gotten over that. All in all, he was at peace with the world and, in most regards, it appeared to be a good time to be alive. Except that he'd been quite sure he wouldn't be for long.

When he awoke the second time, the pressure in his chest was gone. On this fine day in May, Bump was fifty-three years, two months and sixteen days old, and the pressure in his chest had first announced itself three years, two months and fifteen days earlier. Angina, his doctor called it, a warning sign but nothing to get too anxious about. He'd given Bump a thorough examination and sent him for a battery of tests. It was, he said again, a warning sign, but not of an imminent danger. He prescribed pills, exercise, a new diet and patience. But Bump was anxious for he understood this pain to be the hand of death squeezing itself around his heart, not so much a warning sign as an introduction. There was no mistaking it, no escaping it. There would be no missed appointment in Samarra.

But this morning, this very fine morning in May, as he awoke for a second time, there was no pressure, not in his chest nor in his arms or shoulders, neck or jaw. Nowhere. He lay silently, motionless on his back in comfort and listened to the beating of his heart, an orderly motion of blood and muscle as regular and reassuring as the ticking of the grandfather clock in his living room, an heirloom he'd inherited from his father, who had, he remembered now, lived to a ripe old age, well into his eighties. No, there was no hand of death on his heart this morning, no sign of death at all. Bump would not be dying today.

He knew that with certainty because he was now in possession of certain knowledge of his death, when and how it would occur. That knowledge was inexplicably calming.

He had seen it all before his very own eyes, like a tableau spread out before him on a presentation able, or the coming attraction of a movie not yet released – or even filmed. It was so clear, or it had been, for now it was beginning to blur. There was a girl, he knew that, and danger, a girl in some sort of danger, and he, like a hero in a black and white movie, was stepping in, taking the bullet meant for her, and…. He faltered here. It had all been so clear, so sharply etched in his mind, but now it was fading and he couldn't summon it back. It hovered here, this certain knowledge, in the back of his mind, present but as if behind a thin diaphanous veil that allowed him to see its outline and shape but not the details that defined it.

Still, he felt no anxiety. He *had* seen it and he knew it was there, felt confident it would present itself to him again. It was now as permanently and thoroughly a part of him as his name.

Bump, Christopher… Christopher Something Bump. Never mind, it would come to him.

He got out of bed, stretched, made the routine effort to touch his toes, ten times. Went to the bathroom, relieved himself, brushed his teeth. He felt…fine. Unnaturally so. Preternaturally – the word came into his mind, familiar but a bit hazy. A word he'd once known the meaning of but now had lost. Still, that's how he felt.

He brushed his hair and, while studying his reflection in the mirror – had he changed in some almost imperceptible way? – he remembered the dream. He had thought – he remembered now too – that he'd had a vision, a moment of intense clarity, but he realized now it had been a dream – only a dream, merely a dream – and that it had faded, moved itself like skittish kitten just out of reach, a fraction of a thought's width beyond the scope of his awareness.

Still, he felt fine, unnaturally so. Preternaturally. Perhaps. The dream, he remembered, was about him, about death, *his* death. Something. There was, perhaps, a girl.

It felt important, but try as he might to recapture it, the dream remained elusive. It would be on his mind all day, he thought, like a bit of meat stuck between two molars in the deep recesses of his mouth, taunting his tongue. But in fact, as soon as he turned away from the mirror, the dream and all it had purported to foretell was forgotten.

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Bump stood on his back deck for a minute, breathing in the fresh air and the smell of newly cut grass, and admiring the colourful array of flowers in their neatly trimmed bed. The garden was one of his few passions. It was a fine morning, and he felt fine, unusually so. It came to him that his anxiety was gone, that tightness in all his limbs and throat, that fizz in his blood as if he'd downed a pot of black coffee and the caffeine was singing its way through his veins. He marvelled at this, this absence, and tried to remember when he'd last felt so fine, but he couldn't.

He checked his watch, shook his head in annoyance at himself. He was late and had work awaiting. Bump was a man of routine, a creature of habit, and a man who valued punctuality.

On the bus downtown, he found himself humming a nameless tune – an almost tuneless tune – and marvelled at that too. What was going on?

He stopped for his usual coffee and cruller but, instead of getting them to go, asked for his coffee in an actual cup, the cruller on a plate, and took them to a table near the window. Looking out on the street, busy with the usual pedestrian traffic. The barista, a pretty young woman with long dark hair, had smiled at him, and he'd noticed –couldn't help but notice – how, as she breathed, her breasts, under a crisp white blouse, rose and fell, rose and fell, almost imperceptibly. He imagined her breasts – couldn't help but imagine them – how they'd feel in his hands, the taste of them in his mouth. It was a long time since Bump had been aroused but he was now and he opened a paper napkin and put it over his lap.

To distract himself, he gazed out the window – the people passing by all seemed sharply etched against the backdrop of buildings and vehicles moving slowly in the street, the colours of their clothing unnaturally bright, the vivid colours almost painful to see.

By the time he got to his office, he was fifteen minutes late – not that it mattered to anyone but him, though his secretary, Arlene, so used to

seeing him arrive precisely at the stroke of 9, raised her eyebrows as he rushed past her desk, with barely a hello.

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Noon found Bump sitting at his desk, gazing into an uncertain middle distance. In the last two and three quarters hours, he had read his email and a few letters, drafted a letter, signed some documents that Arlene brought to him, talked to two clients on the phone and, along with a colleague, met with another, a rather fraught meeting that nonetheless went to his satisfaction. During that time, Bump thought of nothing other than the matter of hand – he was the sort of man who, when a task was put before him, gave it his full attention. Now, his desk clear and the next appointment an hour and a half way, he sat motionless, the wheels in his mind having slowed to a crawl.

Arlene tapped at his door, opened it halfway and stuck her head in. The curls in her honey-brown hair jostled with the movement. Had her hair always been that colour? "Going for lunch. Bring you something?

"No, thanks," Bump said, but so quietly she could hardly hear. She opened the door wider and came in. "You OK, Boss?"

That broke Bump's reverie. "Yes, sure, Arlene, thank you. I'm going out in a minute."

She turned but before she'd gone through the door, he called her back. "Arlene, something…."

She gave him an uncertain smile. "Something?"

"Something I've forgotten, that's all."

"You remembered you forgot it though." Her smile broadened. She had been with Bump for a dozen years or more and he trusted her completely.

"Yes, something like that. Something…" The word, *that* word, seemed to have gotten itself stuck in his mouth.

"It'll come to you, Boss. These things always do." She laughed and was gone.

She was right, he knew, forgotten things invariably rise to the surface. This time, though, he wasn't so sure.

***

Bump went for a walk. He thought he'd get a sandwich but he wasn't hungry, and it was such a fine day. He walked, without direction, hardly

noticing people he passed, and soon found himself on the promenade along the river, below the new art gallery.

He walked, stopped to gaze into the swiftly moving water, walked some more, stopped again. There was something dark in the water, still at some distance upstream but moving quickly toward him. As it got closer, he could see it was a girl, not swimming but thrashing, flailing… He shook his head. No, this wasn't he'd seen. He walked further. He heard a commotion in the bushes, then was startled as a girl, her clothes torn, came staggering out, a man in a mask right behind her. Bump moved toward them quickly, without thought, tripped…and found himself alone on the concrete walkway. No, this wasn't it either.

He got up, brushed himself off. Two joggers ran by, giving him an odd look. He realized that they seemed to make no sound as they passed, and then, further, that all sound had vanished, as if a curtain had been pulled. He looked over the railing at the rushing water below, but there was no sound.

Then there was a whirring of wings and, as he looked up, he saw a squadron of blackbirds rushing past barely an arm's length above him. And then, in just a moment, the vision came to him again, the same vision he'd had that morning, just some seven hours earlier, the same moment of pure, crystal clarity, tranquility and certainty. He was in a city, but not this one, someplace European, beaten and war-wearied, East Berlin, perhaps? A train station, steam rising from an incoming locomotive, people rushing, and a girl, yes, he'd remembered that right, a girl, coal black hair in an old-fashioned style, clear complexion, darting eyes of undetermined colour, the fright in them clear enough, though. Two men approaching, trench coats, hands in their coat pockets, hats pulled low, then a pistol drawn – and him, stepping out from the shadows – all of this seen and registered in a flash.

But just as quickly, Bump realized this was no vision, nor was it a dream, but rather the memory of a scene from a movie he'd seen, oh, years earlier and not all that clearly remembered. Ingrid Bergman, perhaps? Humphry Bogart? Certainly not him, not Christopher Downing Bump.

But was that right, or just another delusion? Bump shook his head, took three deep breaths, reached down to touch his toes, all in aid of restarting his mental motor. This wasn't like him, not at all; this would not do. He shook his head again. Had he been wrong all day, wrong all along? Not a vision, not a dream, not even a memory, but seduced by a figment of his imagination?

He started up the path that led to the street and found that his breath was short, that the tightness in his muscles that had been so blessedly absent all of this fine day was back, that his blood was once again singing in his veins. He was crossing 22nd Street, thoroughly distracted, when the bus turned the corner, its driver also somewhat distracted by a woman with a crying baby sitting right behind him.

It happened so fast, the impact more noise than pain at first, and then a rushing of pain, like a torrent of water pouring through a floodgate, accompanied by a splinter of clarity. It took just a moment, just enough time for Bump to realize how wrong he had been, then nothing.

Evan Jones

ΒΙΟΓΡΑΦΙΚΟ ΕΝΘΕΤΟ / Biographical Insert

by Kiki Dimoula

Translator's Note: Kiki Dimoula (1931-2020) was one of the first women published in Gallimard's poetry series, in French translation, as well as a member of the Academy of Athens. She published more than a dozen collections of poetry, and won the European Prize for Literature and the Greek State Prize, among others. This poem originally appeared in Χαιρε Ποτέ [Welcome Never] (1988).

Biographical Insert

In some prickly commandment then
my beautiful mosquito net was held aloft
and the buzzing fliers consumed me
as I came to be.
I climbed onto the first truck crying
past and was delivered in Athens.

A great push, others were waiting behind me
to be born, a chain of millions.
Even then they all
managed to be significantly
younger than I am today.

Because my day-mother died
in childbirth she did not know me.

I was reborn later
in various capital cities
depending on where the light
of the firefly seeded me each time.
And I jumped back onto a truck
crying newborn once more.

I could speak early on. I said: *remember*.
My mother was furious, don’t spew

ΒΙΟΓΡΑΦΙΚΟ ΕΝΘΕΤΟ

Σὲ κάποιαν ἀκανθώδη ἐντολὴ τότε
πιάστηκε ἡ ὡραία κουνουπιέρα μου
καὶ μὲ καταφάγανε τὰ φτερωτὰ βομβώδη
εἶμαι.
Ἀνέβηκα στὸ πρῶτο φορτηγὸ κλάμα
ποὺ περνοῦσε καὶ γεννήθηκα· στὴν Ἀθήνα.

Μεγάλο σπρωξίδι, περίμεναν πίσω ἀπὸ μένα
νὰ γεννηθοῦν οἱ ἄλλοι οὐρὲς ἑκατομμύρια.
Πίσω ἀπὸ μένα κι ὅμως πρόφτασαν
ὅλοι αὐτοὶ νὰ εἶναι σήμερα
διαπρεπῶς νεότεροί μου.

Ἐκείνη ἡ μάνα-μέρα μου πέθανε
στὴ γέννα δὲν μὲ γνώρισε.

Ξαναγεννήθηκα μετὰ
σὲ διάφορες πρωτεύουσες
ἀνάλογα ποῦ μ' ἔσπερνε κάθε φορὰ
τὸ πάμφωτο κάποιας πυγολαμπίδας.
Κι ἄντε πάλι νὰ σαλτάρω σὲ ὅποιο φορτηγὸ
κλάμα νεογέννητη ξανά.

Μίλησα νωρίς· εἶπα: θυμᾶμαι·
φουρκίστηκε ἡ μάνα μου, μὴ βάζεις

that trash about loss from your mouth.

I grew up self-taught listening to how naturally
the wave shifts the pebbles –
overhearing the roar
and the gentle crushing
of predetermined situations.

I translated sound into various unfamiliar mistakes.
At my own expense I paved over the useless
to allow the soiled of the world to circulate dust free.

The one among many grew popular.
I proved mathematically
that counting by two
the numbering of stars
is impossible. Everyone comes up
with a different distant result.

I took part in many confessions.
I tattooed with a minute-hand
and heard the age of the sirens
without being tied to a mast.
I surrendered my share
of the miracle to the miracle.

After the donation of your body *remember*
I picked up the trash on the ground
and put it back in my mouth angering my mother –
it lived well and you I think even better.

ὅλα τὰ παλιοπράματα ἀπὸ χάμω στὸ στόμα σου.

Μεγάλωσα αὐτοδίδακτα ἀκούγοντας τὸ κύμα
τί φυσικὰ μετακινεῖ τὰ βότσαλα
κρυφακούγοντας τὸν κρότο
τῆς εὔκολης σύνθλιψης
προηγούμενων θέσεων.

Μετέφρασα ἠχὼ σὲ πολλὰ ξένα λάθη.
Δαπάναις μου ἀσφαλτόστρωσα τὸ ἀνώφελο
γιὰ νὰ κυκλοφορεῖ ἀσκόνιστος ὁ χωματόκοσμος.

Ἐκλαΐκευσα τὸ ἕνα σὲ πολλά.
Ἀπέδειξα μαθηματικῶς
πὼς μὲ τὴ μέθοδο τῶν δύο εἶναι ἀδύνατο
τὸ μέτρημα τῶν ἄστρων. Ὁ καθένας βγάζει
διαφορετικὸ ἀποτέλεσμα ἀπομάκρυνσης.

Ἔλαβα μέρος σὲ πολλὲς παραδοχές.
Ἔκανα τατουὰζ μὲ λεπτοδεῖχτες
καὶ ἄκουσα τὸ γῆρας τῶν σειρήνων
χωρὶς νὰ δεθῶ σὲ κατάρτια.
Τὸ μερτικό μου ἀπὸ τὸ θαῦμα
τὸ παραχώρησα στὸ θαῦμα.

Μετὰ τὴ δωρεὰ τοῦ σώματός σου στὸ *θυμᾶμαι*
σ' αὐτὰ τὰ παλιοπράματα ποὺ ἔβαζα στὸ στόμα μου
ἀπὸ χάμω καὶ θύμωνε ἡ μάνα μου
ζήσανε ἐκεῖνα καλὰ κι ἐσὺ θαρρῶ ἀκόμα καλύτερα.

Benjamin Lefebvre

Drive

Night driving. Snow, but not as heavy as the silence in the car. Kirby, once again the designated driver, the seatbelt straining against his larger frame, his eyes unblinking on the road as though he's entered a night-vision trance. Wendell, squirming in the passenger seat, his serenity stirred up somehow by too many glasses of wine. Soft music from the radio, which Wendell snaps off.

"I hate that song. 'Mary, Did You Know?' Of course she didn't! What was she – some kind of mind reader?"

"Oh – I was enjoying that." Kirby, his eyebrows furrowing like a chevron, almost gasping for breath.

Wendell's laugh that resembles whatever the opposite of mirth is as he wipes away the condensation on his window with a fist.

"They should call it 'Mary, Did You Know I Hate This Song and It Ruins Christmas for Me.' I'd pay money to listen to *that* remix."

"I thought it was your mother who usually ruined Christmas for you." Kirby, with a glance at Wendell, a corner of his mouth curving upward, but Wendell's head is turned away.

"Not this year. My sister and I got a group text from her this morning – turns out she and the Silver Fox are spending the holidays with his kids somewhere out in the sticks, so she can go ruin someone else's Christmas for a change."

"No offence, but I'm kind of relieved to hear that."

"Yeah – no drama. At least not *her* Richter scale of drama. My sister says we can spend Christmas Day at her place if we want to – we can just sit around, shellshocked at all the calm, drinking cranberry vodkas and watching Hallmark Christmas movies that were filmed in every month of the year *except* December."

Kirby, steering the car off the highway and down the winding overpass, a light in his eyes as though reflecting the warmth in his heart. "That sounds kind of nice."

"Yeah? Cool – I'll let her know she can put us down as *definitely maybe*." The sound of tapping and of a cartoon rocket taking orbit, followed by Wendell putting his phone back to its regular place, face down on his thigh.

Kirby staying silent. Wendell's head turning toward him, then turning away.

"Oh, and thanks for picking me up. I'll pay you back for the cab." Wendell pushing his seat back so he can cross his right ankle over his left knee, his eye on the doohickey that keeps the glove compartment closed, as if it's a focal point.

"Don't worry about that. What happened, though? You usually don't drink at all if you're driving."

Wendell's hand reaching out to turn the radio back on, then dropping back. Silence still, broken only by the sound of breath, which is barely any sound at all.

"I couldn't help it."

Wendell's voice has changed – the edge that was in it earlier has fallen away, revealing the wound beneath. One of his hands reaches over to prop up his chin. Kirby, next to him, glances in his direction and takes a breath before turning back to the road as he signals, then changes lanes.

"As soon as I'd taken my coat off I realized I was the only part-timer there, even though all of us had been invited. So I stood around making small talk with some of my full-time colleagues about final-grade submission deadlines and about what counts as self-plagiarism and what doesn't. Well – I say *colleagues*. Most of them didn't recognize me – or remember that we'd met before or that my shared office is right down the hall from theirs. One of them kept calling me Michael. I mean, sure – I *hadn't* met some of them before. But it seemed ludicrous to say, *Yeah, I've been teaching part-time in your department for five years now and you've never noticed me* – either that would embarrass them or it *wouldn't* embarrass them at all, which would embarrass *me*. One of them even said, *Oh, I thought this party was for faculty only* with a raised eyebrow – said this *to* someone else but *at* me. She probably mistook me for a Ph.D. student, but she said this like I was a naughty child who'd crashed an adult party while wearing my PJs and clutching a teddy bear. So when the chair offered me a glass of wine I grabbed it without thinking and downed it in about twenty seconds. And it just got worse from there."

"Oh, Wendell," Kirby says, but with kindness, not reproach.

The snow continues to swirl around them, the windshield wipers sounding like they're clearing their throats to make one of them continue talking.

Kirby glances at the rearview mirror just as a light ahead turns yellow, then brings the car to a gradual stop in anticipation of it turning red.

"People kept asking me what I was teaching in January, and when I told them *nothing*, they seemed to think this meant I was going on sabbatical – not that I'm going to be unemployed because there aren't any courses left for me to teach. So for once they asked me about my research. And I didn't know how to tell them – *It's really hard to keep going with research when you don't know if you'll ever get paid again*. And the last time I shared a research idea with a full-timer in the department, he published a journal article on it before I had the chance to work on mine."

The light turns green, so they carry on with their journey, Kirby's eyes narrowing as a tire skids momentarily on the slippery pavement.

"And then the chair – he did the whole *So I hope you'll be back to teach for us in the fall* song and dance – smiling at me like he thought he was my father. I mean, hiring decisions are a roll of the dice between scheduling, enrolment numbers, and other people's seniority points. It's not his fault we're so disposable, so there's not much he could have said to make it better."

Wendell fiddles with his seatbelt as an acid reflux of emotion bubbles up behind his eyes.

"I just wish he'd *tried*."

His voice subsides in a few moments as they continue to drive. Wendell looks out the side window even though there's nothing to see but darkness. Kirby adjusts the rearview mirror when there's a flash of headlights from a car behind him, but soon the car takes a turn and vanishes into the night.

"You're awfully quiet," Kirby says.

Wendell presses a button on the Fitbit on his wrist, then looks away from it. He blinks – once, twice.

"I'm just – really tired."

"Yeah – me too," Kirby says with weariness in his voice. Then, with an almost imperceptible shake of the head, he reaches out and pats Wendell's knee. "Maybe things'll be better in the new year."

The silence that follows neither confirms nor denounces Kirby's prediction. Wendell grows so still that Kirby turns his head as if to see if Wendell has passed out from the wine, then looks back at the road.

"You've been working hard for years," he says earnestly, "teaching all the courses no one else wanted, sometimes with just a few weeks of warning. It's taken its toll. You *should* take a sabbatical. Why don't you use this time to finish revising that article you were working on last summer? Or your book – what's happening with that? Show those pompous people at the party what you're made of."

Wendell's breathing grows heavier, then raspier, as though violins on a silent soundtrack are swelling with all the emotion he won't let himself express.

"You know," he says, "I've worked my ass off. I've published more than anyone else in my Ph.D. cohort – my CV is twenty pages long – every time I go to a conference, people line up to tell me they can't understand why I don't have a job yet – which makes me feel like I *really* screwed everything up, by the way. But I've kept going because I had this drive in me. I understood that statistically I had as much chance of getting a full-time academic job as I did of getting struck by lightning while riding a unicorn with a winning lottery ticket in my pocket, but I always told myself that if I kept at it I'd make it one of these days. That finally *I'd* be chosen. But it's been six years since I graduated, and now –"

Wendell's hand covers his face, muffling out the rest of the words. He opens his mouth to say something, then stops, then tries again.

"Oh, Kirby – sometimes I think academia's going to kill me. And I need to get out before it does."

Kirby's eyes widen as though he's hit a patch of ice on the road, making him grip the steering wheel and fight for control of the car. "You – what are you saying?"

A new look appears in Wendell's eyes – one that mingles that impossible blend of resignation and hope. "I think – I think it's time to start looking for something else. I don't know what. Policy work – publishing – maybe something in a library, although I really don't want to go back to school at this point. Hell, even working in a grocery store would probably pay more per hour than what I get now. But *this* – all I get for doing my best is a dead end."

Kirby's fingers uncurl from the steering wheel. Keeping his eyes on the road, he reaches out with his right hand, finds Wendell's left hand, and squeezes the band of gold on Wendell's third finger.

"It sucks – letting go – of what you worked so hard for," Wendell says, covering Kirby's hand with his own. "It makes all that effort seem like it was a waste all along – or that I was a bloody fool for trying so hard. But tonight – I don't know – I was talking to a colleague who's been around for so long that his photo on the faculty profile page is in black and white. He probably makes so much money that one day they'll be able to line his coffin with cash. He hasn't published anything since before I started my undergrad, but our interests overlap a little, and the great thing about having a conversation with him when you're feeling vulnerable is that he'll gladly do all the talking. Usually I tune him out and try to give him subliminal messages about retiring through my eyes, but this time it was different. It reminded me of the fact that there are so many more years ahead of me. And I have to find something else for them."

"Well, you know I've got your back," Kirby says before letting go.

"Yeah – I do know that. Thanks." Wendell looks at Kirby for a moment, but then his head turns toward the passenger window again as the darkness outside changes to buildings, and they stay silent as they make their way down a street of identical houses of beige brick and off-white siding until they reach theirs.

Kirby presses the remote for the garage door before they pull into the driveway. A beep from Wendell's phone startles Kirby from his reverie as he brings the car to a stop in the garage, and his brow contracts when Wendell bursts out laughing.

"What's so funny? Did your sister write back?"

"Oh my God. This is so fucking typical," Wendell says as he undoes his seatbelt without looking up from his phone. "Email from the chair – apparently someone at the party tonight talked her way into a last-minute course release in January because of some shuffle in the dean's office. The course is mine if I'm interested – they don't have time to post it. First year – enrolment capped at 250 – which is a drag, but at least there'll be grad students to do most of the marking. I wonder what the assigned readings are – it's probably too late to change them. I guess I'll have my work cut out for me over the break. God – what a system, eh?"

And by the time Wendell has chortled with excitement, he's already crossed the garage and climbed the steps to the door leading to the house, disappearing into the homey warmth inside. Kirby, still with his seatbelt on even though he's already cut the motor, sits for a few moments before getting out of the car. He zips up his parka and starts to brush the snow

off the hood with his bare hands. When it seems to dawn on him that there's no earthly reason why he should do this, he stops.

After being vacuum-sealed in the car with Wendell for so long, Kirby stuffs his hands in his coat pockets and breathes through his mouth. He takes a step toward the snow shovels leaning against a wall, glances back at the falling snow in the driveway, then gives up. Instead, he stands at the edge of the garage and looks out. When neighbours walk by with their dog on the sidewalk across the street his face bursts into excitement and he waves to them like old friends, but although their heads turn toward him, they keep going.

And as he stands there, swimming in his head like salmon are thoughts going against the current. Of the day he decided at age ten to stop asking his father when his mother was coming home. Of having to bury his football dreams under the sod of the field after an injured knee brought his burgeoning career to a close. Of an earlier boyfriend who stopped calling him back after hearing the words "I love you." Of ripping the band-aid off after two years of law school when it started to be clear that the nausea he woke up to every morning wasn't going away. Of his evenings now, spent scrolling through Netflix while Wendell grades papers or crams for his next lecture behind a closed door. He looks down when he feels the fingers of his right hand circling the matching ring on his left hand, twisting it across the knuckle and off the finger, as though setting himself free for a moment just to see what it feels like.

The sound of snow falling. The door opening behind him, light from the hallway spilling out. Wendell's voice: "Kirby, are you coming in?"

Kirby not answering in words, but donning his ring again before turning around, away from the snow. Footsteps toward the door into the house; pausing on the landing to press a button. Glancing over his shoulder as the garage door cascades down and he bids a silent goodnight to noises everywhere.

Carole Greenfield

Perturbed

The year I lived alone I stepped barefoot into the street
every night for a month to bid a comet goodnight.

Simpler to locate its position near the horizon
than to think of you.

That blurry ball of dirt and ice would leave and not return
in this lifetime. I never know if you are coming back.

Far off, you spark and beckon, slow glow
among stationary stars.

You move with unhurried grace and will not stay.
There is no spell to cast, neither ancient rune nor incantation

to halt your orbit beyond my limits. Yet
there is a part I cannot threaten or cajole

from out its stubborn faith that keeps watch,
waits for you to gleam against the darkness,

slip inside and take me in your arms,
stretch your shining length across my body one more time,

leave a trail of dust and debris in your wake.

Note: *occasionally, a comet is perturbed in such a way that its orbit is deflected into the inner solar system, where it can be observed*.

Plucking

Hammered dulcimers take time to tune.
Strings run in pairs, over one bridge,
under the other.

Plucked together along one side,
a pair sounds the same note.

When the hammers fall
on either side, this same couple, now a fifth
apart, chime in harmony.

Meeting as we did, only often enough to check
our hearts one against the other, we kept
ourselves in tune. A fifth apart,
we had our own concordance.

This is just a phase, you tell me.
A temporary rest in our
tumultuous duet.

Your fingers pull back the strings.
I brace myself against the letting go.

plucking: *as water seeps into cracked rocks at the base of the glacier and freezes, rocks attach to the glacier. As the glacier moves on, it may tug apart the fractured rock and pluck away chunks of it.*

Brandon Nadeau

Donn and the Mourning Moon

The Forest. 1995-Nov-07. Prince George, BC. 1805 hours

Mom taught me the stories of our people, from the moon goddess, whose light enchanted the night, to the banshee, whose scream was an omen of death. She practiced the paganism and witchcraft she'd learned from Nana, who'd long since gone to be with Donn – Lord of the Dead.

Mom was a good witch, but nobody understood that, so they punished her for being different. Beyond witchery, though, she was ordinary. She sewed, baked, drank tea.

Here's the thing: she lived with schizophrenia, so the real and mythical mingled on occasion. She'd ramble on about a magical cauldron, battle shapeshifters in the form of neighbours, advise strangers to beware of Balor – the one-eyed demon king. I'd claw through mobs and beg mom to come home. Just a kid. Sometimes she didn't recognize me. One time she thought I was my father.

"Rapist!" She poked my little chest. "You abandoned our son!" My body imploded. Contorted. Ribs curled inward and clawed my organs. My spine spun, tangled up my intestines.

"Liam, Bastard Son of a Witch!" a voice behind me said. The crowd erupted with laughter and jeers that stabbed like pitchforks.

I ran to the forest to die, and not for the last time.

The Foreboding. 2007-Sep-25. Edmonton, Alberta. 1642 hours

Canada's oil capital slid across the taxi's back window. Its highway signs confirmed I'd left Afghanistan, but my clenched jaw and chest pain implied I'd brought it with me. I'd been mentally mangled by six months of shifting from monotony to mayhem at a moment's notice. Unprovoked bouts of suffocation caused me to gasp without warning. Always on edge, I'd jump at the slightest sound, jerk when torn from a flashback. The cabbie squirmed upfront like a hostage at gunpoint – he hadn't spoken since we left the base. Only his playlist of Persian melodies vibrated between us.

In my window view, autumn – a time when wonderful things die, whether we like it or not. The clichés of its beauty are true, of course: pumpkins on porches, migrating geese, steam from cups of coffee carried off with the breeze. The fucking leaves. Edmonton had it all that day.

I scrutinized every fighting-age male we passed.

Downtown smelled of exotic cuisine, sewage, and car exhaust. City workers filled potholes at half the rate they appeared. Yuppies ignored homeless folks who looked unsure of their own existence. The cab's brakes shrieked at the sight of my building: cracked glass, rotten wood, broken bricks. Landlord hadn't fixed a damn thing.

"Forty-eight-fifty-five," the cabbie said. His eyes fled when they met mine in the rear-view. "You ok, brother?" he asked the steering wheel.

I sighed, scanned the sidewalk for landmines.

He brushed invisible dust off the dashboard. "I've worked the base awhile, driven others with eyes like yours."

"Beguiling blue?"

He faced me. "You watch the news?"

I shrugged, shook my head, almost imperceptibly.

"Some of you guys, man – when you get back – well, sometimes…you hurt yourselves."

I grabbed my rucksack with damp hands, passed him a bill, and waived off the change.

"Anyone waiting for you?" He jabbed his beard at my building.

"Thanks for the ride."

The crisp air bit my neck on the cracked path to my apartment complex. I jiggled my key in the door.

"Brother!" the cabbie called. I winced, turned. "You belong in this world."

That considerate prick. His words hit like a sniper round to the chest plate. I managed a nod.

My innards churned as I entered my suite. My roommate left a note: "Welcome home, Dumbass. Gone to Winnipeg. Beer in fridge." I ripped open the fridge door. A case of Kokanee glowed under flickering light. Breathless, I tore into the box, cracked a can with shaking hands. Cold beer passed quivering lips. Chest loosened, hands steadied, mind cleared.

Betrayal. 2007-Sep-26. Edmonton, Alberta. 1808 hours

"Why're you such a pussy?" Fiona said while she kicked my ass at *Mortal Kombat*. "Seriously, I mean, Mohsin's a pussy of the first order."

Mohsin glanced over, one eyebrow raised.

"But you, my friend," Fiona's character grabbed mine, tore him in half, and tossed the pieces, "you are the supreme pussy overlord."

"Dude!" Mohsin said. "That was bad. You embarrassed? Should be."

Fiona and Mohsin deployed to Afghanistan before me. She was a tank commander; he was her gunner. We'd been tight for years. We sat on my duct-taped sofa and stacked empties into a castle on the coffee table – as was our custom.

Fiona leaned in with a playful grin. "Best two of three?" Her pixie haircut suited her mischievous nature.

"You're a whore," I heard myself say. I stared at my character's severed torso.

"Very creative." She pulled away. "Don't be such a sore –"

"Don't be such a whore. How 'bout that? Everyone knows that's why you got promoted."

"Dude," Mohsin said, "what's your problem?"

"Your people," I said, "they're ruining the world."

They both looked at me like I'd torn out my own eyeball.

"Liam…" Fiona faltered. "What –"

"He should've stayed in Trashcanistan with his camel-fucking cousins." I stood, so did Mohsin – his hand on my throat before my legs were straight.

"No!" Fiona shot up, locked his free arm.

He was twice my size. Three times as tough. Didn't need both arms to crush me. He studied my face like a map of treacherous terrain. Fiona's eyes darted between us. A police siren chased the breeze through an open window.

Mohsin's hand lowered from my throat to my chest as he forced a grinding breath through his Adam's apple. "How could you…" he looked away, struggled to swallow, pushed off my chest, and took off.

"You too," I held the door for Fiona, gestured towards the hallway.

"It's hard coming home, Liam. There're people –"

"I hate you."

"You don't mean that," she said. "I forgive you."

I closed the door between us.

Blood Moon. 2007-Aug-28. Kandahar, Afghanistan. 2315 hours

Ijan was alone when it happened. I wasn't far off. Close enough to be deafened by the boom. His wide, unblinking eyes met mine as I entered the interpreter's quarters. A frozen hand clenched my spine; his liberated legs and pelvis were splayed in the rubble like a broken mannequin.

He tried to speak but only gurgled. I knew the word he mouthed: "Maamaan" means "mother" in Farsi – one of the first words he'd taught me. I traced his gaze through the rocket-punctured roof and out to the stars. When I looked back, he was dead. Nothing I could do.

Mother. 2007-Mar-04. Prince George, BC. 1235 hours

"I'll be on the frontlines," I said to mom. "Won't be able to call much."

Mom's house was a 1970's time capsule. Orange, brown, yellow, beige. All-present wood paneling. Nana's antique dishes glimmered behind the glass of an ornate china cabinet.

"Good soup?" Mom said. Her hair was ashy-white like rabbit fur in February. When did that happen? I wondered.

"You make the best soup, mom." It was canned tomato. "Should I call you on –"

"How's Fiona? You dating yet?"

"Just friends."

"Oh, Liam, I really like her." She hunched forward, picked at a chip in her cup.

I craned over, caught her eye from below. "Maybe you should date her."

Her eyebrow danced the way it did when she held in laughter.

Mom raised me on her own, never dated. Had some fun, no doubt, but didn't bring it home. Didn't trust anyone, she said. Just me.

Sometimes she cried on the corduroy sofa: curled up, face down, nearly silent. A "Crazy Bitch" sign appeared on the front lawn. Another boss fired her for getting overwhelmed. A new friend ditched her for being "weird." Other times, when the world ripped her open, she'd polish Nana's china. "I want my mom," she'd say, wiping her tears from the floral-patterned cups and saucers. Her tiny body shook to the rhythm of her sobs.

Still, most of our time together was pleasant enough. She'd sip tea and ask about me. I'd eat soup and try to be honest. We'd play *Scrabble* – sometimes she'd let me win. I'd write stories in the kitchen while she sewed quilts in the craft room. The sewing machine went: *Rat-a-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat.*

A Type of Grieving. 2007-Nov-23. Edmonton, Alberta. 2346 hours

"Do me a favour, sweetheart," I told a gigantic biker that bumped me with his potbelly, "watch where you put that gut." He had a skull tattooed on his throat and a jagged scar from brow to chin. I stood outside a nameless tavern on the northeast side – alone. No Mohsin nearby to save me; he gave up on me after my third-second chance.

"Buddy, don't act tough," the biker said, pulling a soggy cigar from his lips.

"Buddy, don't smoke while pregnant."

His first punch only grazed me; the second must've connected, I thought, as I regained vision from my seat on the concrete.

"I think you're lost," he said as I stood and teetered to steady myself.

"Yup." I side-kicked his bike to the pavement.

He shot at me like a missile. That's all I remember.

Combat. 2007-Sep-14. Kandahar, Afghanistan. 1330 hours

I screamed in vain. Muted by impenetrable silence. A dream? Ijan was in my arms. Impossible. His blood looked orange beneath a spotlight that punctured an otherwise black void. A distant, high-pitched tone approached like an ocean wave and crashed into my consciousness: "O'Dwyer! You ok? We hit an IED!" Captain Brown's voice crackled over the tank's intercom.

I had all my body parts. "Yeah."

"It's an ambush," the captain explained over the *rat-a-tat-tat* of rapid gunshots. "Tango-One's laying down suppressing fire. Get out, prep the tank for recovery."

"Yes, Sir." I grabbed my rifle, dismounted the tank. My knees buckled when I saw the damage: the IED chewed us up like a can opener.

Tango-One's machinegun stopped. Jammed? The Taliban responded with an RPG. It whistled like a kettle as it flew between an Afghan soldier and me. We locked eyes. A hailstorm of bullets made us dive behind my tank.

I spat. Rubbed sand from my eyes. The Afghan convulsed face down. I grabbed his flak jacket. Flipped him over. His silent, guttural laughter looked like painful sobbing. I fell back and joined him. The perverse euphoria of combat. We'd never met before, nor would we again, but I loved him, and he loved me.

The Triple Goddess. 2005-Dec-23. Prince George, BC. 1807 hours

"The moon is a feminine deity," mom said to Fiona. "She shares our cycles."

"Cycles already, mom?" I hung up Fiona's coat.

"Not just our monthly cycles," mom said, "the cycles of our lives, too."

"Does Aunt Shannon still steal your fabric?" I said, "I can't believe _"

"You know the Triple Goddess?" mom said. Fiona shook her head, shot me a glance. "Well, the new moon's the Maiden." Mom squeezed Fiona's forearm. "She's wild and courageous – like you." Fiona beamed. "The full moon's the Mother, like me, a time of fertility, maturity, and sexuali– "

"The waning moon's the Crone," I said, "when a woman becomes wise, isn't 'onomatopoeia' such a funny word? Who's hungry?"

Mom messed up my hair. "I can take a hint."

Fiona laughed. I loved them.

The Wrath of Balor. 2007-Nov-24. Prince George, BC. 1705 hours

I woke up in an Edmonton alley covered in blood, garbage, and probably piss. That biker messed me up. My face looked like the discarded parts of a slaughtered goat; I couldn't open one eye. I drove home to mom, eight hours through the Rockies, nothing else made sense.

Rat-a-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat.

"Aunt Shannon doesn't have her own sewing machine yet?" I asked mom. Her hand shook as she struggled to open my tomato soup. The kettle simmered on the stove. "Mom, it's jammed, let me."

Her skin was pale, clammy. What happened? I wouldn't know, I didn't call from overseas, not once, hadn't even called since I got back.

Rat-a-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat.

"Mom…please." I grabbed the can.

"No." She tightened her grip.

"Let go!" The kettle started boiling.

"No!" The kettle started screaming.

RAT-A-TAT-TAT-TAT-TAT-TAT!

"What the hell? You crazy bitch!" The can slipped from my hands as I jerked it free. Cold soup covered my disfigured face. Mom stumbled back and smashed against the china cabinet. A cascade of dishes fell with her to the floor.

"Liam, help!"

I moved towards her, "Oh, God, Mom!"

She gasped. "Who are you?" Her face warped into a gnarled knot. "My son will kill you if you hurt me!"

"What? Mom…it's m–"

"Go away, you monster! You don't belong here!"

I ran.

Ijan. 2007-Aug-28. Kandahar, Afghanistan. 1857 hours

"We do not have the *Scrabble*," Ijan said. "We play panjagh, maamaan is the best." His close-cut beard disagreed with his delicate features.

"Panjagh?" I said.

"Stone-throwing game, very old, I will teach you." We sat at the midpoint of a small mountain. He faced me with his back to the poppy fields and mud huts in the village below.

"Does maamaan ever let you win?"

"Never." We laughed.

"When'll you see her again?"

"Next month." He placed his hand on his heart. "Ramadan."

"Ramadan's in September?"

"Different each year, Liam." He rolled his eyes. "Lunar calendar, I told you before."

"Right. How do you celebrate?"

His chest doubled in size. "For one month, we pray and fast and give to the poor people."

"Party animals."

"What? No. That comes after. Eid Al-Fitr is the party."

"What's that?"

"We feast!" He shot up with his arms in the air, then called down to the valley: "Maamaan makes shor-nakhod and sweets!"

"Must be good." I glanced back over each shoulder.

"Maamaan's cakes are the best." He sat beside me. "Will I see you tonight?"

"Yeah, eleven."

"Do not be late. You are always late."

"I won't."

"Good." He placed his hand on mine.

A mosque in the village began its call to prayer. The sky turned orange. The sun slipped away.

The Mourning Moon. 2007-Nov-24. Prince George, BC. 1837 hours

I ran through the crystal-white woods. Snow crunched underfoot, defiling the sacred silence of the dark. An inferno burned in my lungs, fueled by frozen air; it radiated pain with every laboured inhalation. I ran harder.

I'd torn off my shirt so the forest could flog my body. Salt from my tears persecuted my wounds. I collapsed. A train horn wailed in the distance. My breath rose past the judging eyes of crows on crooked branches.

I didn't deserve that cabbie's compassion, I thought, nor Mohsin's mercy, Fiona's forgiveness. No. I belonged with Ijan in the Afghan dust, but I'd settle for the house of Donn.

The Mourning Moon is the last full moon before the winter solstice. Mom says, "It's a time to grieve and unburden our souls, to embrace the cycle and make way for new life."

That night I'd die in the light of the mother goddess, and not for the last time.

Regi Claire

Run, trip, run slipshod blinded into the night

towards deserts whose dunes bury houses, fall over
walls into courtyards to get shovelled back out the door,
over and over, dry dust yellow sand, grain by grain,
heaved and shifted and blown back across, to and fro
in glassy whirls towards the small flock of pure white goats
whose trough is filled with chopped-up cardboard,
dusty grey, no leaves, no grass, no herbs, just cardboard,
and the pure white goats, in the end,
eat it all, starving a bite at a time.

Run, trip, run slipshod blinded into the night

towards mountains where snow buries houses, falls over
walls into courtyards, bluish frost-silvered crystals of soft wet
hard dry stinging, to get shovelled back out into the street
past shelters where grey and brown goats filled with hay
never stir as storm devils pounce from flying carpets of Saharan dust.

Run, trip, run slipshod blinded into the night

towards seashores and the cormorants' wide-stretched
wings that might hold you in, keep you safe as fragments
of petals drift into the sedge and the tidal machinery
grinds up shells for future fortresses.

Run, trip, run slipshod blinded into the night

towards the ghost of the house marten waiting at the kerb
with its young, listening, turning its head left-right-left,
after all these years still waiting for you in the shadows
of what's long gone, to lead you across.

Somewhere beyond memory

My orchid loves me, I swear. Purple-spotted lips nuzzle
me back. Leaves swell under my touch as I bend towards
their waxy smooth. Powder-blue roots grasp my rapunzel
hair until I lie prone. Above us the skylight, swung ajar,

welcomes in a spell of rain. Later the rooftop cat drops
down her tail, to polish my skin. A pair of finches have
taken to visit. Their wings whirr light into prisms that fill
my eyes. They feed me maggots, beetles, segments of

worms. The flowers drip nectar into what was once my
mouth. The birds have built nests within my ribs. By
now the leaves are small boats spanning the length of
my body. I'm unmoored, far gone, with no land in sight –

and somewhere in the vastness beyond memory awaits
an electric storm, somewhere beyond, an unleashing.

Christina H. Felix

After Dusk

for Cheryle St. Onge

Females fireflies hide in tree shadows
while their potential mates swirl
in the darkened air.

They scan their options
for suitable flashes of code,
signifying the very best genomes.

Tonight, a male firefly landed
in the garden, his tail's cold light
still blinking from the ground.

The life of a firefly
is so short that some adults never
eat, their lifetime completed

with the single success of securing
a mate. They must know death
like this friend's mother

who repositions chairs
on top of the kitchen table,
is dressed and undressed.

She smiles as she offers
half of the sandwich just

given to her. She responds

by dismantling a lamp,
a toaster, walks down
the driveway in forgetful circles,

yet, she concedes to be photographed.
The lenses of her daughter's camera
persistently and precisely aimed

at her still-blue eyes,
her sunken flesh,
her billowing white hair.

Both women waiting

for a click, the shutter,
of light.

William Bonfiglio

The Beds of the Women I Loved

An. had a full with a painted, chipped wrought-iron frame and clusters of plastic grapes strung from the headboard. She had to push aside magazines and littered tissues when she flipped back the comforter. The sheets were stained.

Au.'s was a typical dorm twin raised high off the cold linoleum floor. Underneath, she stowed her cache of toys and lingerie in stacking plastic shelves. Above, the cinderblock wall was collaged with printed photos: with friends in scanty Halloween costumes, smoking and drunk in a brick graffitied alley, with beloved pop-punk icon Max Bemis. The blue anti-bedbug mattress lay exposed under an overlarge fitted sheet. We raked our fingernails across its laminate until it whined.

Ch. didn't have shelves and her desk was cluttered enough, so her bed got the overflow. She'd pick the anthology of Russian poetry and read a few lines, then wait for my reaction. Ignoring the textbook prodding my back, I'd be pretending to fall asleep, and would murmur something I meant to sound almost appreciative.

Ol. and I were always on the same page. I would call her after my evening seminar and she'd say *What a coincidence! A spot just opened up*. Her bed was crooked – worn out from someone who'd had it before and put serious pressure on the adjustable wooden frame. We'd try to live up to the precedent, fail miserably, but still laugh about it, still enjoy the novelty of not being monitored by our parents, being naked with another body but feeling comfortable and unembarrassed and safe. We encouraged each other to go after crushes, to put ourselves out there. We joked that, if nothing else, we could always fall back on each other.

As.'s was a converted daybed, wrought iron like An's. She had trash-picked, stripped, sanded, painted, and set it beneath her window, and surrounded it with her lifetime of sculptures, prints, and pictures. I can understand why, after all that, she wouldn't want to part with it, even if there was barely enough space for one. Laying together after our zombie movie marathons – me on the inside, her out – I had to fold my legs. Hers would overhang.

Mo.'s ceiling was sloped, and when I lay on the inside of her bed, against the wall, there wasn't even room for me to lift my arm. Each time I tried, the space itself would push me away.

I don't remember Ma.'s bed as well as I do the look of her next to it – glasses on, hair in a topknot, the ends of her pajama pants draping her bare feet as she waited for me to leave.

The last time I wrote Ol., I said I'd be passing through in a few weeks and it'd be fun to see her again. I said I missed her, that I missed how uncomplicated things seemed when we were "together." She hasn't written back.

Susan Bloch

The Men in My Life

The dandelions push up, cracking the flagstone slate on the front patio of my London home. Weed killer? But the killer had already done its job when asbestos took John, my husband. "Oil me," shriek the hinges on the front door. The kitchen faucet leaks. Drip. Drip. The smoke detectors chirp. Bills unpaid, the house is dark and cold. A bruised Granny Smith and moldy cheese in the fridge.

"You must move on…"

***

1.

When I planned my move to my new home in Seattle, Jason, a structural engineer, was the first man I met – by email. He prepared the inspection report of the property I planned to buy. Jason found every little thing that needed fixing: the seven holes in the crawl space where rats and raccoons might nest; the twenty-two rotten planks on the cedar deck; the four missing shingles on the eastern slope of the roof; the leaking shower faucet; two loose charcoal slate tiles in the kitchen; a disintegrating concrete driveway; and roots in the thirty-year-old clay sewer outlet leading from the bathroom to the city main. He stressed the importance of replacing the outdated circuit breaker panel, the three faulty electric sockets, and the hook behind the bathroom door. Why the hook?

"Besides these minor repairs," Jason wrote, "the house is solid, and the foundation will withstand the earthquakes that happen in this region from time to time."

I pictured Jason to be lanky, slim, and frisky enough to climb a tall ladder, squeeze into the crawl space, peer behind the washer and dryer, and bend low enough to test the bathroom drains.

When I did finally meet him, Jason, barely taller than my five-foot-five, wore black-framed glasses perched at the end of his nose with an expressionless face that looked as though he had nothing good to say.

"This hook on the bathroom door needs replacing before you splinter the door," Jason said, clipboard in hand. Now it made sense. "And you'll need to think about installing an on-demand water heater soon. This tank is over ten years old." His dark brown eyes scanned the room as if searching for more bad news.

I pressed my forehead against the streaked bedroom window and closed my eyes.

"Signs of a woodpecker here on the deck…" Jason stopped mid-sentence. "It's not so bad."

He paused, but I couldn't straighten up.

"I'll connect you with Sam. He'll fix the lot. I've seen his work and you can rely on him."

Shoulders sagging, I turned to look at Jason.

"You look like you need cheering up. You should try the Seattle Opera." For the first time I saw half a smile. "My wife Laura and I saw La Traviata last night. Awesome."

He began to hum the first few notes of "Libiamo Ne'Clici." As if he were on stage, he waved his arms like a conductor, and I half-expected him to break into the aria. I hummed along with him and grew taller.

2.

At six-foot-two, muscular yet wiry, Sam took the stairs two at a time, fixing everything on his to-do list. And more. I soon got used to the sound of him chewing gum with his mouth half-open, the rattle of the bunch of keys attached to his belt, and his chuckles when he completed yet another task. He wore acid-stained jeans and white sneakers that looked brand new, even though he insisted he'd had them for over a year. My new Adidas looked as if they'd run a dozen marathons already.

During the day, Sam took swigs from a thermos filled with coffee and whistled Jimmy Hendrix's "Hey Joe" while drilling, sawing, and hammering. Sam's thick calloused fingers tackled every repair with the delicacy of a spider weaving its web, while I dropped or cracked almost everything with my slender manicured fingers. He had no problem repairing the rattling drum on the washer or sliding his hand behind the television to fix a loose wire.

After Sam completed all the repairs, he insisted on unclogging the gutters, rewiring the outdoor sensor light, and helping me hang my

artwork and lug heavy boxes to the upstairs bedrooms. His paint color choices – cream and pale yellow – for the bedroom and living room brought light into areas previously a dull grey. Without Sam showing me which buttons to press, I wouldn't have been able to operate the American-style electric oven or learn that the smoke detectors were linked by wi-fi to the security system. Otherwise, I might have spent far too much time looking for the batteries.

When he decided to take a year off to hike through Nepal, I missed the sound of swishing jeans, drilling, and his "Sure, I'll deal with it, no problem."

I've been afraid of knocking a nail in the wall without his patient voice saying, "Steady now. Not so hard." His voice calm, without sucking in air as if I were stupid. But without him I swore when the nail went in at an angle.

I decided to try to find a reliable handyman.

3.

When I opened my front door, I was greeted by a scarlet woolen cap, an unruly silver beard, a broad grin with a missing incisor on the side, and the smell of cigarettes and soap.

"Hey there, I'm Pete, your handyman. Let's check and see what needs doing."

He thrust out his hand to shake mine and shook it up and down for a little too long before putting his toolbox down on the front porch.

"Thanks for coming by." My mouth was dry and my voice shaky. I was reluctant to let this stranger into the living room – not someone who'd been recommended, but whose card had been stuck onto the notice board of my local coffee shop. I opened the door a little wider. Pete's Ford Ranger, parked in the driveway, looked as if it had come straight out of the carwash.

While he kicked off his scuffed black work boots, I texted my neighbor Jen. Would you please call me in half an hour to check if I'm okay?

Slipping my cell phone into my back jeans pocket, I tried to blot out all images of being held prisoner or strangled in the basement and poured Pete a cup of coffee to relieve my anxiety.

He spent the day fitting customized Formica shelves into the closet, rehanging two bedroom doors that were sticking to the wooden floor, spray-painting the marked white windowsills in the main bedroom, and unblocking the hair-clogged shower drain.

The shelving in the closet fits perfectly, and my feet no longer sink in a puddle when I shower.

A few weeks later when I was out on a neighborhood walk near home, I met Pete and his wife tending their vegetable box near the sidewalk. He cut a bunch of Swiss chard and handed it to me. I felt my cheeks flushing, remembering the time when he was a stranger rather than a neighbor.

Pete has since repaired the garage door, replaced the front doorbell, and painted the deck railings. He always brings me freshly cut chard and parsley.

4.

Once I settled into my new home, I found a cleaner – someone I could trust with my front door key and security code for the alarm when I was at work, advising executives on leadership. Navy sneakers next to the front door are a sign that Carlos is still vacuuming.

“I want to make sure everything is perfect for you,” Carlos says, rubbing the palm of one hand up and down his dark brown razor-cut hair.

On his fortnightly rounds Carlos not only polishes the wooden furniture, vacuums the carpets, dusts the bookshelves, and mops the kitchen floor, but he also waters the house plants, brings in the mail, and refills the hummingbird feeder with sugar water. Every few months he washes the windows on the outside, sweeps the deck, and polishes my brass kettle the natural way with lemon and salt.

When I travel, on his own initiative Carlos will text me, “I’m going to go into the house to make sure everything is okay.”

On my return I see the garbage bins are back in their enclosure and my car is washed. Mail is on the kitchen table next to a vase of roses cut from my back garden. The house smells of fresh lemon and Carlos’s smile.

Just before Christmas Carlos brought me Rosca de Reyes, or King's Wreath, a traditional Mexican bread his wife baked especially for me.

“We eat this in January, after the New Year,” Carlos told me.

My gift basket filled with ginger cookies, chocolates, crisps, and nuts seemed a feeble attempt to match the time it had taken his wife to bake my sugar-coated delicacy.

5.

When my electric toilet flusher broke I tried to find a plumber to fix it. I called about ten, but all were either too busy, didn't return my call, or only wanted to work on large projects. For weeks I had to use a bucket to flush until I finally called Home Depot for suggestions.

"We don't normally recommend people," the salesperson told me, "but Roni is great."

And he is. Roni is the only workman I know who will return a call from a stranger in just a few minutes.

"Please text me a photo of the cistern, and I'll get back to you later," he said through his speakerphone. "I'm driving right now."

By six o'clock I'd not heard from him. He was like all the other plumbers who'd said they'd call back. As I was finishing dinner he called while still on the road.

"I looked at the photo," Roni said, his voice echoing through the speaker phone. "You have a fancy, schmancy, toilet." His strong Eastern European accent was hard to understand.

"Can you fix it?"

"I grew up in Russia and lived in Israel while at school. I can fix anything."

We were both newcomers to Seattle and chatted on for a few minutes about life in our new city.

"You lived in Tel Aviv too?" I asked. "Whereabout?"

"Just off Nordau near the port."

"Are you telling me we were once neighbors? That's not possible!"

We chatted on about our favorite coffee shops there, and then returned to business.

"A new pump will cost almost as much as a new manual system which is more reliable. Kohler has discontinued your model." Roni added, "I'll let you know later."

He called back when I was watching *The Late Night Show*.

"Do you have your computer in front of you?" Roni asked. "Look for Drek toilets."

Unable to find 'Drek' toilets on the internet, I cradled my phone between my shoulder and chin and asked, "Drek, how do you spell that?"

"I don't know. Type dr and see what happens."

"You know drek is the Yiddish word for shit," I said, laughing out loud and expanding the search. "It's Drake, not drek."

"You make me laugh so loud I will have an accident," Roni choked. He was not yet home.

Roni suggested I replace the whole toilet and scheduled the work for the following week. Such a response is unheard of when so many houses in Seattle were being remodeled.

"I'll call the wholesaler tomorrow. It usually takes a few days for the order to be processed. Three-fifty bucks is okay for the job?"

"Sounds good. You want a deposit?"

"No, no. You pay me when all the work is done."

We both burst out laughing when I answered Roni's punctual knock. Drek tied us together in a common bond. I expected Roni to have the build of a short, stocky Russian weightlifter, like those in the Olympics, but he had to bend to come through the front door. A Brad Pitt look-alike with shoulder-length curly black hair.

I peered out through the drizzle looking for his sidekick. He was alone.

"How are you going to get the toilets up and down the stairs on your own?" I couldn't help asking.

"Don't worry," Roni said, laying a worksheet up the stairs. "I do this all the time."

Banging, clanging, drilling. I willed myself to stay in my study. I closed my eyes trying to banish a picture of a hole in the ceiling or water flowing down the staircase. I stayed away even after the financial spreadsheet on my laptop became blurry. Suddenly it was quiet. I stood up, opened the study door, and walked up the stairs. Roni was gulping down a bottle of water.

"It's pretty hot up here," he said. "Do you mind if I take my shirt off?"

I nodded and smiled. If Brad Pitt wanted to take off his shirt that was fine by me.

6.

Until Juan began to trim the hedges, do the weeding, and line the window baskets with fresh compost, I had no idea that the dull-green potted plants on the cedar deck could bloom into mauves and purples, hues of yellows and gold, white, scarlets and pinks. The colors reflected his energy and humor as he worked his way from window box to flowerpot, laughing and chatting.

"Let me show you how to prune this rose…in Guanajuato where I was born, we have tomatoes all year…did I tell you my son got into college? He is the first in the family."

Juan pushed back his straw hat, touched the brown and white speckled feather in the black headband, and wiped his forehead with a lime-green kerchief. He chortled at my attempt to de-bud the rhododendron bush.

"Here, try one of the Mexican cookies my wife baked yesterday." Juan's eyes crinkled at the corners. "It makes the plants have more flowers."

In the front courtyard where I'd struggled to grow any plants except weeds, Juan planted a variety of flowering rose bushes and fuchsias, filling the area with a carpet of color well into the fall.

Juan has other talents too. He offers a hoarse, "Yes, I do it," to any request as if my question is an insult. One spring day, before I could protest, he clambered to the top of the sloping slate roof to tape aluminum foil around the chimney to keep the woodpecker away. Juan offered to change the water filter under the kitchen sink and replace the inset light bulbs in the vaulted ceilings. When he stood on the top step of the ladder in my bedroom he gasped.

"Suzie, did you see this wasp nest here at the top of the door frame?"

I'm embarrassed to say I hadn't even noticed it. I let out a long sigh, bit my lip and couldn't speak.

"Don't worry too much. I think maybe they're dead."

"What do I do now?"

"Just bring me a broom," he whispered, slowly climbing down so as not to disturb the nest.

I opened the window and cowered in a corner. There was no buzzing when Juan knocked the grey ball off the ceiling with the broomstick. Chips of a cement-like stone fell onto the floor. Inside were three dried, dead wasps. And I'd been sleeping with them while they were nesting.

"Promise you won't tell the neighbors," I said laughing.

7.

During Seattle's short summer season, my kale, tomatoes, and potatoes growing in pots on the south-facing deck need daily watering. It takes over an hour to lug the heavy bucket from pot to pot, and then control the flow, making sure I don't drown them.

One day when I tipped too much water, uprooting a pansy, I swore a little too loudly. A straw hat popped up as a man looked over the short laurel hedge.

"You need an automated sprinkler system," he said, taking off his hat and fanning his face.

I wiped the sweat off my forehead with my T-shirt sleeve and frowned.

"I'm Mike, the person who looks after your neighbor Alison's yard."

"Hello."

"I can install an irrigation system for you and save you all that hassle."

"I'm okay," I said, turning away. "No thanks."

A week later, during a heat wave, the handle of the bucket snapped. I turned the bucket over and sat on it, sweat running down my T-shirt, wishing I weren't so stubborn.

I called Mike. "This is Alison's neighbor. You said you could install a sprinkler system?" I felt my face redden.

He installed a smart sprinkler system which is much smarter than I am. Connecting to the local weather forecasts, the system adapts the amount of water according to the moisture in the ground and the plants' needs. Both Mike and I have access to the phone app which shuts off the

system if a leak is detected. When the app notifies us of a problem, Mike arrives faster than an ambulance responding to an emergency call.

One summer's day, Mike went about his quarterly check-up shuffling, head bent.

"Are you okay?" I asked, knowing he was not.

"My wife was just diagnosed with stage four breast cancer." He stood up and wiped his eyes with the back of his right hand, still gripping a piece of tubing with a pair of pliers. His hand was tanned, but his knuckles were white.

The kale plants seemed to lose their verdant leaves, and the pungent smell of compost clawed my nose. A black house crow let out a series of hoarse caws, rattles, and clicks, but I couldn't speak. Then I made him a cup of coffee and let him speak. All I could do was listen to a rerun of my own story.

***

John's work tools lie on a steel-framed storage rack in the basement of my new home. Even though I hardly ever use them, I sometimes go to look at the bottles labeled in his handwriting with the different size nails and screws. From time to time when I need to fix a leaking tap or hang a new photo, I pick up a wrench or hammer and hold it close to my cheek. Then I take a breath and hear John's voice. "Take it easy and watch your thumb?

Ahimsa Timoteo Bodhrán

burning

in your blood is the call to movement.
you are called east and west
at the same time. stones gather around. you
become the body in flight. the body becomes
what it has desired. you turn from
mine. i free syllables, loose them
from the skin, tongue. skin-weaving-story.
mane of a lion, across a serengeti
field. stepping inside the circle, i burn
what is unnecessary: seven years of waiting.
clippings of hair. corn husks
wilting with weight. you'd have been
my third lover from EPA. you lived in a time
where living was not (land)granted.
lands to the south of here, i know how north
your borders grow. intricacies of fingers, lips,
tips, a test of memory. these digits, our
first night, keys to our numerology. touch
the place of silence, deep within. sing
the words through my body. hips open,
knees bent, to accept the rhythm, bring me
to a place of deeper language. help me
remember words i haven't forgotten yet.
i do not know the body of your poetry.
but i do know white words never spoke
our place within tradition, before
we were pushed outside the circle,
before we burned within. nights

i cried over flesh, both your spirits,
how you said you'd return to women one day.
there is a memory of flesh and longing, soul-deep;
cells swirl. after the travels, you return, helixed, apart.
if you'd be still enough in one place, you'd
hear me. in your blood, the signs,
you want to be all the places you're from.
keep what is necessary: the times you said i knew you
like no other. the beauty was
in my eyes. a language our own, kissing
my cheek. moments
i actually saw inside. after the seasons
of fire and rain, we will gather: by oceanside, cliff.
as is the tradition, i will dance with you
at your wedding, and offer you this song.

Reviews

Katie Zdybel. *Equipoise*. *Exile Editions, 2021. $27.95*

Katie Zdybel's collection of stories, *Equipose,* is the poster child for a trend that is both amusing and mildly disturbing: the premature hyper-professionalization of the CanLit industry. It's her first book; it comprises ten stories, only three or four of which have been previously published in literary journals. But: she has (almost inevitably) an MFA from UBC, she has an agent, she has had an impressive array of "professors…who inspired and guided [her]," including such luminaries as Miriam Toews and Heather O'Neill, and she has enjoyed the Canada Council's "generous support." But wait, there's more! One of the stories won a $10,000 award (no kidding, that's for *one* story).

It's as though Ms. Zdybel is saying, "Here I am, world, the Second Coming of Alice Munro!" But of course she isn't.

The stories of *Equipose* are competently-written explorations of the lives of a variety of young Canadian women. Men are usually absent or unimportant, not a problem for me as a reader, but the fact does suggest something about Ms. Zdybel's (self-imposed?) artistic limitations. There's nothing particularly interesting or distinctive about the female protagonists. A common denominator, apart from their all being white, is their middle-class identity.

One is a university student, one is a family doctor; there's a grad student, an actor, an artist, an education bureaucrat. Several are involved in what seem to me to be unhealthily intense relationships with other women: a mother and daughter in one story; two young women who've been friends since childhood in a second; a close friendship that's destroyed when one of the women gets pregnant and marries her partner in a third. Their lives tend to be characterized by what one might identify as an absence of vision, a lack of anything resembling a desire to achieve or even imagine a difficult, worthy goal for themselves or others. They roll with the punches but don't deliver many themselves.

As for the quality of the writing, the most accurate adjective I can come up with is "smooth." At the sentence level, everything is carefully managed. The style does not call attention to itself. The narrative voice, whether first or third-person, moves forward with impeccable ease. So

far, so good. But of course that doesn't really take us very far at all. What I'm really looking for is probably not meant to be there: the sound of a hitherto-unknown voice speaking truths one has never heard before, sentences that surprise, original turns of phrase or images that delight with their raw novelty. No, unfortunately (from my perspective) there's nothing like that. And (from Ms. Zdybel's perspective) why should there be? One plausible way to achieve professional literary success is to write fiction that sounds pretty much like the fiction of the already-successful cohort that Ms. Zdybel presumably hopes to join. No story in this collection is likely to offend anyone. Neither will any reader's cherished beliefs be challenged. Of course no writer should feel obligated to do either of those things. But still . . .

One story concludes with a now-old-fashioned post-Joycean epiphany, when a confused young woman goes skinny-dipping in a midnight thunderstorm with her mother's friend: "Ginni saw something she had never seen before: the power and beauty of a woman's body – not as a way of attracting men, but just as a way of being in its own right." *I am woman, hear me roar*, I suppose – but wasn't that about fifty years ago? It would have been more interesting if Ms. Zdybel had told us something we didn't already know. But again, that doesn't seem to be what she's aiming for.

More interesting to me because of its originality is a story such as "The Critics," about the slow-motion disintegration of the friendship between Audrey and Skyla, which includes passages of dialogue such as this: "And you think that makes you better than me, don't you? I'm so crude and you're so nice and demure and everybody just loves you. Is that what you think? Well, guess what? Thinking what you thought makes you just as crude as me." And this scene is set *after* they've graduated from high school. That quoted passage is what an adult says to another adult. Rarely have I felt so relieved to be male.

Two stories are set mostly in the Yukon, a place I have never before read about in fiction, and Ms. Zdybel does a fine job of exploring that world from the perspective of their protagonists, single women who have gone there for work but will be leaving sooner rather than later. The loneliness of the outsider is convincingly and movingly presented, and these stories are perhaps the volume's best evidence that Ms. Zdybel is capable of moving beyond the limits of long-established short story form.

Sadly, there are two other stories written from a child's perspective. Full disclosure: I always find such stories to be tedious, depending, as they invariably do, on the groan-inducingly obvious contrast between the innocence of childhood and the darkness of the adult world that will

sooner or later engulf the lives of the kids. Ms. Zdybel's efforts in this sub-genre are neither better nor worse than the run of the mill, which is to say: the book would be better off without them.

Then there's "Honey Maiden," which features a jerk-husband whose attempts to cheat on his protagonist-wife come to a sudden end when he's attacked and killed by a swarm of bees. Ms. Zdybel is not the first writer to "solve" the problem of an unsympathetic character by arranging for his arbitrary violent death. But one can hope that she may be among the last to do so.

Bottom line: Ms. Zdybel has mastered the style of a certain kind of mainstream contemporary fiction. Whether she will have the sort of literary career that one would wish for her will depend on the extent to which she can (or will) move beyond the limits she has currently set for herself.

--Larry Mathews

Mark Callanan. *Romantic*. *Biblioasis, 2021. $19.95*

Is 'romantic' a term more sinned against than sinning? Or is it, like 'tragic', deserving of its anarchic reputation? And, further, has Mark Callanan titled his third collection of poetry "Romantic" to rehabilitate this perverse word or to bury it, once and for all? Or is he up to something else entirely? I don't know. But I've certainly never mulled over a book title for longer than I have this one. Right straight through Christmas, New Year's, and Valentine's Day (obviously) and on into Spring, when winter's resentments begin to fade and then, as the book's first epigraph tells us:

doth the dew bespangle all the sward as with an incredible multitude of jewels
of various colours; then is all the world sweet and clean and new, as though it had
been fresh created for him who came to roam abroad so early in the morning.

-Howard Pyle, *The Story of King Arthur and His Knights*

A second epigraph from the poster boy for the English romantic sensibility, William Wordsworth, follows. And then the first poem, "Arcane," which renders a comparison between computer coding and the "heroics" of spells and magic wands. So far, so good. Front matter gone by, (indicated through the placement of a lone, tiny and stylized budded crucifix on its own page) the poems seem now to deliberately belie the cover illustration, which is taken, perhaps, from an illuminated manuscript of a medieval knight, in supplication pose. (Quite striking, in fact.) In diction and imagery, with only one exception, that being the title poem itself, the remaining poems only deal off-handedly with notions of chivalry, knights and ladies errant, and love, of the platonic kind. There are no apostrophes to the blooming, buzzing confusion and there is no sustained relationship to either Camelot or the Lake District, or revolution, and certainly not to *sturm und drang*. Candle-lit dinners? Don't even ask.

So, what gives? Is Callanan riding a sturdy steed named "Irony"? There is plenty of *things-aren't-as-they-seem* … as we would expect from most poets. And forlorn reflections on both youth's temporality and its Janus-faced attractions that too often teach only one lesson: "I was never a contender" ("Longshoreman"). But the contrast between the sumptuous cover and the clipped lines and allusive sociological and psychological deliberations is pronounced.

Updating, perhaps, the Wordsworthian lament that the world is too much with us, there are as well a handful of poems about our sad, almost tragic, relationship with technology. For example, how we adjust to the change from watching a baseball game on the screen to watching one live from the stands ("Score"). Our grandparents had to adjust to the reverse, of course. These are unavoidable changes and going off-grid to rescue the soul is just not an option.

In "Part of the Main," the speaker acknowledges the irrefutable fact that change and the dimming of life's bright promise – deliberate echoes of Donne and Matthew Arnold – leave the speaker with no recourse but to admit to appreciating the benefits of commerce and innovation, even as he must also admit to the "slow erosion of my sense / of self as moral being". And despite such compromises

> … I am happy
> paying for the services I'm given.
> My rooms are lit electrically. My
> house is heated. And in the middle

> of a heated moment, arguing bills,
> I think how nice it is: the luxury
> of fighting over debt ….

There are a number of such anti-romantic laments scattered throughout the book. They are all poignant and never sentimental. Callanan writes regularly about how we maneuver ourselves through an adolescence in which

> We were failed experiments
> ourselves, teenagers falling
> down drunk in wooded parks
> where glass shards, sloughed
> condoms, charred lumber scraps
> had washed up from the wreck
> of evenings past. We talked
> crap about the firmament,
> theorized life on other planets.

This is from "Science Camp," an anti-romantic lament if ever there was one. Youth is only dreams undone. Icarus is riding a bicycle he can't control ("The Rider"). And skylarking is as opposite Shelley's aspirational paean to that titular bird as acid rain is to verdant showers ("Skylarking").

Why not ignore science, then, and modern technology? Why not, instead, commune with the still extant bits of mother nature and imbibe her truths? Surprisingly, there is so little recourse to mother nature's bounty in this volume that, once more, I wonder about the purpose of this collection's title. The poetry is of urban experiences mainly, which is itself kind of remarkable since Callanan is writing from Newfoundland, where half the population is rural or quasi-rural. Or, at least, rural in sensibility. Of course, this characterization is a Newfoundland stereotype, implying that the true voice of a true Newfoundlander is grounded in isolated outports and spoken in a dialect rapidly disappearing down the drain of Canamerican culture. In fact, the current generation of Newfoundland writers is dominated by gens x and y and very little to do with I'se da b'y.

And speaking of postmodern, I wonder if it is fair or even helpful to comb through the collection for random words and images that justify a broad summary judgment. Even if readers write the book, as I believe they do, poetry, with its demand for unity of sound and sense and tone must be allowed to resist a reader's – and certainly a reviewer's – claim to freely and wildly interpret such well-wrought artifacts. And a thematic roundup can only diminish each poem through superficial comparisons and disfiguring paraphrases.

Then perhaps my worries about Mark Callanan's title are misplaced. Perhaps this grand concept poses a challenge, instead. You will reveal more insight on the world and get more pleasure from its junctures, he may be saying, if you stretch your finished canvas to fit an oversized frame. In this way Callahan, at his best, wonderfully reworks a resonant image of nature – a seashell – in what I'll remember as my favourite poem in the collection.

Beginning with a 'science only sullies nature's beauties' trope, "Shell" calls the reader to embrace the "vacancy" that is left once this poisoned dichotomy is transcended and to reach upward for a richer ambiguity.

> The murk is where I like to be,
> the depths at which unheard of
> species, grotesque lamps for eyes,
>
> can lurk beneath the range of our
> machines. I like it when an ROV
> gets stuck while trying to dredge
>
> up treasure from an ancient wreck
> and surfaces with nothing but
> some scuff marks on its shiny hull.

But it's a Pyrrhic victory, isn't it? Because the murk and the vacancy close in around us sooner or later … and we can't live forever in its soothing, numbing ignorance.

> So I hold this shell as I would hold

a phone, on hearing that my friend
has died – not ready to believe it yet,

too awed by how a distant grief has
travelled all the way to me in waves:
a shushing that's supposed to soothe.

It's a despairing poem, in the end, relieved only by the magic of language that sees through the murk and finds beauty, if only momentarily. If beauty is truth in more than a contrived sense, then we are capable of being saved.

I like to think that somewhere in
the dark there is an old clay cup
not even chipped, still bearing

maker's mark in florid script –
a holy object nestled in the silt
beside a coral crown; a sword

so furred with barnacles it looks
more like a gem-encrusted wand,
it's magic now forgotten by all.

For poets traditionally, of course, it is art itself that rescues us from despair, redeems our sojourn through the vale of tears. Or not. Sunsets, urns, symphonies, a plethora of Madonnas. Not so quick, there, says Mark Callanan. In a fascinating triptych of poems Callanan undoes the miracle of artistic creation, too, while, at the same time, undoing his deconstruction. He saws off the limb he's standing on but, in true poetic fashion, floats gloriously to the ground.

The first poem in the triptych is "The Work of Art." Centred on a survey of the wares in the popular Imaginus travelling poster pop-up shop, the speaker can't help mocking the contradictions involved in the posters on display. Mixed in with the Dali's, the van Gogh's, and Waterhouse's "The Lady of Shallot," is the infamous kitten, clinging onto the suspended rope, commanding us to hang in there. And, naturally, the movie stars:

Pacino, like a "handsome, / melancholy duke" and Nicholson "gone insane again".

Having also name-checked Walter Benjamin in "The Work of Art," the next poem on the next page is the stark "In the Age of Mechanical Production" whose three lines so neatly capture the double-edged future that Benjamin's important essay predicts:

> I clamp these sausages with tongs
> to cut three at once, in one
> smooth motion for my children who look just like me.

And why not "sausages"? In its own way it's a word as antithetical to romance and art as 'infrastructure,' to name but one.

On the facing page of "In the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" is "Museum Diorama," third in this *ad hoc* triptych, which is an elegy of sorts for the traditional outport Newfoundland lifestyle that revolved around the cod fishery. Expertly reproducing a tone borrowed from "Lies for Tourists," by Mary Dalton (to whom he dedicates the poem in an end-of-the-book acknowledgement), Callanan critiques the impulse behind and the impact of a curated museum piece portraying a traditional inshore fishery setting that has "been vetted by committee / so it's true". He doesn't have to say it – and he doesn't – but it's clear that there is no romance left in art galleries (all gone commercial?) or museums.

Just in case I've given the impression that *Romantic* is steeped in cynicism or dripping with dyspepsia, I hereby attest that it isn't. This is not a nihilistic screed: Mark Callanan isolates many joys and wants very much to rescue them from the slough of modernity. There are poems here about road trips, snow forts, paper airplanes, secret sex, balloon animals, Lancelot (updated) and even the Green Knight himself, in his own time. But, as said above, this is no Camelot, unless your head and heart can hold together its Manichean manifestations: the melancholic Camelot and the once and future Camelot. I can't decide, even now, where Callanan wants us to reside.

Nevertheless, I'm heartened by the the final poem, "Coda," separated from the preceding poems by another crucifix page. Here, the bumbling troubadour bids us adieu.

> I strummed whatever

chords I knew, fretting
over each flubbed note,
until at last, I hit a sound
that resonated out beyond

the borders of the park –
that sense we sometimes
have of being one
among the many parts.
It wouldn't last. I knew
that even then. I broke
a string and had to play
the night out from the gap.

Aesthetic abstractions be damned: listen to the music, however maimed, for the imagination can always be counted on to fill the gaps. And, finally, if there is any, unequivocal, connection between this dead horse abstraction I've beaten, it is probably the archetypal journey. From the beginning of the book to the end, Mark Callanan's pilgrimage is definitely worth taking.

--David B. Hickey

"Destiny's Children." **Zalika Reid-Benta**. ***Frying Plantain***. *House of Anansi, 2019. $16.95*

Every moment is tense in Zalika Reid-Benta's collection of linked short stories, *Frying Plantain*. At least I found myself reading the book and feeling tense – and sad, regretful. The image of Reid-Benta's protagonist and principal narrator, Kara Davis, striving with her father to be quiet in her Nana's basement when she was a child, and he was still in her life, says enough to much. About the level of unease that has dogged Kara, and about the immigrant existence of her parents and grandparents, in Toronto's Caribbean community.

I want to know if or how this tension could be defused. How the lives of Nana, Kara's raging mother, and her cool-yet-kind grandfather George could be any different.

In this story, the title story, Kara, now an adult, says, "Her [Nana's] voice is so gruff I almost tell her to get [the cinnamon] herself – but her voice is always hard." In another story, "Fiah Kitty," toward the book's middle, all the action centers around a desperate request from her mother that is camouflaged by usually welcome holiday greetings: Nana "tears open the cream-coloured envelope to reveal a green Christmas card. On the front, an angel made of swirls and snowflakes holds a trumpet to her lips, blowing out a Bible verse: *And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which will be to all people. Luke 2:10.*"

Shouldn't great joy, and the absence of fear, be theirs, given where they have struggled to come from, Jamaica, and where they have come to, Canada?

Reid-Benta has a way with telling details, from the simple (Ting bottle) to the arresting (a pig's head) in an icebox in the opening story, "Pig Head." They usually point to something disturbing to come. In a matter-of-fact way. An inevitable way. "Brandon & Sheila" is one of the best stories I've read about a girl's (and boy's) awkward first kiss, the unavoidability of sex, and toxic relationships (personal and parental). Yet so quiet. "This was how all storms started. Gently," remarks Kara in "Snow Day." This observation is perceptive for an eighth-grader. So many of Reid-Benta's stories begin quietly, gently. Before the noise and brutalizing begin.

We move with Kara from age ten to nineteen, from fumbled intimacies to preordained university. Formative years both wonderfully and terrifyingly captured in this debut collection – right down to high school socio-cultural pecking orders and a shared poutine among so-called friends in a donut shop. What happens during these years can determine the course of a life, for better and for ill. Munro's *Live of Girls and Women* and *Runaway* come to mind. *Frying Plantain*, like them, tilts toward being a novel in stories, with its recurring characters, progressive action, overarching plotting, clear continuity – and a voice in Kara, who herself feels physically insecure, socially put upon, and culturally profiled, that is compelling right from the first.

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Among generational divides is where Reid-Benta is mining, that rocky space between "home" and "back home." Throughout the book runs the split between three generations of Davis women: Nana (Christian name Verna), Eloise (Nana's daughter/Kara's mother), and Kara. In them,

we are reminded of the endless and contentious ways of doing, seeing and being.

After Kara's reaction to the chilled "pig's severed head" in Nana's sister's fridge, her Jamaican cousins and friends approach her, it seems, only "for games they thought Canadian girls could stomach." Kara's mother watches for her daughter to swallow her disgust in front of Nana, too, for fear of being labelled soft or other. Kara's way out: to make up stories about her experiences between Canada and the Caribbean in order to make sense of them. And I can relate.

She does this in a transplanted Jamaican Nation Language that is as on point and pointed as her Torontonian Standard English is direct or flat. So it is sad that Kara often feels like nobody's child, even if she has owners who tell her loudly (or angrily) otherwise. Eloise's proud, Caribbean refusal to "[speak] to the cause of her rage, kept [her but also Nana] from admitting that another person had triggered such a response." Kara's own "stricken" silence, brought on by years of psychological and physical abuse she, ever her mother's child, would not readily call that, is an attempt to fit in among family, among friends, among fellow Torontonians and Canadians – when she may never.

I wonder about Kara's need to belong as much as I do about her mother's and grandmother's insistence on their own sense of order. They, along with Kara's sympathetic, inscrutable grandfather, are standout characters in *Frying Plantain*. So much of who they are, and where they originate from, is in their self-protective handling of their encounters with each other and their community: "Like a cat pawing its meal, letting it go to catch it again." I wonder, too, at the ease with which our own kin can cut us down.

Is it the problem of living here and there, or of trying to; because it is frightening to let go of who we knew ourselves to be and no easier to embrace its reinvention in equally yet differently hostile environments? Nana wars with Eloise, and Eloise in turn wars with Kara…but they all appear embattled in Canada. The mystery of their conflict sufficiently propels much of the book's plot. Reid-Benta's storytelling is so natural. The language is without frills yet charged with truth. All this highlights how unnatural Kara feels in her particular situation as someone born in Canada to Caribbean parents. Even her own family have made her birthplace into a "great misfortune," with her identity as "Canadian-born" always suspect. Then why did they come? What were the after? Did they expect a woman to give birth with half her body stretched over borders?

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The time frame of *Frying Plantain* is clear based on references to music and technology: from the turbulent all-female R&B group Destiny's Child and CD players to the early use of cellphones and chat rooms; but no Facebook, not yet – so the late 1990's to the very early 2000's, with all that lies ahead for Kara, her family and friends.

What kind of world we want is one of the questions the book asks – of the indigenous and the migrant – and is uncommonly pressing. As I write, Vladimir Putin continues his invasion of Ukraine for no defensible reason, and the world continues to ask itself how best to react to him, to Russia's propaganda machine, to unchecked bigotry. Kara's reality is one similarly built on convenient lies and racism, and the self-loathing taint of colourism. Her challenge in addressing her own individual issues has far-reaching implications. To heal the rift between her and her mother, and between her mother and Nana, is only the start. It is a matter of reconciling generations and environments and languages among people who, as in "Drunk" and "Brandon & Shelia," for instance, have a hard time being any other way because of how they were brought up.

We are all bound so closely, so dangerously, sometimes. How do we escape the gravitational drama of the lives of others? Reid-Benta reminds us how impossible that was in high school. When Kara realizes "[t]here was no one here to have my back," she remembers her "mother and grandmother had prepared me for" the kind of "embarrassment" served up by her peers. Those lessons would have come with hard knocks and harsher words. "Getting injured was the only time any of us cried. Or cried in public anyway." Detectably, a bitterness with lifelong staying power emerges: "I'd never expected much from people – but what little I did I'd learned to let go of two weeks before at New Orleans Donuts," she says in "Before/After."

It's easy to be cruel. No less true in *Frying Plantain* is that we take too long to learn from our own failings, and those of others. There's a moment in "Lovely," for all of its emotional distance, that I realize I don't like Kara's mother very much. Does Eloise get drunk with Kara because her only child is finally graduating from high school, and she sees this as a moment for them to bond, or is it for passing seventeen without getting pregnant, the way she did at that age? I suppose it could be for both. But Kara knows what dangers women, young black women, open themselves to when they "buckle to [a man's] will." She calls the boy she's seeing "the" boyfriend and never "my" boyfriend. She confesses that "I didn't know if I wanted to be needed. It didn't seem too far off from being used." The need to control, as Nana and Eloise seek to, what can't or won't be controlled is as burdensome as keeping secrets from their loved ones.

George is also right when he suggests to his peacemaking granddaughter there are some things no one knows until they do. Some things no one can tell you until you tell them to yourself first, or ask yourself. In my case, that might be with this book: What do I read for now? What am I, a fifty-four-year-old black Canadian writer of Barbadian descent, looking for in a work like *Frying Plantain* – especially when I live and write directly out of the place, the Caribbean, where the misery that stokes Eloise originated?

I was and am always partly where I was born, or brought up, along Montreal's St. Lawrence River in LaSalle. In Reid-Benta's collection, equal parts Toronto and Jamaican, I can't help comparing our two Canadian-Caribbean landscapes: decades apart socially and politically yet closely bound on the page. What to make of the landscapes of Austin Clarke, H. Nigel Thomas, Dionne Brand, M. NourbeSe Philip, Althea Prince, or Makeda Silvera? What to make of our various descriptions of snow, sorrel or plastic-covered sofas? I ask this because there are echoes of others, here – Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl," or Cherie Jones' "Bride" – in stories like "Inspection." And there are missteps (minor) in language and pacing, or stylings better suited to oral rendition. And I don't know how much the understanding of blacks in Canada has really grown over all these years. I don't know for sure. As with the works of the other writers mentioned, I *do* know I'll be giving *Frying Plantain* to my sixteen-year-old daughter to read. As a kind of guide, maybe. Another to help her make her own way through.

--Robert Edison Sandiford

Wayne Curtis. ***Winter Road***. *Pottersfield Press, 2020. $19.95*

In the back pages of *Winter Road* is a list of Wayne Curtis's published books and a biography that indicate he is a well-established literary figure in Canada whose work focuses on life around New Brunswick's Miramichi River. New to his fiction, I read this collection of short stories as a speculative treatise on how a particular landscape can have a profound, formative impact on its inhabitants, affecting all levels of their lives in complicated ways. For example, his central characters romanticize their pasts, envisioning their childhood lives nostalgically and ignoring many of the sober realities that motivate some of them to leave for better fortunes elsewhere. This mistaken valuation of the dreamy past causes some of them to lose their way on the roads through their own

mental landscapes, and they end up without any sense of direction at all. Others cope well, and still others interpret the past realistically to thrive on their cultural heritage. So, there is a scale of addiction here with correlating consequences, and these stories are about the various pathologies of fixation and how to overcome them.

First, we meet Dale, the elderly narrator of "Class of '59" who is stubbornly attached to his hometown, Stanton, a place he sees as "repellant," but also as "the most beautiful place on earth." This setting is used to contextualize his romantic obsession with a young classmate, Mary, who is aloof and unreciprocating. She moves away to a successful life elsewhere, leaving him stultified and incapacitated as an adult. Curtis subtly reveals the debilitating effects this refusal to accept romantic loss can have on a person, and Dale readily admits that "through the years, the would-be affair brought me feelings of shame and self-pity. Yet I was comforted by the memory of her in my arms, be it ever so briefly." A sense of ambivalence in this thought intensifies with his comment that "Mary would always be with me spiritually, as so much of our relationship was planted deep in my psyche. In fact, she had become a state of mind, one that brought me more suffering than pleasure."

Curtis shows us here the power of place and events over an individual. As Dale admits, Stanton itself and his failed relationship with Mary cause him to live a "solitary life, exploiting the seductiveness of memory, coloured in my favour by nostalgia." Coupled with this is a quotation from Proust that brings into focus more clearly the thematic essence of all the stories that follow: "'There must be something inaccessible in what we love, something to pursue; we love only what we do not possess'."

In fact, after "Class of '59'," there is a rough progression in attempts by the characters to pursue and possess what they love most, whether located in a mistakenly idealized past, the real present, or a promising future. Most use art, either writing, painting, or music, to help them along, and, technically, Curtis opts mostly for first-person narrative and versions of indirect discourse to allow direct access to their philosophical and artistic reflections.

A good illustration of how Curtis' stories work vis-à-vis this thematic cluster of land, dreams, memory, and nostalgia can be found in the four stories about Mark Moore. In the first of these, "Away, Back East," Mark returns to the Miramichi from Toronto by car with his new wife Pam and infant son Nathaniel. As they drive through the countryside, he interprets the landscape for Pam through a semiotics of musical codes:

> . . . the farm implements were like phrases in a symphony of classical music. They made up the 'whole' when it came to looking at a landscape that brought back so many emotions. The inventiveness of memory carried him along through the wooded stretches between farms. And at the end of lanes the tree-shaded farmhouses (that to him were the only kind of house worth looking at) served to further embody the rugged and rustic soul. And he felt that he had never completely outgrown that age of innocence, and probably never would.

This scene, a protype for many in the collection, encapsulates the process through which these characters succumb to the entrancing nature of landscape and culture. It is the "inventiveness of memory" that transforms brutal hard work, poverty, and suffering of real Maritime farm life into something bucolic. This, Curtis seems to suggest, is a form of cultural atavism, and misguided characters like Mark do not fare well under its influence. Pam tells him later that when he obsesses about refurbishing a house to an earlier grand style, as a way of recreating and living in the past, he is entering a "dark zone," an aspect of his character that eventually leads to their separation.

Although the land itself is the locus of meaning in these stories, its numinous power is abstracted and invested in the old stately houses in the area. They represent the romanticized cultural past and must be preserved to preserve the past itself. Mark's goal to buy one is achieved five years later in "Prevailing Winds." This story is set around Halloween, and Mark watches from his bedroom window as an old derelict mansion nearby burns in the night, probably because of pranksters: "It was one more symbol of the glory days of Blueberry Ridge being devoured from the landscape." In other stories, some of these symbols are referred to directly by the characters themselves as "metaphors," and Curtis steeps this collection in literary allusions and renders it in a narrative sensibility and tone that are distinctly high Romantic.

By now, Mark is writing poems and essays for a literature class, while pretentiously assuming the persona of a Romantic writer. During the harsh weather of November, he roams down by the river and at one point adopts a transformative artistic gaze "that made the scene appear like an amateur painting in progress. Such were his observations, the artistic life he craved and that appeared to be eluding him. He would stand in meditation as he looked across the Robertson Intervale to see the gables of his farmhouse . . . and envision a century-old inn . . . somewhere in the marshes of literary England."

By the third story, "Apartment," Mark is living in a low-rent apartment in Bradford, his son is estranged from him, and his marriage is over. Still enslaved by his dreams of the past, he relies on literature and the arts to protect his sanity, which is precarious at best, as we see from one of his self-reflective comments: "I am an old-fashioned traditionalist and am no longer sure I can find my right mind anymore." Yet, Curtis signals Mark's progress through another introspective comment that "nostalgia has a dangerous brushstroke of its own." Mark also wonders, "Why does one work and study so hard to escape from the person they really are? . . . Why do we always grasp for a happiness that does not exist? Or is chasing after a dream where the romance lies?" It is in this last question that we find Curtis' sympathies: his characters are not simply struggling with an *idée fixe*, but with the idea that romanticism and nostalgia themselves form a substrative element of their lives. This helps explain the veneration by a number of male narrators for female figures in their lives who are often sentimentally depicted as regal, saintly, and morally unimpeachable. Besides Mary in the first story, there is also the narrator's mother in "Wild Blueberries," Caroline Henley in "The Curfew," and the narrator's wife in "Apple Picking."

The last of Mark's stories is "The Return." Since the time of "Apartment," he has somewhat recovered from his mental issues, worked in the oil fields out west, and moved back to Bradford. While driving towards his previous home in Blueberry Ridge, not far from his childhood home in Falconer, he again reads the landscape and thinks "For a moment I want to go back and live in that sweet old mindset, before my misguided life's ambition entered into it." This is the "dark zone" again that Pam identified for him early and which he is still trying to keep at bay. However, he is healing, and his imaginative powers are no longer capable of transforming grindstones and winnowing machines into portals to the past. He is in control enough to see the real countryside, the real delipidated house, and thinks, "Perhaps it was my imagination that made the house what it was, a resourcefulness without which any kind of romance, even nostalgia, could have survived."

"The Return" continues with Marks' further progress in the acknowledgement of two separate versions of himself, the younger Mark under the spell of nostalgia and the older Mark who is somewhat recovered: "The Mark Moore of that time made no mistakes; everything was perfection because he was on his way to quintessence. And I think too that arrogance can always find its virtue along that crooked road of reflection." The origin of his despair is more fully understood when he admits he should "not have been obsessed with a dream that had been spun out of poverty, a delusion that took me into a time zone of the

previous century." We find these moments of revelation throughout the stories, and there is a certain authorial prowess in their placement and capacity to resonate and accumulate power with each iteration.

Meanwhile, Curtis has not wholly rescued Mark from the throes of his psychic conflicts. He still has something left to say about nostalgia and reveals it in Marks's final thoughts about losing Pam, his son, and loss of his property and dream:

> The years of counselling have eliminated her and our disagreements and the scars from trying to cling to them. And I think that is why there is no classicist view left in this picture. You have to have a dream world and dream people to live in it. Otherwise, the whole cognition is overtaken with realness, the not-so-spirited gray world of routine, the calamities and death of real life. For me, fact is not the sweetest dream that labor knows.

Curtis makes a notable statement here. He partially absolves Mark of his mistakes and weakness and makes a case for imagination, art, and the sublime as fundamental elements of life, without which most people would be spiritually impoverished.

For some reason, many of the male narrators succumb to their temporal delusions, while the female narrators escape the pitfalls of farm life and dangerous romanticized versions of the past. In "First Snow," a young teenage girl enjoys a storm that brings the first snow of winter to their family farm. Whereas a male narrator would see a topography of sentimental hieroglyphics, the narrator here is clear-eyed and solidly connected to the present. She already knows what Sally in "At Oak Point" has earlier concluded: "we must be careful with nostalgia. Like Wordsworth's pen, it paints a beautiful picture."

Curtis more directly endorses a realistic approach to Miramichi farm life in the last story, "Winter Road," through Minnie, probably in her sixties, who has inherited her aunt's Miramichi cottage and enough money to start at degree in music and literature. Placed in much the same rural setting and under many of the same conditions as her male counterparts, she is more philosophically savvy and speaks from a position of intuitive wisdom: ". . . good things can happen here at home, and the days of winter poverty, cultural or materialistic, are a thing of the past. It is just a matter of letting go of the ghost." More sage words come from her Aunt Lilian, who could also be delivering Curtis' summary assessment of this issue so far: "A dream is from the heart, and without

following it we cannot find true happiness. But to pursue one's dream, however romantic, is a hard old road and we need support and love while we are attempting it." This also means that "For the elderly, nostalgia is not a dirty word."

The last road we see in this collection is a "trackless winter road" leading out from a warm family home charmed by piano music. It's a road that symbolizes Minnie's potential future, one that most of the other characters couldn't find because of their obsessions with false images of their idealized pasts.

It's worth noting at this point, that, notwithstanding gender differences in responses to the cultural past, there is hardly any differences in style, tone, or temperament between male and female narrators. This homogeny creates the feeling that there is a single narrative consciousness, despite Curtis' individuation of character. Similarly, the mono-thematic thrust of his stories overrides the particularities of character, and we move from one story to the other without being much aware of a movement from one consciousness to another.

A few more points remain to be made about this collection, but we have to go back to the first story again to articulate them. Although Dale's love for a classmate in "Class of '59" affected his entire life and left him a loner, he proudly defends his choices and his feeling, stating confidently that they "were not innocent, but mature, not provincial, but universal." Indeed, Curtis' standard here is impressively high and his themes catholic in nature. His prose is ladened with philosophical questions posed by characters born from archetypal landscapes that you would see anywhere in his classical literary forebears, who include Wordsworth, Blake, Frost, Dickens, and Canadian writers like Wilfred Campbell and E. Pauline Johnson. I think especially of Chekhov, quoted in "Wild Blueberries," and his story "The Man in a Case." Although not referenced in *Winter Road*, a statement about its main character, Belikov, can be applied to Curtis' male characters in particular: "Reality chafed and alarmed him and kept him in a state of perpetual apprehension, and it was, perhaps, to justify his timidity and his aversion to the present that he always exalted the past and things which had never existed."

To close, we stay with "Class of '59," and a magnificent vignette of several young men at a social gathering on their way in an old Chevy to get a second supply of liquor in a nearby town. As Dale remembers it, "They were laughing and whooping as they went over the hill to cross the river bridge. When the brakes gave out, down where the railway tracks were, the car swerved into the ditch and completely missed the bridge."

They ended up in the river, made it back to shore and back to the dancehall, standing outside barefoot and soaked as "they hugged one another and cried. . . They were in shock and thankful to be alive." This is another road travelled with poor results and another metaphor for the fate of young men unable to successfully navigate their way through life on the Miramichi. Curtis' stark description of the car stands as a warning to those who have a propensity to see the past as the apotheosis of life: "The Chevy sat on the bottom of the river, surrounded by a million amber stones, and the water ran through its windows. An old straw hat drifted down with the currents."

There's a humble, poetic beauty to this prose, to Curtis' writing overall, and to his depictions of characters wrestling with their preternatural love for their ancestral past. A reader comes to understand then the legitimacy underlying the long list of Curtis' publications and the impressive credentials that identify him as a preeminent Canadian storyteller.

--Ed Balsom

Contributors

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