

GEIST

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INSIDE THE MACHINE

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Emetophobia ♦ Canada Goose Poem ♦ Three Yelp Reviews

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COVER: Sandeep Johal, *Only Crazy People and Men Have the Energy to Dream*, 2019, acrylic on panel. The artwork was inspired by the female protagonist of the book *Tamarind Mem* (Penguin Random House) by Anita Rau Badami. The piece was created as a part of a series titled “She Left Only to Come Back,” which was presented as a solo exhibit with the Art Rental & Sales program operated by the Vancouver Art Gallery in 2019.

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MISCELLANY



GEIST IN VIENNA

Geist 122 with Yuna of the Shakespeare & Company bookstore in Vienna, summer 2023. Photograph by *Geist* correspondent Michael Hayward.

GEIST IN THE CLASSROOM

My creative writing class and writers' guild love reading *Geist*. It's also used throughout the year for silent reading with my grade 9 English class.
—*Anneke Nussbaum, instructor at Frances Kelsey Secondary School in Mill Bay, BC*

We love to hear how Geist is used in your classroom. Visit our website for more information on how to request complimentary copies for your classroom.
—*The Editors*

DRIFT

Ernie Kroeger's dispatch "Acoustic Memory" (page 13) describes an aural *dérive* (or drift), as he accesses and accumulates memories by reviving sounds from his childhood—snatches of conversation, airplanes, pigeons, his grandmother's piano. For this issue's creative prompt, we encourage the drifters among (or within!) you to generate your own soundscapes.

1. Take a walk: set out with no destination or route in mind, and see where your ear takes you. Or simply tune in to the sounds of your home and the outside world filtering through the window.
2. Pay attention to sounds: blackbird, coffee grinder, a caught phrase. Let them carry you into memory, emotion, and any other associations that arise. Try to pinpoint them as specifically as you can in time, even to a particular event.
3. When you return from your *dérive*, make a list of these sonic experiences. Diagram your walk or mind-wandering, mapping your movements, sounds and memories on the page.

—*The Editors*

VIRTUAL GEIST

If you've visited the *Geist* website recently, you may have noticed a few changes. We've been working hard over the last several months on a substantial redesign. Our thanks to creative designer Caitlin Aboud for the fresh look, and to Michelle Ha for her work on our digital projects team last year. We hope our readers

will enjoy browsing the site, and will forgive us if there are a few temporary gremlins lurking in our virtual digs. We're delighted to be able to showcase our writers' and artists' work in this transformed space—you can expect

to see lots of exciting original content posted online over the coming months. Feast your eyes at geist.com.

We were aiming for a tomato red, but everyone tells us it's orange.
—*The Editors*

OVERHEARD

"The barking is implied."



Overheard on the outdoor patio of the Barking Parrot Bar in Penticton, BC, by Geist reader Genevieve Wynand. Comic by the poet-cartoonist Emily Chou. Find more of Emily Chou's work in issue Geist 122 or online at geist.com/comics/my-dads-brother.

WRITE TO GEIST

✉ Thoughts, opinions, comments and queries are welcome and encouraged, and should be sent to:

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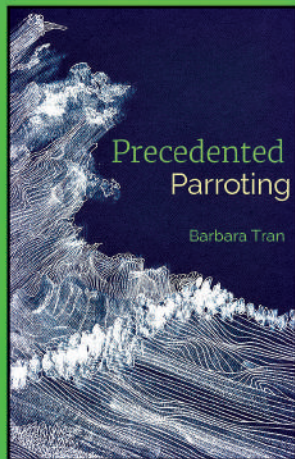
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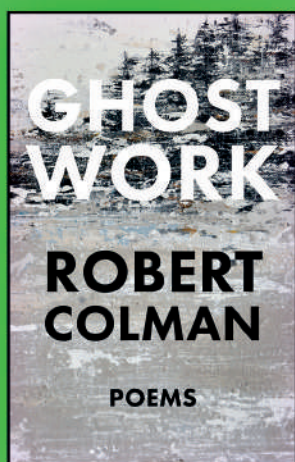
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ARTISTS IN THIS ISSUE

Sara Angelucci is an adjunct professor of photography at Toronto Metropolitan University. For the past ten years, her projects have involved environmental concerns exploring the plight of birds, forests and plants. Her work has been exhibited nationally and internationally and is held in numerous private and public collections. She lives in Toronto, ON. Find her at sara-angelucci.ca.

Leila Fatemi is a visual artist. Her multidisciplinary practice uses mediums that include photography, collage and printmaking. Through exploring postcolonial themes, her work challenges viewers to rethink the representation and cultural impact of Orientalized subjects while engaging with issues of gender and spirituality. She lives in Toronto, ON. Find her at leilafatemi.com and on Instagram @localeila.

Julia Iredale is an artist and illustrator. With clients around the world, she specializes in freelance illustration and book cover design for children's and young adult literature. She lives on Salt Spring Island, BC. Find her at juliairedale.com and on Instagram @julia_iredale.

Joshua Jensen-Nagle's work is of immersive, large-scale photographs created to capture a feeling, rather than document a reality. For his series *Endless Summer*, Joshua travelled to

over twenty countries and five continents capturing dreamy beachscapes from high above, often hanging out of helicopters for his bird's-eye views. He lives in Toronto, ON. Find him at jensennagle.com and on Instagram @jensennagle.

Sandeep Johal is a visual artist. Her art practices include drawing, collage, textiles and large-scale murals. Through her Indo-folk feminine aesthetic, she confronts themes of bleakness, despair and ugliness with their dissonant opposites: brightness, hope and beauty. She lives in Vancouver, BC. Find her at sandeepjohal.com and on Instagram @sandeepjohalart.

Catherine Mellinger (she/they) is a mixed-media collage artist. Her work has been exhibited across North America and has been published internationally. She lives on ancestral territory belonging to the Haudenosaunee, Anishinaabe and Neutral peoples in the Haldimand Tract in Waterloo, ON. Find her at catherinemellinger.com.

Donna Seto is a writer, accidental artist and occasional academic. She is working on an illustrated history book, *Chinatown Vancouver: An Illustrated History*, forthcoming from House of Anansi in 2025. She lives in Vancouver, BC. Find her on Instagram @donna.seto.

After the Flames

KELLY BOUCHARD

A wildland firefighter witnesses an old burn's second act



I was a wildland firefighter for the Government of British Columbia for five seasons spread over thirteen years. I spent all of them on a twenty-person unit crew stationed in Burns Lake, a small town in BC's central interior. My first season was in 2009, when I was a twenty-one-year-old wide-eyed rookie. My last was in 2022, when I was thirty-four and served as Assistant Supervisor. I grew up on the crew and loved every minute, but at the end of 2022 I knew it was time to call it quits for good. I was getting older. My body was breaking down. I had a girlfriend

who didn't want to miss me another summer. There were other things I wanted to do. But it was still tough to leave.

High on the list of the many things I miss about the job is the relationship it fosters with wildfires themselves. Like a boxer spewing vitriol before a fight and embracing his opponent afterwards, I began fighting fires filled with antagonism and left the job with feelings of respect. I don't think you can fight fires for any length of time and not come to respect them. Not when they have flummoxed and outfoxed you. Not when they have

frightened and nearly killed you. Not when you have watched them devour hillsides or light the night with their hellish and beautiful glow. Most firefighters I know speak about fires in the same personified manner that sailors use to talk about the sea. We give our fires gendered pronouns, comment on their temperaments and moods, and argue with them in our heads. Somehow over the course of the struggle, they turn from insentient obstacles into living adversaries.

Firefighters tend to think of the extinguishing of a fire as the end of its life—a death signalled by the fact that once a fire is out, we drop the pronouns, and it becomes just another number to write in our logbooks. But from an ecological standpoint, the dousing of the flames is better understood as the start of a second phase. In this sense, we firefighters are treated to only the first act of what is really a two-act play.

We know the second act exists. In BC, we were taught about it at basic training, our instructors trying to hold our attention as they droned on about the nitrogen cycle and species like jack and lodgepole pines, whose cones require the fire's heat to seed. If a fire's first act is destruction, its second is renewal, and there's no objective reason that one should be more compelling than the other. Firefighters just never get to see act 2 up on its feet. At intermission, we pack up our tents and away.

I didn't want to leave firefighting without having a chance to see the end of this narrative arc, so near the end of the 2022 season my fellow crew member Ryan Skinner and I revisited a fire I'd fought back in 2014 to see what had become of it

eight years on. The Chelaslie River Fire's first act was about as explosive as they come. It started in early July when a lightning strike ignited a stand of beetle-killed pine about 90 kilometres south of Burns Lake, and went on to burn for months, sweeping hillsides, hopping lakes, and resisting all attempts to contain it until it had consumed over 1,300 square kilometres of forest and become, at the time, one of the largest fires in BC's recorded history.

As an exuberant third year, I was on the fire for a total of six weeks. For a big chunk of that time, we got our butts kicked. Our first fourteen-day deployment was particularly fraught. Two of our crewmembers were nearly entrapped when the fire jumped our line and burned over our hose, leaving them in a shrinking green pocket they escaped only by sprinting through a less active part of the burn. I spent ten days guiding a bulldozer and excavator to create what remains the largest fireguard of my career, only for the Chelaslie to hop it like an elephant over a stream of ant piss and go for a kilometres-long run. Even in mid-September—when the fall cold had arrived in earnest, and we had to drain our pumps and hose nightly to stop them from freezing—we would look up from our work to find a sky bedevilled by plumes as the fire churned stubbornly away toward Tweedsmuir Provincial Park. The Chelaslie, more than any other fire I fought before or since, seemed to have something akin to a will, one that despite our best efforts refused to break. Eight years on, it remained the biggest, longest lasting, and most memorable fire of my career.

Skinner and I headed out to the Chelaslie from Burns Lake in late August 2022 during mandatory days off before what we both suspected would be our final deployment of the season and, in my case, my career. We'd wanted to get our hands on maps from BC Wildfire Service that

would tell us the exact locations of old fireguards, pump sites and crew locations, so we could revisit these sites of battle and see how they'd changed. But after weeks of back-and-forth emails, we'd been told that to get those we'd have to submit a Freedom of Information request and by then it was too late: the season was nearly over, and Skinner and I would soon go our separate ways. In the end, all we had to go on was a final fire perimeter publicly available on BC Wildfire's website, some maps purloined from the Burns Lake fire attack base, a backroads map app, and my own murky memories—Skinner started fighting fires after the Chelaslie.

I had hoped that, despite the lack of detailed maps, I would find some places on the fire where I could be certain I had stood back in 2014. However, after we had driven hours on washboard dirt roads and taken two ferries—first a government-run one across Francois Lake, then a barge across Ootsa Lake operated by the Cheslatta Carrier Nation who generously let us ride for free—we arrived at a lookout above the old burn, and I was reminded of the scale. The naked, sun-bleached stems of burned trees stretched interminably in all directions. From our direction of approach, we had access to nearly 26,000 hectares of the burn, an area representing less than a quarter of the total fire but which was still twice the size of Vancouver. We spent hours in my little '08 Ranger, raising dust clouds on kilometre upon kilometre of logging road. We walked down to the edges of the various lakes that dotted the region, thinking to locate old pump sites or hose-trails that had been cut into the forest with chainsaws. Nothing.

I was sure we would at least find the remnants of my doomed bulldozer guard, but the rapidly expanding fire had meant many such guards were made, overrun and abandoned. Over time, they had all come to look alike and blended indistinguishably with

decommissioned logging roads crisscrossing the old burn. We stopped the truck again and again to walk various machine-made slashes covered over with clover and waving grasses. Maybe we did find my guard. Maybe not.

Even things from my memories that seemed indelible had been subsumed by nature. The ATCO trailer for instance—where our crew had stayed during our last fourteen-day deployment on the Chelaslie and one of many such wilderness outposts maintained by the BC government—had been broken into and looted of furniture and appliances. We entered through an open door that sagged and flapped on rusting hinges, and rustled around in the remnants of the trailer. I remembered our crews' sleeping bags unrolled neatly on the trailer floor, watching old VHS tapes in the evening on a tiny television that once sat in the corner, and the smell of meals prepared in the little kitchenette. Now, the place smelled of animal droppings, mould and decay. Outside, we spent nearly twenty minutes searching the tangled forest for a pit toilet I'd helped build and were thrilled when we found it, broken and moss-covered but upright. In an environment that appeared intent on erasing all trace of me, even a broken toilet seat felt significant.

Instead of the legacy of the fight, we found the story of what came afterwards. Beneath the trunks of the burned trees, on a forest floor invigorated with nutrients and exposed to the sun, pioneering plants had forged upward through the blowing ash of the new burn. In time, they had been joined by slower species and the resultant mix was lush and lovely. Raspberries and lowbush blueberries rubbed shoulders with clovers, lichen, bunchgrass, poplar saplings, tiny blue and white wildflowers and the tall, waving blooms of the ubiquitous purple fireweed.

As we high-stepped through rosehip brambles, a brood of young grouse

fluttered into the trees, their mother eyeing us warily from a branch. A red fox bounded away from us over the charred stumps of a cut block, and everywhere we went we found deer droppings and bear scat. Most encouraging to a BC native like me who remembered when the mountain pine beetle wiped out most of the province's mature pine, the burn was littered with young lodgepole saplings. Their spiky branches danced in the wind beneath the looming presence of their burned forebears. We drove and walked and drove, settling into an altogether more staid rhythm than the kinetic one we'd embodied on the fireline. My driving speed gradually slowed. Skinner dozed intermittently in the passenger seat.

In the late afternoon, we pulled over beside a lake near the centre of the old burn and went for a swim off a dock whose existence out in the middle of nowhere felt completely unaccountable. The water was so clean that the dock looked like a balcony jutting out into thin air from the shore. The lake was cold but bearable, and we floated on our backs, looking up at the blue sky. It's perhaps quintessentially human that we came to the burn looking for evidence of our crew's past deeds. The focus on act 1 of a fire is not unique to firefighters alone, for it's in the flames and destruction that we humans most readily see ourselves. We tend to view today's wildfires as a natural threat to people and property, lent unnatural ferocity by human-caused global warming: it's a story of humans within and humans without. What's lost is that a big part of a wildfire's story involves no people at all.

I turned myself slowly in the cold water as memories of the Chelashlie and other fires washed over me. I remembered near misses with falling trees, strategic withdrawals before walls of advancing flame, and long days patrolling endless blackened moonscapes. I recalled moments of humour and catharsis shared with

Emetophobia

EM DIAL

The ride to girl scout camp made me curse my father's pickup truck and its back-seat boardroom, two child-sized fold-out chairs made for knee-to-knee confrontation, which is exactly what happened when Naomi's lunch got the better of her, the windy road bonding our sneakers together through a fluid no longer hers but shared, sparking in me a fear of losing what is only partway worked through, I started colouring in the broadest strokes, compulsively saving my computer documents lest some unexpected turn pull from me like a magician's fist around a chain of scarves. It wasn't until I hit send on the separation document and painted the porcelain a bile and egg-yolk blond that I saw what I wanted out of the rest of my life was exactly a lemony dawn dripping through fingers into another day, and another, slipping away when you feel like you were just getting started.

Em Dial is a queer, Black, Taiwanese, Japanese and White, chronically ill poet, grower, and educator born and raised in the Bay Area of California, currently living in Toronto. They are a Kundiman Fellow and recipient of the 2020 PEN Canada New Voices Award and the 2019 Mary C. Mohr Poetry Award.

fellow crew members, many of whom had long since moved on. I placed my own halting timeline atop our crew's twenty-one-year history. To me, five seasons had felt like the whole story, but it was only a tiny part that was now nearly over.

It was time to go. We had a long drive home, and tomorrow we'd be headed back to the heat and freneticism of the line. We towelled off with our T-shirts and climbed into the truck. Skinner fiddled with the radio as I drove up the steep road from

the dock. I looked over my shoulder. The lake reflected the blue sky. Hills rose from it on all sides, covered in an understory so distractingly green it took conscious effort to pick out the burned trees protruding from it at odd angles. I looked until a bend in the road took the view, then faced ahead and drove on. It was sad, it was natural, but out there in the old burn's

second act it was above all clear: things carry on without us.

Kelly Bouchard was a wildfire fighter in BC during the 2009, 2012, 2014, 2015 and 2022 seasons. His writing has appeared in the Malahat Review, the Toronto Star, and Canadian Running Magazine. He currently lives in Toronto, where he works in social services.

The Academy of Profound Oddities

DAYNA MAHANNAH

The fish is a suspended phantom, its magenta skeleton an exquisite, vibrant exhibit of what lies beneath

Everything around Jo Lepeska is dead. The vase of flowers, dry and fragile, on a side table. The myth-sized insects collaging the wall. The Albertan coyote staring blankly in the corner, the stuffed goose that dangles from the ceiling. Mounted on the wall is the head of a stag. Next to the skeleton of some unidentifiable animal, anthropomorphically taxidermied rats in fisticuffs adorn the shelves.

“As a taxidermist, I’m only interested in the skin. I’m not interested in what’s inside.” From behind her desk, Lepeska smiles at me, swathed in a grey leopard-print sweater, her blond hair in a messy updo. What appear to be feather earrings dangle from her lobes.

The epidermis of all mammals, she explains, is attached to the body at the same points: ears, eyes, nose, mouth, genitalia. “I’m literally removing the jacket the best way I possibly can, and the rest of it just kind of comes off like a sock.”

We’re sitting in the unmarked studio of Pretty Dead Taxidermy, located in Vancouver’s Mount Pleasant neighbourhood, tucked in an alley just off Main Street.

Lepeska leans forward and gestures to her assistant, who is arranging large, dead insects into picture frames. “If I were to take your skin and put it on Karen’s body, it would look weird.”

I nod, unable to agree more. To make her point, Lepeska hands me a piece of foam in the shape of a flying squirrel, one example of what she calls a “form,” a foundational structure for a taxidermied animal. The foam templates are further sculpted if the form doesn’t fit the skin. Lepeska’s earrings swing as she talks. They are not feathers, I realize, but moth wings.

After moving from Finland to Vancouver in 2016, Lepeska ran taxidermy classes out of a local curio storefront. The business expanded, becoming Pretty Dead Taxidermy, which now hosts an online shop of oddities in addition to offering taxidermy services for private collectors and film and TV commissions. They also run workshops through their Academy of Oddities, “to teach others the amazing beauty of nature,” Lepeska says. By simplifying the workshop procedures of butterfly pinning or taxidermy, the art and practice of preservation is accessible to beginners, even children. “If, out of ten students, two of them

visit more natural history museums and do more studying, I’ve done my job.”

In the Academy’s “art classes with a dark vibe,” participants learn about arthropods and skulls while drawing real specimens, or practice the art of moth-pinning. Occasionally, the Academy collaborates with experts. “We had the head fish scientist from the aquarium talk about wet specimen preservation technique, why it is used in scientific study, why they preserve something. I’ll show you.” Lepeska disappears into the next room and returns with two jars, one of which she plops on her workstation. She passes me the other jar, made of clear glass, containing a diaphanous fish. The proteins and muscle mass have been chemically altered so the flesh is translucent. Red and purple dyes have infused the bone and cartilage. The fish, smaller than my hand, is a suspended phantom, its magenta skeleton an exquisite, vibrant exhibit of what lies beneath. How Lepeska landed on the name of her business is evident.

The fish seems to emit its own unnatural glow. Before this moment, the association between beauty and death never occurred to me. Though taxidermied animals don’t generally capture my breath in such a way, the fish is undeniably stunning. I eat fish, I’ve caught fish. Perhaps my food-chain relationship to this aquatic creature permits the sense of aesthetic pleasure I experience from the sight of its corpse. Or maybe the surreal pigment of its tiny bones, or the fact that it once had scales and not hair, put my own sense of mortality at a further remove than, say, the stuffed coyote standing in the corner—the mammal.

I tell Lepeska the fish is beautiful.

“That’s what I want to do,” she breathes. “If every single urban dweller would have a little piece of nature in their home, they would maybe appreciate it a little bit more.”

I look at the other jar. A dead rat floats in yellow liquid—a little piece of

nature. House plants come to mind. And, outside this windowless studio in all directions, the magnum opus of Vancouver: mountains, beaches, parks, wildlife (and a *lot* of warm-blooded dogs—everywhere).

I have to ask about the skeleton on the shelf, however, because I suspect it has something to do with another service Lepeska offers: pet preservation. The skeleton, perfectly rendered, is crouched, tail curved, as if about to pounce.

“That’s a cat,” she says. “A domestic cat. After a few years, we expanded to different areas.” Lepeska stands. “I’m not really like a normal old school taxidermist who just does trophies.” She floats around the desk, around me. “I lost my dog really traumatically three years ago. He was only five months old and he was attacked and died of his injuries in front of our eyes.”

“By another dog?”

She presses her lips together. At the time, the only post-mortem service for pets that Lepeska could find was cremation, with the option of a paw or nose print. She approaches the cat on the shelf. “I wanted to keep his skeleton and get it rearticulated. I have friends in the industry, and I donated his skin to a friend of mine. My partner didn’t want to get him taxidermied, and that’s okay; it was triggering for him.” Reaching beyond the cat, Lepeska then turns around, holding a small gold and glass box. Inside, smaller than my fist, is a skull. “Now I have Milo here with me every day. I wanted to give that option to other people.” Since then, she has provided customized pet preservation services; clients can request almost anything, from full taxidermy to skeletal rearticulation.

I accept the small box from Lepeska. The skull can’t be much bigger than a golf ball. “This is a chihuahua?”

“Milo,” she corrects.

I’m not sure what to do with the box after tilting it around a few times.

Lepeska, though, has returned to the shelf. “There are different ways to do bone cleaning. A friend of mine has a dermestid beetle colony.” She explains the insects as “flesh-eating beetles that eat everything so it goes back to nature.”

I put Milo’s skull on the desk and reorient myself, conjuring an image from the 1999 film *The Mummy*, of scarab beetles that swarm humans and eat them to death. Not quite the M.O. of dermestid beetles, but almost—they don’t go for the live stuff, but will envelop a carcass and munch away all dead flesh and cartilage until the bones gleam.



She taps on a large glass jar of cloudy liquid. “The other option is maceration. There are five rabbit skulls in here. They are submerged in water and what you see here”—she points to floating white chunks—“is fat.” Lepeska looks around. “I don’t know if I have a greasy bone...”

The moment I laugh, Lepeska starts up too. “The shit I say here.”

Lepeska is concerned about quality, especially for the pet memorial projects. She pulls a large foam plate from the top shelf. “A lady brought us a cat that had been demolished by a coyote. He came to us in pieces, so we tanned and preserved the pelt and stitched it back together.” A full cat skin is laid out on the foam, fur up. Flipping it,

the underside is leathery, each stitch a story of violent demise. The preserved tail and paws lay next to it. “Imagine coming home from work and you see your cat torn to pieces in your garden. That’s unbelievably traumatizing. So to be able to come and get something that looks nice—your trauma comes to the end of the cycle, so you can actually let go.” This is what makes pet preservation so challenging for the taxidermist—the client’s emotional attachment to the animal. Lepeska describes the process as exhausting. But afterwards, “I feel unbelievably privileged to be able to give them something back.”

Once a client contacts her, she advises them of the options for their deceased pet. The animal is kept at the studio in a freezer. To understand her client’s vision, Lepeska acquires reference photos and asks as many questions as possible to gain a sense of the animal’s personality, and to create a detailed concept for the final product. The pet is defrosted once she is ready to get to work. “It is pretty gnarly.” Lepeska is matter of fact. “You have to be able to disassociate yourself from what you’re doing.”

Preserving a pet, Lepeska explains, offers her clients a concrete way to remember a loved one. A keepsake, if you will. “Through taxidermy, you bring it back to life.”

I ask what it feels like for her to have Milo’s skull near.

For a moment, the space goes quiet as she stares at me. “He’s still here. I’m so happy that he’s here.”

The assistant, Karen, looks up from her bug work. “He has the best afterlife.”

Lepeska nods. “My friend made Milo’s skin into a full taxidermy dog. He’s lying in his beautiful miniature sofa in her house with the other taxidermy animals. It’s great.”

It’s impossible not to think about my own (living) dog, Javi, as I listen. She’s a mutt from Mexico, sweet and awkward with huge ears that stop

people in the street. The thought of her stuffed and stagnant sends a shiver across my skin. I try to imagine her skeleton rearticulated, which is strange but seems more tolerable somehow. Still, I don't really get it. Javi's velvety ears would be far less cute, cold and detached from—even still attached to—her head.

"His life was cut too short," Lepeska says of Milo. "He never had a chance to fully experience life."

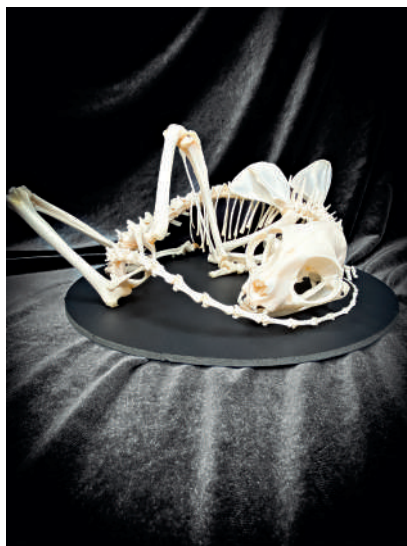
When I return to the Pretty Dead Taxidermy studio a couple months later with some follow-up questions, Milo's skull is arranged in the anatomically correct position—connected to the rest of his fully rearticulated skeleton. As an observer with no emotional connection to the chihuahua, I have to admit a certain level of fascination in seeing a complex biology stripped down to the singularity of its organic structural frame. Okay, okay—stripped to the bone. It might be a bit of a stretch to suggest that I "see" myself in this simplified version of Milo—forgive me—in the skeleton of a chihuahua (or of a fish, for that matter), but because I start to imagine what my own bones look like beneath flesh and fat and muscle and blood, it's possible that I am relating, in some strange way, to the fact of a body, to both its vitality and its mortality.

Lepeska returns to the ever-giving shelf. "So, there is traditional taxidermy. And this is anthropomorphic taxidermy." Mounted on a wooden platform are two white rats, standing on their back feet. One grips a bloodied butcher's knife above its head, as guts spill from the chest of the other rat, their mouths frozen wide in terror. "This is called 'Divorce.'" She wiggles the platform. "He's like, 'Waaah! You have to sign the papers!' And she's like, 'Give me the fucking mansion!'" Lepeska credits her theatre background for her "weird ideas," but assures me she's not the only taxidermist who stretches the truth of her corpses. "Most have a

little room at the back that they don't show to everybody."

There is no back room at Pretty Dead Taxidermy. Everything is allegedly out in the open, and considering how much Lepeska has shared already, I'd be hard-pressed not to believe her.

Lepeska is aglow looking at her pugilistic rat creation. "I want to imagine them having their own little life. The normal reaction to rats is, 'Ah! A rat in my house!' And then you get a rat that looks like a fortune teller and you realize that's what you wanted all your life. Pass me a beetle." Karen passes her a huge rhinoceros beetle staged on a wing-backed chair, reading *The Jungle Book*, a bottle of shiraz in arm's reach. Rhino beetles: they're just like us.



Lepeska's penchant toward the macabre is not home-grown. "In Finland, we don't have open caskets. We don't look at death. We don't talk about death. We avoid every single thing about dying and death." Traveling exposed her to other attitudes—"I realized that people carry their dead people with them"—until her perspective eventually shifted away from viewing death as a finality: "It doesn't have to be."

When Lepeska hands me a taxidermied rabbit head, I run my thumb over its forehead. The fur is soft. No

signs allude to it ever not being just a head. "I weirdly... like this," I admit.

"Right!" she explodes, laughing. "Everybody wants one!"

I do not share the enthusiasm about entering the orbit of a bodiless rabbit. But I do wonder if the "back room" I'd hoped Lepeska would reveal is perhaps a cerebral thing.

"The more I work with death and dying, the more I want to be here today," she says.

"Where?"

"Right with you, right now." Her hand taps the desk. "Know what I mean? Like, this moment is really meaningful. I don't have any expectations for what happens after. I can make plans. But I'm not expecting them to happen." She spins slightly in her chair, revealing her white leather sneakers. This time, I notice the fake bunny ears that replace a traditional shoe tongue.

And when Lepeska dies?

"My spirit—whatever you call that—is somewhere else. I don't know where that is. I don't have answers to that."

She describes her body as a "vessel" which, when the time comes, she would like to donate for research. "Because I don't drink, I don't do drugs, I'm hoping that people can use my organs to give life to others." Her hand flits through the air. "Do whatever you want. I'm not there anymore."

I don't imagine a back room where some taxidermist has staged Lepeska's vessel into a grisly fight scene, but I do imagine her living on, in some partial way: as a heart, a liver, a lung. Even she doesn't want to abandon this life.

Before we part ways, Lepeska invites me to participate in a death's-head moth-pinning workshop later that evening. "Come back any time!" Her moth wings swirl below her ears as she strides away.

The moth-pinning workshop is sold out. The death's-head hawkmoth is famous, thanks to its appearance in

the 1991 film *The Silence of the Lambs*, and its name comes from the human skull-shaped markings on its thorax.

Karen is facilitating. The person beside me isn't new to this; he collects dead insects on his own and pins them. The woman across from me looks like an occultist social media influencer, but my assumption is wrong; she's an embalmer.

The first step is to rehydrate the dead moth by filling its body with hot water using a syringe. I hold the moth in my palm, belly up.

"Stab it right in the chest." Karen watches my hand hovering above the insect. "Just like in *Pulp Fiction*."

This is helpful in my understanding of the velocity required, though less helpful in my motivation to stab it. I imagine the moth jolting to life, right into my face. Lepeska's words echo in my head: *Through taxidermy, you bring it back to life.*

I jam the needle into the centre of the insect's body. Many cultures believe the death's-head moth is a symbol of rebirth. But nothing happens, and the moment is only further wilted as I place the moth in a Tupperware container with damp paper towel and wait for the brittle body to "relax."

Once the moth is rehydrated, I stretch the wings out to their full capacity. But the body falls off. Karen reassures me that Gorilla Glue makes for a quick repair. As I affix the body to its rightful place between the pretty dead wings and below the thorax, the unmistakable icon of a human skull stares up at me and all I can see is myself.

Dayna Mabannah lives in Vancouver with her partner and their uncategoryable mutt, Javi. Her work appears in Electric Literature, TRUE Africa and HELD Mag. Dayna received her MFA in Creative Writing from UBC and is currently writing a memoir about the misfortune of finding yourself wherever you go.

Acoustic Memory

ERNIE KROEGER

Memories sneak up, tiptoe quiet as a cat. Boom like a slapshot



It's too bad you don't have ears like mine. It's not that they're particularly shapely. It's what they've heard. Hear. I recall the wistful voice of my grandmother, remember how she played the piano in our living room, especially Chopin's dreamy *Étude* op. 10, no. 3 in E major, which was overlaid on occasion with the hissing of gases being released from tall thin cylinders across the street at the Liquid Air factory. Next door to the factory Mr. Gibson kept a flock of flapping pigeons—clap-clap-clap—that circled the neighbourhood three times a day.

I grew up on Valour Road in Winnipeg—the West End—where most people on the street spoke English.

But the neighbourhood was also peppered with snippets of French, Ukrainian, German and Chinese. Next door was a patch of Holland where the VanVliets lived, and just down the street was a pocket of Iceland inhabited by the Einars-sons. And, like us, there were other Mennonite families with names like Loepp, Riediger, Suderman and Toews.

When I was a boy we spoke German at home—High German—because Oma only knew a handful of English words. She spoke Plautdietsch to confuse us—Low German—and sometimes threw in a delectable word like *morozbenoye*—which means ice cream in Russian—referring

specifically to Blue Boy vanilla ice cream that we bought from Max the Jewish grocer on the corner of Sargent and Valour.

I was conceived on Ingersoll Street, in a standard two-and-a-half storey house on a twenty-five-foot lot between Wellington Avenue and Notre Dame. A quiet, leafy street. My parents shared the house with my aunt and uncle, two cousins and grandmother. I wonder about the acoustic signature of the house, narrow wooden staircase and small plaster-walled rooms, the echo of voices and my father tapping away on his typewriter—clickety-clack—writing letters and poems that rhymed.

Mere weeks after conception, when I was only the size of a lentil, my ears began to develop, beginning as tiny folds of skin. At eighteen weeks they started to stick out. I could hear my mother's heartbeat, breath, swirling digestive juices, the odd burp. By the twenty-third week, in the summer of 1954, when I was about the size of a large mango, I started to hear sounds from outside the womb. Most of all I heard my mother's voice. What did she whisper to me in those early days?

I heard these first sounds—muffled and warbled—as though through a kind of primitive sonar, and imagine my mother humming to herself in church on Sunday morning, her hands resting on her pregnant belly, the droning words of the minister, her soft singing voice off-key and melding with the congregation. Of course I don't remember these sounds but, immersed as I was in my mother's belly, surely they were soaked up by my little ears and stored away somewhere in proto-memory.

Although research shows that the earliest childhood memories date to somewhere between the ages of two and four, I feel they go back farther. Why else would certain sounds

reverberate so? Why else would splashing in puddles and skipping stones be so pleasurable? We hear far earlier than we speak and what we hear from the outset must be in us somewhere, even if we can't measure or retrieve it.

Between the twenty-fifth week of pregnancy and six months old is a crucial time for hearing development, requiring speech, music and meaningful noise from the surrounding world. Sound apprentice, I listened intently, imbibed mother tongue, German lullabies. Everything was muted. Then suddenly it was all clear. Thunderstorms. Rain pelting down on the roof. I don't remember gurgling but I'm sure I gurgled with the best of them. In German and Plautdietsch. Then came babbling, early vocalizations, a little spilled milk: "Uh-oh."

When I was three months old we moved to the house on Valour Road, an L-shaped, stucco-clad bungalow, where I absorbed new sounds: empty rooms with hardwood floors, jingling bottles of milk, roaring furnace. By six months I could turn my head toward the source of a sound, *zwisehernde Vögel*—chirping birds—for instance, or to the drone of a plane, a story my grandmother told me. She watched me in the baby carriage as I searched and searched the sky until I found the tiny dot of an airplane.

When I was two my younger brother came along, adding a fresh voice to the family chorus. He laughed at words like *Heinzelmännchen*, from a nursery rhyme in which little men come at night and swarm and clap and make a big racket. In the midst of a story my father would blurt out, "*Chargez charbon pierre!*"—a French phrase remembered from his years after the war working in a coal mine in Belgium. Uncle Arthur cut in with a booming "*Zbulik*" and Tante Valli offered a hearty "*Chasn-yok*." It was a regular *Kaffeeklatsch* in my head.

When I was old enough to play out on the street with the other kids in the neighbourhood I learned English. Foreign fricatives and backwards sentence structure, new plosives, glottal stops and word order, words that tripped over my tongue. And the confusing words—funny when you're a kid—that sound the same in both languages, like *fabrt* and *groß*, which in German mean *ride* and *big*. Soon after we got a TV and then came "Yabba-Dabba-Doo" and "What's up, Doc?"

One day my grade 5 teacher, Miss McMurchy, asked about my name. "Kroeger," she said, rolling each *r* before asking whether the *oe* had once been an *o* with two dots above it; an "omelette" she pronounced it, trying to use the German word "umlaut." *Umlaut* and *omelette* clashed in my head. I stood in front of the class—*stumm*—ears red with embarrassment, and couldn't manage a word. It was as if all sound had been sucked out of the room. I returned to my desk, the dissonance of Miss McMurchy's mispronunciation still clattering in my ears. I couldn't wait to sing *God Save the Queen*, which signalled the end of the school day.

A word, a sound, begins with a breath or a breeze, jangle or rap. Vibrations rush at the speed of sound, hitting each eardrum one millisecond apart—ba-boom—left tympanum first, then right, or vice versa—allegro, dolce, presto—rattling the auditory ossicles and speeding through the cochlea's spiral to the inner sanctum—a secret part of the brain—for deciphering. Room 40. Signals intelligence.

Why do certain sounds resonate so? Do we remember watery words heard in the womb? Is that why I love the sound of water and fountains? A stone dropped into a pond, its slippery—*schluddrijch*. Perhaps that is at the heart of resonance: me bobbing gently inside my mother

as she walked. The swish of her footsteps. I was already learning the measures and syntax of language through her movements.

Resonance is a kind of punctuated harmonizing over time. The word comes from Latin and means “to resound,” like an echo. As if the whole body’s an ear, it is something felt as well as heard, tremors just at the threshold between stillness and movement. Deep-down shiver. Shake, shimmy, sashay.

Words linger too, never dissipating entirely, coming back to ring like the sympathetic vibrations between tuning forks. I absorbed the sound of certain German words so deeply that when I hear them I’m taken away. *Radieschen*, such a lyrical word for radishes. A lover whispers in my ear, “Tell me a story in German.” Memories sneak up, tiptoe quiet as a cat. Boom like a slapshot. Rustle like *Populus tremuloides*.

I remember sitting in the living room with my grandmother listening to a record of Arthur Rubenstein playing Chopin. A nocturne. Her eyes were closed. We were waiting for dinner. Overtop the exquisite melody came the irritating sound of the cuckoo clock. On top of this the Polo Park bus rumbled by, rattling the dishes. *Gloms Vareniki*—cottage cheese pierogis—burbled in a pot in the kitchen and farmer sausage sizzled in the pan. Next door the neighbours were arguing, their dachshund barking away.

There’s something about the way such sounds are recalled, like the pop and crackle of a spark leaping out of a fire, floating silently through the air and then disappearing. Vibrations flowing through the ear’s canals halt now and then. Reminiscence occurs in intermittent aural waves, sounds quietly gathered inside my inner ear, in a kind of resonant refrain.

I recall and recall. In the morning the kitchen radio crackled with static and funeral announcements on

CFAM. In the back lane the junk collector’s wagon crept along pulled by an old nag, horseshoes clanging, clippety-clop. I practised imitating the horse’s *clip-clop*, pulling my tongue from the roof of my mouth. It’s called a click consonant. One day Dad fell down the basement stairs, bump-bump-bump-bump-bump! But he was okay and then he wrote a poem about it, in Plautdietsch, thanking the Lord for protecting him. One time a sparrow fell down the chimney, its panicked flailing sounding all the worse for being buffered by the bricks.

I drift through time on an aural *dérive*, sometimes humming to myself, beyond all words. Inadvertently, church hymns surface and I sing to myself: “*So nimm denn meine Hände und führe mich.*” I wonder where such musical memories come from. It’s as if I could hum the old church interior back into being. So take my ears and listen, just one more time.

“Now I know where your accent is from,” my cousin’s mother-in-law told me one morning: “*aus Westpreußen*”—from West Prussia—she having traced it through her memories to an old friend in Danzig, now Gdańsk. That’s where, in the flatlands of the Vistula Delta, Dutch and German mixed and fermented for hundreds of years. I was astounded to have my accent so accurately geolocated. Later, I traced it farther back along the serpentine shoreline of the Baltic and the overlapping waves of the North Sea to the dikes and polders of Holland and *sh*-inflected words by the Zuiderzee, waves *gemischt* with Frisian and Flemish, a mix of saltwater and schmaltz.

Inside our house was a mix of German, Low German, English, plus Surzhyk—a blend of Russian and Ukrainian—a lively, flowing multi-grain mix of sound and language. Languages. Loan words and mingle words mixed with light voices and

heavy accents, a new and sweet, mellow hybrid enhanced by cross-talk, overlap, signal distortion and echoes.

Today my sonorous memory is disrupted by tinnitus, a slurry of sound overlaid on the auditory landscape of present and past, a watery soup with a still acceptable signal-to-noise ratio of less than 1:1. My internal soundtrack is made of multiple tracks and interweaving melodies, the steady beat of time interspersed with unexpected riffs and voice-overs. *Lärm und Geräusch*. The odd discordant beat. Sibilant whispers.

At times it sets me off balance, as if my ears have been turned inside-out. But still, under the buzz, there’s a pleasurable sensation, remembered sounds that take me back to a time when I couldn’t understand anything and everything flowed together, was garbled, and I didn’t mind. It’s as if such memories offer some heretofore unheard-of sustenance. Remembered voices that connect me to loved ones long gone. To another world.

On top of the ringing, the theme song of *Bonanza* drifts in from a Sunday night long ago—medium tempo—galloping horses and a 4/4 beat. Then “*schlope gobne*”—time to go to sleep—kneeling by the bed and saying my prayer. “*Unser Vater, der du bist im Himmel...*” Then lights out, voices fade. Night sounds linger and lull me to sleep. In the distance the train, its E-flat minor refrain. Dreams of tomatoes growing at night. Lilacs, thunder, crickets and fright. Sounds that come and echo through time. The song of the night-ingale. Good night. Amen.

Ernie Kroeger is an artist and educator living in Kamloops, BC. His artwork has been exhibited across Canada as well as in Europe. In the past few years his interest has turned to writing family stories. Recently retired from the Visual Arts Department at Thompson Rivers University, he was honoured with the designation Professor Emeritus in 2020.

FINDINGS



Zainab I and Zainab II, 2014, and Leila I and Leila II, 2014, chromogenic prints by Leila Fatemi. These pieces are from Clothbound, a photographic series that explores the way in which the veiled Muslim women are perceived in

Trashpandas

SUZANNAH SHOWLER

From Quality Time by Suzannah Showler. Published by McClelland & Stewart, a division of Penguin Random House Canada Limited, in 2023. All rights reserved. Suzannah Showler is the author of two collections of poetry and a book of cultural criticism. Quality Time is her first novel.

The trashpanda tucks her chin down into her fur, casts her hind feet wide, rocks back once onto her tail, and propels herself forward. She imagines herself becoming a ball, anticipating the thrill of rotation, the power of her natural quickness condensing, finding new form. Instead, the ground rushes up to meet her face, and before she knows what's happened, she is breathing into the tang of grass. She rolls to one side and casually licks the ground for bugs, as if this was her intention all along: to face-plant for her food.

In fact, the trashpanda is teaching herself to do a somersault. She wants to turn over and over, her

head disappearing and returning up towards the light again and again. Rolling across the wet, new grass like a sweet, lazy cantaloupe.

This desire is pure. A decided waste of energy, devoid of competitive advantage. The extraneousness of the effort is important for the trashpanda. Vital, even. Just ask any city-wild creature: there are things you need and things you want, and the difference matters. In the gap there is ambition, hope, vision. Every feeling beyond the raw, jittering reflex of survival.

There are a million trashpandas living in this city. Their home is shared twice over: first amongst themselves, divided into an evolving patchwork of hard and soft borders, territories orbiting semi-communal piss-patches and shit-holes and the occasional seasonal fuck-trench, then shared again with the millions of trashmakers who occupy the day, roaming under the guileless, bald cast of light, never covering their tracks or changing their patterns, moving in circles, so easy to follow.

For the most part, the trashpandas just leave the trashmakers to do their thing: winging back and forth across the city, crossing territories,



Western culture. The images employ strategies of concealing and revealing to visually depict the many facets of the veil and its place in Western society.

drawing easy lines, scurrying in and out of buildings at predictable times, doing whatever it is they do indoors that makes so much sweet trash. This arrangement suits the trashpandas, who will tolerate daylight but generally consider it crass, preferring the subtle slip of night. When the sun is being rude, trashpandas would rather sleep, or rest. They will go out by day every once in a while to hunt, or look for food, or patrol their territories, or maybe exercise some private whim, like this trashpanda now with her somersaults. Just to mix it up. Keep an equilibrium, make themselves known. Remind all the hairless, simple-moving trashmakers: you can have the light, but don't think everything under it is yours.

The trashpanda failing to turn somersaults is one of four females—cousins and wombmates and mothers and daughters at birth, now all are sisters. This one is the Second-Quickest. They were five until recently, when one was crushed under the heavy, rolling wheels of a trashmaker's metal predator. When the ground is moist and warm again, the trashpandas will keep a strong female or two from among their young to replace her. There are twelve kits between them this season.

Each trashpanda would fight to protect any of the young but die only for her own.

The sisters live in a stuffy, hollow tree standing in a spare, unattractive strip of green below a quiet street. Theirs is not prime territory. At the local piss-patch, they've smelled rumours of areas both north and south where enormous bins line up, full of sloppy-ripe fruit and meat in plastic shells and bags full of thousands of sweet muffins the size of newborns. With such luxuries, however, come greater dangers. These sisters are just fine with their quiet, middling place and its domestic trash.

Their territory is bordered on two sides by tracks where large, metal sheds barrel through several times a day, noisily shaking the ground. There's nowhere in their territory where the vibrations don't reach, running up the trashpandas' hands and burrowing in their chests like a flutter. After a while, you don't even feel it anymore. Or more like: you believe you're feeling it all the time.

The trashpanda lies on the grass and looks up. A soft, round cloud rolls across the sky like a taunt. She pushes herself upright to try again.



Uncle Fester

COLE NOWICKI

From Laser Quit Smoking Massage by Cole Nowicki. Published by NeWest Press in 2024. Cole Nowicki is the author of Right, Down + Circle (ECW Press). His work appears in the Walrus, Maisonneuve and elsewhere. He lives in Vancouver, BC. Find him at colenowicki.com.

“HUGE, ROTTEN, RARE,” a banner beside the entrance of the Bloedel Conservatory read. A line of hundreds snaked its way around the grounds, waiting to smell the alien-like being that had been morbidly marketed around the city all month: audio, print, and web ads all indulging in nature’s gross-out sense of evolutionary humour. The why, how, and yuck of the *Amorphophallus titanum*. Titan arum. The corpse flower. A rare Indonesian plant that smells like dead shit.

Every seven to ten years, this hulking thing blossoms, its spathe opening like the soft verdant hand of a giant presenting a pungent gift. However, the gift is a trap. To the insect world, the smell of decomposing meat is what high school boys imagine the scent of Calvin Klein cologne to be—pure allure. Beetles and flies make their way into the flower, luxuriating in its putridness.

CANADA GOOSE POEM

By Peter Crowell. From a postcard published by Gorilla Publications in 1977. Peter Crowell’s prose and poetry has been published in the Fiddlehead, the Antigonish Review and Canadian Fiction Magazine. He lives in Yarmouth, NS.

i
i do
i do not
i do not like
i do not like them
i do not like them flying
i do not like them flying canada
i do not like them flying canada geese
i do not like them flying canada
i do not like them flying
i do not like them
i do not like
i do not
i do
i

The plant remains open for only a few short hours before closing in on itself and the bugs. Trapped, the bugs are forced to wander inside the grasp of the corpse flower, caking themselves in its pollen until it releases its grip. Eventually, its one large petal will peel back, freeing the insects, who then go about their lives, unwitting pollinators for one of nature’s smelliest flora.

At the conservatory, The Beatles’ “All You Need Is Love” blared over the loudspeakers as part of a hokey mash of love songs meant to intimate that, yes, the corpse flower was trying to *reproduce*. To *make love* with the earth. A fact that once realized made me a bit uncomfortable. We were a line of voyeurs all waiting to watch this thing fuck in its own complicated way. A few paces ahead, a trio of elderly Ukrainian women deliberated on whether the wait would be worth it, asking a volunteer (whose shirt was emblazoned with an all-caps “WHAT’S THAT SMELL?”) how long it would take.

“Whaaaa!” The smallest of the three gasped. They huddled and muttered amongst themselves, measuring their interest in consensually smelling the fetid plant against the two hours it would take to reach it. The sun pushed down on them with heavy hands as they calculated. They were still at least forty-five minutes away from even making it to the section of the line covered by a row of collapsible tents—shade the most valuable of real estate here.

The smallest of the women threw her hands into the air in defeat; another took one last look at the line and capitulated. The third decided to stay, beaming as she waved goodbye to her friends: The smell was an experience she would have earned, that she could hold over them, an exercise in endurance and curiosity. An hour from the entrance to the building, a couple started furiously swiping through their phones.

“We can make it, right?”

“Yeah, I mean. One hour? We get in, see the thing, run out, get a taxi.”

“Are there any later flights? Can we swap tickets or anything?”

He made a phone call. This couple was so dedicated to whatever olfactory rush they thought they were in for that they were willing to miss their flight back to Los Angeles. I wanted to ask them why. Was the prospect of this stench that appealing? I bounced back and forth between their eager faces. Are there not things that smell this terrible in California? I

WAYFINDING

From A Family of Dreamers © 2023 Samantha Nock. Published by Talonbooks in 2023. Samantha Nock is a Cree-Métis writer and poet. Her work has been published in Maisonneuve, Best Canadian Poetry and numerous other publications.

“i’m almost there, six stops away”

Commercial.

McLean.

Clark.

Glen.

Campbell.

Hawks.

i’m minutes away from where the blood mixes,
where i’m going to spend the next four hours
exploring the shapes of acquaintances, beer,
and cigarettes.

if i close my eyes
i can picture the road to grandma’s house:

head down 97N, turn left at the cemetery, go
a few clicks past ted’s service, left again at the
tumbler ridge turnoff, hang a right at the sound
barrier fence my grandpa built four summers
ago so my grandma wouldn’t have to listen
to the jake brake squeals of the trucks going
down the highway

follow the loop of their drive, past sheds with
snares hanging on the door with bear skins
nailed on the side. park in front of the house
my grandpa made with logs of wood cut from
down the road. follow the path where i used to
dig up red clay with rusty tonka trucks.

to say goodbye, honk the horn and look back:
grandma will be waving in the window

follow cracked sidewalks to sit on the back steps
talk about the ways in which these
nights feel real and surreal.

i am rooted here.

even though i can still draw a map to the field where
wild strawberries grow in the summertime

i don’t believe in in-between spaces.
i don’t believe in long-winded monologues
about walking in two worlds

my existence isn’t reconciling
the changing seasons
with the way
i count time by bus stops.

remember floating along the water track of “It’s a Small World” at Disneyland as a child, watching the soulless animatronic children singing about unity or whatever, and being completely distracted by the smell that lifted itself from the waterway and entered our nostrils. It was that of damp clothing, the rank armpits of a coffee drinker, and blood.

Still, I had let my fingers drag over the water’s surface, losing sight of the ripples behind us as we entered the black of the tunnel. My hand tingled. It became clear that my flesh would be eaten away by whatever bacteria or curse had been cast on the river by the ride’s possessed animatronic children and their squealing hinges. I sat on my hand for

the rest of the ride, praying I would be okay, trying to ignore the smell. The feeling. That had to have been worse than whatever the corpse flower would offer.

As we finally neared the entrance, the Ukrainian woman and I grinned at one another. It was a reason to celebrate and bare teeth. I smiled as a sunburn stung the back of my neck and arms like a hard slap. I hadn’t made it to the tent section in time to save my skin.

A person from the botanical garden with a parrot on their arm ambled down the line toward us. Along with the occasional bottle of water and ETA update, this was an attempt to keep the garden’s patrons happy. The bird’s name was Blanca.

Its off-white feathers bristled as the man displayed it for all of the scorched, weary waiters.

“Say hello to all of the nice folks,” he encouraged. Blanca ducked its head under a wing and let out a low squawk, expressing its embarrassment for all of us in the line-up.

The couple from Los Angeles cooed, talked to the bird as though it were a small human child and told her—despite Blanca not interacting with us, and giving us some heavy side-eye—that she was a good girl. *A geeeewwwd gyuuuuuuugrl.* “She’s just tired,” her handler told us, trying to assuage whatever worries he thought we had, as if our egos would be bruised. Why should we expect

this creature, stuck in captivity, to want to interact with us? I wondered if any of the botanical garden’s patrons had ever taught Blanca curse words, as she stared at the Ukrainian woman through parted wingtips. The woman glared back. This was the kind of interaction I was interested in—interspecies skepticism.

Once inside, it took little time to reach the corpse flower. A steady procession shuffled through the conservatory, past rare Australian bushes and invasive Brazilian grasses, while other parrots with names like Rudy and Nelson wailed around them.

Everything living under the building’s large glass dome had been given a name, even the corpse flower. The plant’s moniker was decided by a public vote, and as we got closer to it—the main event, the grand stink, what the weirdly targeted ads in my social media feeds had been spinning all week, the reason we were all here—a small placard revealed its democratically given title: Uncle Fester.

Uncle Fester was bigger and more phallic than I had imagined. Its engorged spadix pointed proudly, boastfully, towards the ceiling. However, we were told that in a few days, it would wilt, and become dramatically unimpressive. Comically flaccid. But in the waning hours, thousands of people would gawk in awe at its turgidity.

Unfortunately, that’s all they’d be taking in, because as we finally got in front of it, taking in its physical presence, that’s all there was. No one was holding their nose. Not a single person gagged with the sick delight of someone who had spent a quarter of their day waiting to do just that.

A reporter from CTV scribbled in his notebook, making last-minute amendments as his camera operator did their best to frame him so that the corpse flower sat prominently over his left shoulder. Another parrot brought attention to itself with a yelp as a light on the camera blinked red.

“Well, this isn’t what most had hoped for. The smell of the Titan arum—that of rotten meat—has drawn a crowd of hundreds today; but that stench has, unfortunately, passed.”

The Ukrainian woman, her grin gone, followed the perimeter of the area roped off for the corpse flower, stopping to point her nose in the air. Hungry for just a whiff, something to bring back to her friends, to justify her staying. Blanca screamed from her perch like a car alarm. We could all read between the lines:

Y’all been had, y’all been had, y’all been had.

AWAKE FOR EVER

From Stedfast by Ali Blythe. Published by Goose Lane Editions in 2023. Ali Blythe is the author of Twoism (Goose Lane Editions) and Hymnswitch (Goose Lane Editions). He lives in Victoria, BC. Find him at hialiblythe.com.

I moonlight.
As a ghostwriter

who responds to
burned or buried

letters. They all seem
to begin, *Yours, ever—*

*I wish you'd go back to writing
me love poems.*

To which, *You Romantic,*
I must once again reply,

*Just what on Earth
do you think I'm doing here?*

It was once said that to write
any love poem

you must first invent
the poet who will write it.

There is no return post
from ashes or dust.

But don't worry,
I am nearly there.



Treatment: Three Yelp Reviews

SPENSER SMITH

From A brief relief from hunger by Spenser Smith. Published by Gordon Hill Press in 2023. Spenser Smith is a poet, essayist and photographer. His work has been published in the Malahat Review, Prairie Fire and numerous other publications. He lives in Winnipeg, MB.

*Calder Centre (Youth program)
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan*

★★★★☆

Not allowed to smoke but otherwise the place was chill. Free food, free Nicorette, and nightly smudging. Detoxed with the help of orange juice and *Coach Carter*. Would have given 5/5 if not for A.A. meetings. When I refused to stand and recite “The Lord’s Prayer,” old men (who smelled of sugary Folgers and dust) told me I would die drunk.

*Narconon
Trois-Rivières, Quebec*

★☆☆☆☆

Knew something was up when staff handed me a stack of L. Ron Hubbard books. For fifty days, I drank olive oil and bird seed before sweating six straight hours in a sauna. Also yelled at ashtrays. When I emailed my parents to get me out, they didn’t believe me (pawned too much of their stuff to hold any trust = genius business plan by Narconon). Gave up on sobriety and smoked smuggled weed out of a can with a Croatian giant named Ivan. Unless you’re into Scientology, AVOID!

*Edgewood
Nanaimo, British Columbia*

★★★★☆

Edgewood’s group therapy = good shit. Found some hope by sharing my story with others who shared similar. Counsellors had degrees and were (to my knowledge) legit. Low-key developed an eating disorder, though. Traded drugs for ketchup chips and Coffee Crisps and thirds of everything.

(Shout out to Edgewood’s kitchen staff—you make the best beef stroganoff.)



The Girl with the Most Cake

LISA WHITTINGTON-HILL

From Girls, Interrupted by Lisa Whittington-Hill. Published by Véhicule Press in 2023. Lisa Whittington-Hill’s work has been published in the Walrus, Hazlitt and numerous other publications. She is the author of The Go-Go’s Beauty and the Beat (Bloomsbury). She lives in Toronto, ON.

Pretty on the Inside was released in the US in September 1991, but it would take me a few months to discover it by fluke, plucking it from a random stack of CDs my friend kept in her car. I chose it because the cover art reminded me of a zine and because I really, really could not listen to Soundgarden’s *Badmotorfinger*; my friend’s driving soundtrack of choice, one more time. *Pretty on the Inside* was chosen only for temporary relief from “Rusty Cage” on repeat, but instead, it changed my life.

In the 2011 documentary *Hit So Hard*, about the life of Hole drummer Patty Schemel, [Courtney] Love calls *Pretty on the Inside* “unlistenable,” but that fall, it was all I would listen to. The album’s sound was noisy, confrontational, and messy, and I loved it. It felt abrasive like sandpaper to my twenty-year-old ears. Hearing Love scream and snarl felt cathartic. I worked at a restaurant at the time, and shouting, “*Is she pretty on the inside? Is she pretty from the back?*” along with her made the pain of endless soup, salad, and breadsticks go away. It also made my invites for after-shift drinks with co-workers evaporate. They favoured prim and proper pop princesses and were uncomfortable with the raw, in-your-face lyrics (“*You want her on the bed with her legs wide open and her eyes all spread*”) they heard coming from the crappy dish pit speakers. On the plus side, I started getting my orders much faster, since, presumably, the kitchen staff feared I would unleash Courtney-like rage or screams if my pasta primavera took too long.

But it wasn’t just Love’s screams that intrigued me. Her lyrics were intense and confessional (“*I’ve seen the things you put me through and I, I wish I could die*”). This was the first time I heard a woman sing about body image, rape, abortion, and self-destruction (“*She tears the hole up even wider / Lets all the darkness up inside her*”). Hole’s music was not only groundbreaking; it was honest and real. “I sometimes feel that no one’s taken the time to write about certain things in rock,”

Love said in an interview with *Melody Maker* when the album was released. “There’s a certain female point of view that’s never been given space.”

Pretty on the Inside’s first single, “Teenage Whore,” would go on to reach number one on the UK indie chart. The album received positive reviews in the *Village Voice*, *The New Yorker*, and *Melody Maker*, among other outlets. It was also named one of the twenty best albums of the year by *Spin*. Writing in *The New Yorker*, Elizabeth Wurtzel described it as “the most compelling album to have been released in 1991,” while *Melody Maker*’s Sharon O’Connell called it “the very best bit of fucked up rock ’n’ roll” she had heard all year.

The number one song in America the week *Pretty on the Inside* was released was “Promise of a New Day” by Paula Abdul. The future reality show judge’s plans for her new day definitely didn’t include being a teenage whore, so I sidestepped Paula, and *Pretty on the Inside* became my number one. I also settled into my new part-time job defending Love.

Years later, this job is still on my résumé, and it’s not without occupational hazards. I have been in many heated arguments about Love. I have been asked to leave at least one party. In my defence, I already had my coat on. Her name appears as the number one item on several lists made by friends of things we don’t discuss because we have moved well beyond an agree-to-disagree truce at this point. I have also had a red Solo cup full of warm gin and tonic thrown at me by a guy who really, really believed Love killed her husband. Not only was he wrong but it was a waste of perfectly lovely top-shelf gin, which really should not be consumed in frat party glassware in the first place.

Not only have I been a lifelong passionate defender of Love but I have also been a believer that if Generation X and the flannel-loving alternative ’90s had a hero, it was not, as everyone claims, Kurt Cobain but Courtney Love instead. “She’s not supposed to be alive. She’s supposed to be a pretty corpse,” says Smashing Pumpkins front man Billy Corgan in the 2006 documentary *The Return of Courtney Love*. Love not only lived through the ’90s, she clawed her way out from under her husband’s shadow and refused to play the widow role everyone wanted and expected her to. She fought critics, conspiracy theorists, and Cobain lovers, stage-diving headfirst into all of them and emerging the ultimate survivor. There is nothing more heroic than that.

Through a combination of resilience, resolve, and reinvention, Love has been a best-selling

musician and outspoken front woman, a cultural and feminist icon, a Golden Globe-nominated actress, and an inspiration to girls with guitars everywhere. She subverts the notion of what a female musician should be, how she should look, and how she should act. While male artists are repeatedly celebrated for their ambition, antics, and their addictions, Love is constantly judged for them. Also, a decade that saw the rise of third-wave feminism and a movement like grunge that championed women’s rights and power should have a woman for a spokesperson rather than a man. It should be Love, not Cobain.

This July, Love turns fifty-five, an age when we start to think about retirement and taking stock of our lives and our accomplishments. In honour of this milestone birthday, let’s celebrate Love’s musical, artistic, and cultural impact. Let’s finally make Love the girl with the most cake.



Geist would like to note that Courtney Love was born in 1964. She turns sixty in July 2024.—The Editors

Meaning of the Universe

KATHRYN MOCKLER

*From Anecdotes by Kathryn Mockler. Published by Book*bug Press in 2023. Kathryn Mockler is the author of five books of poetry and the co-editor of Watch Your Head (Coach House Books). Read more of her work at geist.com.*

I discovered the meaning of the universe on my first acid trip, when I was sixteen. I was visiting Thea in her new town where she and her parents had just moved: Guelph, Ontario—the home of John McCrae, the physician who wrote the poem “In Flanders Fields,” a poem we had to memorize in Mrs. Brown’s fourth-grade class. I was no good at memorization. I was no good at school, and this was the poem that made me hate poetry.

The acid was called Purple Double Barrel.

We were in the food court of the mall downtown.

I said to Thea and her new friend Stephanie, who dressed like Cleopatra and acted like she knew Thea better than me: “You guys are peer-pressuring me. Like in an afterschool special.”

“You don’t have to do it,” Thea said. She knew I was afraid.

“It just would be more fun if you did. Then we’d all be on acid.”

The pill was so tiny. Much smaller than my birth control pills. I held it in the palm of my hand and stared at it and thought, I’m going to be the type of person who does acid.

I was not the type of person who did cocaine because my mother told me I could get a heart attack from cocaine. But my mother knew nothing about acid. She was too old to be a hippie and had not experimented with anything other than alcohol.

When Thea and I were little, Thea was an avid reader and had read about “angel dust” in one of her library books. One day we were in my basement pretending we were on angel dust and seeing colours and crystals and pretty things all over the damp and dark cellar that smelled of mice and still held my father’s old *Playboy* magazines tucked away in some corner, along with the handgun he used to shoot bullets at tin cans.

Now here I was holding Purple Double Barrel in my hand like it was a four-leaf clover.

To say the acid trip was good would be an understatement. It was beyond description.

It made me feel like I was a balloon.

On this acid trip, I believed I had discovered the meaning of the universe. I pitied all of those who didn’t understand. I pitied all the people with miserable lives, like my parents.

The acid trip also made me forget the twinge of jealousy I felt toward all the cool friends Thea made at her new high school, especially her friendship with Stephanie. It made me forget about my terrible boyfriend and my mom who was drunk all the time and how badly I was doing in school and how much I hated my drama teacher who gave me a C because I couldn’t do an Italian accent. The acid made me feel smart and light and intellectual.

After traipsing around Guelph for hours—in parks, cemeteries, churches, trying to recite “In Flanders Fields”—we finally ended up at Thea’s house. Her parents and sister were asleep. We made bagels and cream cheese and snuck down to her room, where we listened to the same song over again in the dark, on an album she took from her parents’ record collection. Her parents didn’t do drugs, but they were real hippies. We thought the song was sending us messages.

This is where the meaning-of-the-universe moment comes in. We lay on Thea’s floor side

WHAT DO I KNOW OF THIS MOTHER TONGUE?

From Building a Nest from the Bones of My People by Cara-Lyn Morgan. Published by Invisible Publishing in 2023. Cara-Lyn Morgan comes from both Indigenous (Métis) and Immigrant (Trinidadian) roots in the place known as Turtle Island and Canada. She is the author of three collections of poetry.

What good is *duck*,
river, shore,
and *sky*?

The name
in Cree for the town
where I was born. But not
betrayal, hypocrisy,
disillusion. I was not gifted

words for *coping*
or *losing*, and I cannot
teach them

to this belly-cub,
say to her

Look up
to the stars, they are your people.

I can only say
in English

That is the sky and
We are alone.

by side holding hands when I—yes, it was me—discovered the meaning of the universe. Not just the meaning of life but the universe. In one moment I knew nothing, and in the next I knew everything.

Once I explained it to Thea, she knew it too, and we both cried out of relief and happiness, knowing that we would not be searching for this for our entire lives. We decided not to tell anyone because we didn’t think they could handle this epic truth.

When we woke up the next morning, the meaning of the universe became a faded memory, a dream, and all we were left with was a bad stomach-ache that Stephanie told us was gut rot caused by the rat poison they cut the acid with.





Teapots, 2023, watercolour and ink by Donna Seto. The teapot illustrations are inspired by Vancouver's Chinatown and are a part of her series Re-Imagining Chinatown Vancouver.

Magazines Are Good, Magazines Are Very Good

GARY BARWIN

From Imagining Imagining by Gary Barwin. Published by Wolsak & Wynn in 2023. Gary Barwin is the author of thirty books, including Yiddish for Pirates (Penguin Random House) which won the Leacock Medal Award for Humour and the Canadian Jewish Literary Award for Fiction. He lives in Hamilton, ON and at garybarwin.com.

Nineteen seventy-four. Darkness. Fonts. The sheen of glossy grey Xerox paper. I, clad in white samite and sports socks. The arcane allure of a long-armed stapler, the numinous and tactile attraction of cover stock. I was ten years old and

my school was having a white elephant sale. I had recently moved to Canada from Northern Ireland and I didn't know what a white elephant sale was. Our teacher, Ms. Foote—I had an intense schoolboy crush on her—encouraged us to have something to sell. So, to please her, I was going to have something to sell. And though I'd never done it before, it seemed the most natural thing in the world to write a story and make a little book out of it. I don't remember all the details, but I know *Cosmic Herbert and the Pencil Forest* was about Cosmic Herbert, an ancient and ironic wizard who had to save the pencil forest. The forest was being clear-cut by writers whose need for self-expression—and thus pencils—was insatiable. Naturally, the consequences of this were ecologically disastrous for the pencil forest and for the continued survival of literature as we know it. I don't remember how the story

worked out or how my sales were, but I know I didn't move as much product as those kids who sold brownies, tank tops that they'd macraméed or little plastic statues of bedraggled and forlorn golf-playing men that said, "World's Number 1 Best Dad." But I did catch the excitement of writing and publishing. The excitement of creating work and standing behind it, sometimes literally, like at that white elephant table, or at book fairs or signing books after a reading.

Since then, I've been doing basically the same thing in various forms for forty-three years. Writing and publishing. In this way, as my favourite Louis de Bernières line says, I have demonstrated "exemplary flexibility in the face of unchanging circumstances." And how have I managed to continue this activity for all these years? To paraphrase Yeats, "I have an abiding sense of tragedy, which has sustained me through temporary periods of joy."

But today I want to talk about how vital and important writing and publishing is in all its forms, and especially how a diversity of voices, how a variety of publications—from big mainstream publishers to the non-commercial margins—is vital if a society is to sustain the cultural biodiversity needed to have a strong and thoughtful culture of inquiry, engagement and dialogue. If our society is to continue to develop and be resistant to threats—threats to meaningful dialogue, inquiry and engagement; threats to diversity and the diverse perspectives of a diverse population. Without variety in publishing, we might become like the banana industry, reliant on a single variety, a top banana which can be wiped out by a single strain of disease, as has happened before. We'll miss out on all those different kinds. Goodbye, Gros Michel. Goodbye, Cavendish.

In all their diversity, arts and culture magazines have been a central part of my life as a writer and as a reader, and so hopefully my enthusiasm and experience—if not my knowledge—will contribute something to the discussion.

The main point I'd like to make is that by creating and nourishing, by making things new, by being awake to possibility, by always examining things from different perspectives, by being the antenna of society, arts and culture *is* implicitly culture jamming. Arts and culture is inoculating. By having flourishing and varied arts and culture, we are resistant to homogeneity, to being reduced to being passive consumers of what is

UNFRAMED

From Precedented Parrotting by Barbara Tran. Published by Palimpsest Press in 2024. Barbara Tran is the author of In the Mynah Bird's Own Words (Tupelo Press). Find her at barbaratran.com.

In the Vietnamese language, there is no present or past tense. Verbs are not conjugated. Time is discerned through context. Without context, there is no going or gone or will go: you can only be. In my family's photo albums, photos are arranged in no particular order. On the left, my family before a cathedral in Montréal. On the right, my sisters in saris. Falling out of the album, American students marching in support of the war in Việt Nam. About three inches wide with deckle-edged frames, sepia-toned photos of people I don't know but see in my mother's face. My father in a cowboy hat in the desert.

merely in the interests of the powerful. What is merely in the *minds* of the powerful. We can be resistant to the gravitational pull of simplifying and reductive tropes and instead have agency in constructing our world. Magazines are good. Magazines are very good.

I think of that line from the Steve Martin movie *Father of the Bride*, where they're talking about getting a videographer, and the daughter says, "Can't we just pay very close attention?"

Arts and culture enable us to pay close attention. To pay attention to *how* we pay attention. And to pay attention to *who* it is we are paying attention to.

We need to pay close attention. And our attention needs to be our own. That Steve Martin movie—well, except for the banjo—recalls the Nordic legend where Woden is attempting to beat back the circle of darkness around the world. He goes to the king of the trolls and asks what exactly is the trick for keeping troll-blackened night from eclipsing the daylight out of the non-troll world. The king of the trolls says, "I'll tell you, but first you have to give me one of your eyes."

Woden says, "Sure," and gives him his left eye. Then, "Okay, so tell me."

"The secret is," the Troll King says. "The secret is: *Always watch with both eyes.*"

Great. Irony is one of the core operational principles of the world.

I should note that this very old missing eye story is, of course, a metaphor, and it's likely an ableist metaphor at that. Everyone can learn much from those voices which pay attention in other ways and which often have gone unnoticed or silenced. Voices of people of colour, Indigenous voices, disabled voices, queer voices.

But I think this story is a kind of metaphor for, well, the human condition, and certainly also for the position of the arts. We have to try to watch with both eyes. So what do we do? Move quickly? Pay attention to the periphery? I think it has something to do with smoke, mirrors and writing really good arts grants. Also, advocacy and building community. Thoughtful writing in books and magazines allows us to resist giving away our eye, or, if we're already missing an eye, to join together and have more eyes to watch with.



PAPERTOWN OPEN BONSPIEL

From Island Falls by Owen Toews. Published by ARP Books in 2023.

Contests hosted by the Mill Manager for workers accommodated in the Central Wing:

- Youngest grandmother
- Best basement
- Mr. Island Falls Mill
- Best flowerbed
- Best overall homeground
- Table setting
- Girls' cadette bands
- Regatta
- Men's slapshot
- Ballroom dancing
- English horse riding
- Karmann Ghia sports car raffle
- Young women's short stories
- Children's figure-skating
- Finest children's tunic
- Young men's poetry
- Young women's piano
- Papertown Open Bonspiel
- Children's choirs
- Women's miniatures

Postcards from Inside the Machine

BRADLEY PETERS

From Sonnets from a Cell by Bradley Peters. Published by Brick Books in 2023. Bradley Peters's work has been published in numerous publications including Geist. Sonnets from a Cell is his first book. He lives in Chilliwack, BC. Read more of his work at geist.com.

PECKERWOODS

In cuffs, willing myself clean
 one pulsating streetlight
 at a time while the cop swims
 around me with his flashlight
 cutting the fog and his face
 appears pale and glistening
 from the red and blue glare
 like something being born.

What are you doing here?

he says and pats me down,
 sighs, backsteps, blinds me.

A perfectly nice kid like you.

I'm a straight Caucasian male.
 I'm white. I could be his son.

PREACH

I step into my cell ready to kill
 or be killed. Officer, I too love.
 Power. Respect. I share your
 sense for danger. A Black man
 shadowboxes in the corner
 of his mind next to bibles
 caught between the valley
 of the shadow of death
 and sizing up his new bunkie.
 Shirt tucked. Sleeves rolled.
 Officer, I too fear the unknown.
 He glances up. *You religious, man?*
 I shrug. *Well, that's something
 to work on,* he says and smiles.

FISH

We all watch the dead man
 walk across the unit and smile
 at each table with his meal tray
 like it's the first day of school.
 The dead man looks lost.

He can't be more than eighteen.
The dead man sports bangles
and a bright red turban to match
the jumpsuit draped on his frame
like PJs. The dead man's dead
he just doesn't know it yet.
He grins, clears his throat, nods
at the shot callers. I reach out
to him and touch nothing but air.

TORPEDOES

The Hills Have Eyes enters my cell.
Me: You can't be in my room.
Hills: There's a Hindu on the unit.
Me: Wait. Don't come any closer.
Hills: The back table wants him gone.
Me: I said stop. Back up, man.
Hills: And you're going to bounce him.
Me: No. I'm not. Get someone else.
Hills: I said you're going to bounce him.
Me: I'm just trying to do my time.
Hills: Or I'm going to bounce
your head off this toilet.
Me: Get the fuck out of here!
The Hills Have Eyes exits my cell.

DINNER AND A SHOW

Meanwhile in Canada an inmate
with a Hitler stache raises red fists
and shouts *I'm the king of the world*
from the second tier like it's a pulpit.
Meanwhile in Canada a Stó:lō kid
returns from eighty days in the box,
wrists gnarled by chips of cinder block,
and tears all the bibles in half.
Meanwhile in Canada my bunkie, Preach,
plays aces as a sock lock blooms a pair
of red lips atop his dome and the COs
unload two cans of mace on everyone.
I fall off my chair, shield myself, and later
I stand and return to my cell unscathed.

SOCK LOCK

I sense with the knife edge of my eye
bodies shift in the chow hall, looks,
nods, and the white arc of the sock
appears like a scythe of tilting light
above your head. Forgive me, Preach.
I'm not all I hoped I was. That night
we blazed into the toilet's vacuum

and promised backup, we both knew
it was you who had to fight to survive.
You laugh across the table. I sit frozen
in the moment between grin and lock
and think maybe it won't come down,
maybe you're safe, Preach—maybe
it will just suspend above you forever.

TAKING FLIGHT

At lights-out I climb metal steps
to go fight The Hills Have Eyes.
His cell is third-last down the tier.
My shirt is tucked, my laces cinched.
I'm resolved and ready for whatever.
The CO shouts *Ten!* The lights dim.
I'm not trying to be some white hero.
Open doorways to my left radiate
Indigo and TV babble and inmates
shift in the half-light. Two OGs
cross the unit, nod and smile up
like *Go on then, Blondie*. I'm trying
to learn my place in all this. I close
my eyes for a bit—then enter his room.



STOIC REMINDER BANQUET

From Island Falls by Owen Toews. Published by ARP Books in 2023.

Balls, dances, and banquets held in the Finishing Room
for workers accommodated in the Central Wing:

Papermaker's Ball
Quarter-Century Club Banquet (Q.C.C. Banquet)
Million Man-Hours Without A Lost-Time Accident
Dance (Million Man-Hours Dance)
New Year's Banquet
Hard Time Dance
Decoration Day Banquet
Vimy Ball
Record Production Banquet
Paper, Power, Pea, and Pickerel Dance (4P Festival)
Fall of the Iron Curtain Dance
Stoic Reminder Banquet
Safest Mill Banquet
Armistice Dance



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Judge: Jenny Heijun Wills



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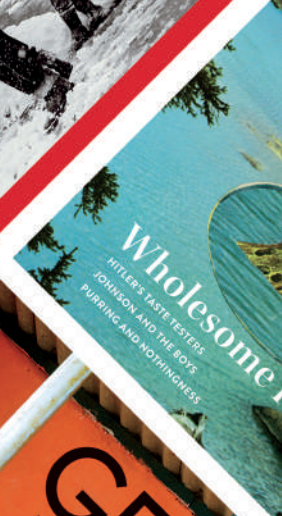
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No Names

JOSEPH PEARSON

*Woe is me! to the land of what mortals am I now come?
Are they cruel, and wild, and unjust?
or do they love strangers and fear the gods in their thoughts?*
—Odyssey, Book VI, 119ff.

ARRIVAL

Donousa is not easy to leave and for the past three weeks we haven't had sex with anyone but each other. The spotty mobile reception is frustrating. Our app tells us the nearest adventure is 21 kilometres away, the next island. We've resorted to old-fashioned cruising methods: time wasted, looking ridiculous. We focus on each other and tire of eating souvlaki every day.

It's seven thirty in the evening and I sit with Sebastian, chess pieces between us, at To Kyma, the port café. From this perch above the harbour and boulder jetty, half the island awaits the arrival of the *Express Skopelitis*. The 380-seat ship is the island's lifeline, in service three times a week since 1956.

Sebastian calls the boat the "Scrofulous," but it causes other ailments. It sets sail even in the choppiest of weather, vomit painting serifs on its blue lettering: Small Cyclades Lines. When they stagger off-board, some passengers should be met by an ambulance.

They land on Donousa, the remotest Cycladic island, chipped from the island group, surrounded by rough sea. A speck of dirt on my map turned out to be a single mountain peak with blunted edges and bleached cube houses. It is where the Romans sent exiles, thinking the island had no water. Summer bakes its hill-sides of desiccated thyme, sempervivum and sage. Only the underwater chasms give Donousa colour: transparent depths, picked clean of seaweed, bare as a fish skeleton.

Sebastian taps his finger and I consult *Logical Chess: Move by Move*. Today, we learn from a 1928 game in Evian, the chess gods making our choices. The *Skopelitis*, meanwhile, is a fleck suspended before the mountains of Naxos and the sunset. Each time we move a piece or force down some eggplant bloated with oil, the boat grows larger. Its white hull approaches, pounding the surf and rocking side to side simultaneously, like something cruel children might do to an animal in a box.

**A man materializes. We shrink back.
He seems to have come directly from the Aegean.
It is too dark to decipher much except his blond
sailor hair, translucent in the rising moon.
He should be covered with seaweed.**

The sea grows dark; we order another quarter litre of wine. The ship's horn and motor amplify, as does the chatter of old women in black on the quay. Men groan in on motorbikes and skid within inches of them. The boat rounds the harbour and its rear rises to the dock. Sebastian and I forget the game, entranced as the seasick unload.

We examine each face, looking for someone sexy. The friendly (but too familiar) brothers who work the beach café stride on board against the lurching foot passengers, to collect bags of potatoes, peppers, fava beans. The priest (married, straight) directs acolytes (ditto) to portage cucumbers, wine casks and an animal carcass for the saint's festival, or *panegyri*, tomorrow night. The musicians (all over sixty) are photographed by two German matrons with walking sticks. A luxurious beard parts the crowd and Sebastian knocks over a bishop. But the man is kissed by the henna-haired creature from the bakery. Barrels and barrels of feta follow. We aren't that excited about the feta.

We stumble home to our *domatio*. Past the bakery and the ATM, along the town beach, the sand is deep, and we get our runners wet. There are no lights down here past midnight. Reeds click in the wind, a shape moves in the surf. As we reach the point

farthest from the port lights, where the waves feel suspended, we hear a splash.

A man materializes. We shrink back. He seems to have come directly from the Aegean. It is too dark to decipher much except his blond sailor hair, translucent in the rising moon. He should be covered with seaweed. He should not have dry clothes. We hesitate at the familiar tension as we stand before him. I am about to nod in the direction of the reeds, but we hear his voice, focused in his nose, a French accent.

"Where is the beach at Kedros?" he asks.

We point down the coast: a path over the ridge, down the cliffs, a journey you shouldn't make at night.

Just as quickly, he disappears.

Sebastian shakes his head. "Fuck this island."

"Where did he come from? He wasn't on the boat."

That night, I find it hard to sleep in our *domatio*, like ones we have stayed in all over Greece with its tiled floor, shuttered windows, laundry line and blue door. Sebastian and I are cramped under the white linen of a single wooden bed. He eventually pushes me into the next bed—three are lined up in the room—but even on my own, I feel confined and tear off the sheet.

In just my boxers, I stand and walk barefoot to our terrace and stare over our moonlit row of basil plants. The port of Stavros has more electric lights than the rest of the island put together. Its streets of arched, whitewashed houses resemble a skeleton. The town beach is darkened. There is no one, not a sound, not even footprints that might come directly from the sea. There's just *meltemi*—the wind.

∞ NIKOZ ∞

In the morning, we don't need to discuss where we are going. We pack up our beach towels and take the coastal path. The ancients chopped down the trees for their ships; to one side are stone terraces retaining topsoil, where goats nibble at the nettles, and to the other is the ribbed sea. It's a hot walk up the hill. At night, it would have been cool. It would have been all stars, as if you could step into them.

We reach the cliff top, its precipitous trail. The beach below, smeared as if by a great thumb, is fringed by the eponymous cedar trees. Kedros. Between them, we can just make out the occasional tent tarp, hanging laundry, and nudists of the campsite striding into the Aegean. Far out in the bay is the carcass of a sunken World War II German longboat.

I can't spy the shock of blond hair. It's only as the trail kicks out, at the bottom, that a cedar tree, sheltered by the hillside, comes into view. The stranger sits under its umbrella.

Sebastian and I turn to each other wordlessly on the path. The man must be in his late twenties, just a few years younger than me. His sun-brushed body is shaded under the branches. He wears a rough linen shirt, his chest tightening under the open V. I wonder if he has satyr legs, whether little horns are hidden in his sun-bleached locks. But as we grow close, he pulls his bare legs from his sleeping bag.

The stranger looks up, smiling, and starts talking right away. At first, I am only half-listening. He has pale skin. His nose is red, peeling; it seems he decided long ago to forgo sunblock.

"It smells so beautiful sleeping here," he tells us. "I'm shielded from the wind and the sun." He rummages in his overstuffed backpack, from which I see the top of a laptop and the bell of a clarinet. Eventually, he finds a bottle of milky liquid in the folds of his sleeping bag. It looks like he spent the night with it.

"Here, you must try this," he offers, not getting up.

"Try what?" Sebastian asks with a faint smile.

He blinks. "It's goat milk. It's still warm."

The stranger goes on to explain how you need to move fast, grab the goats by the legs, then milk them. A local shepherd told him it's better for the digestion mixed with water, but he likes it pure.

Sebastian takes a sip and stares down the barrel at the young man's body.

He offers me the beat-up bottle and I try.

"Delicious, isn't it? You can taste the island." He laughs. "Hell, you can taste the ass of the goat."

"I'm glad you didn't get lost last night," I tell him.

He blinks and cocks his head.

I assumed he had already recognized us.

The stranger stands and introduces himself as Nikoz, short for Nikolaz. His mother wanted a name that was both Breton and Greek. Nikoz can also be read as Nikos. *Nicolaus sylvestris*: the one who walks the ridge at night, with only a small backpack, who falls asleep under a tree, who wakes to the sound of the surf.

I introduce myself but Sebastian doesn't offer his name. He shakes the stranger's hand instead.

The stranger explains how you need to move fast, grab the goats by the legs, then milk them.

A local shepherd told him it's better for the digestion mixed with water, but he likes it pure.

Sebastian and I sit at a low table in the beach café. The family makes fennel pie and salads with ingredients from their irrigated field behind Kedros. On the lunch menu, we see *rizogalo*, or rice pudding. Michaelis tells us it's from the goat they milked that morning.

In the shade of the café, with a view to the band of blue, I see Nikoz swimming distantly and I argue with Sebastian. We should change how we travel. Why do we have a heavy rolling suitcase? Why don't we sleep on the beach? There will be campfires and drinking and then who knows what happens. Sebastian reminds me of the virtues of a room with a shower and toilet.

"You wouldn't last a half hour," he tells me. "You'd get cold or bitten, or be allergic to something."

We look up from our table and Nikoz is standing before us. I thought I'd just seen him out in the bay and don't understand how he got to the café so quickly. He pulls up a wicker chair, his feet covered with sand, his clothes dry. In one hand is his smartphone, in the other *The Master and Margarita*.

Michaelis takes our order. "You don't even want a glass of water?" he asks Nikoz, who shakes his head.

Nikoz tells us many things in the café. How he lives in the Greek islands in the summers and has learned the language. He spends winters in the “South of Arabia,” which means Oman, leading trekking tours for French adventure companies. He lives out of a backpack; it’s been years since he’s been back home.

“My favourite island is Amorgos.” He points across the water. He talks about the depth of the sea there, the shafts of copper mines filled with saltwater. “You come out of the blue, amazed it hasn’t dyed you. My friends are there; there’s a great community in the Chora.” Arabia also has miles of coastline. Hospitable people, who would give you everything. Nikoz loves these stark landscapes: sea, desert, and—when he was in Russia, travelling by train through Siberia—steppe and forest. “Russia has this soul, you can’t imagine. I met shamans in the Urals. Once I walked into the mountains, followed by a pack of wolves through the ravines. There was tension between us, yes, but also communication.”

“So, you’ve met the Breton sailor,” she says, calling him *le mythomane*. She’s also sleeping at the beach. “He was up all night telling... stories.”

I ask if he has been as far as Kamchatka, and he says he has. And to Baikal, where you look across the lake as if it’s the sea. “Unimaginably deep.” He visited all these places from St. Petersburg, where he studied opera singing. “Yes, I met great artists in Russia. They are the most intelligent people, the deepest, but also the hardest to know. But once you do, they are the most loyal of friends.”

I notice Sebastian has picked up his book from the table. He reads until Michaelis returns with our food—the fennel *marathopita* specked with sesame, a Greek salad with a block of feta drizzled with oregano and olive oil, and the pureed fava, homemade bread—and I nudge Nikoz. “Are you sure you don’t want anything?” He hesitates before ordering a *dakos*. Michaelis brings a Cretan rusk with fresh tomato and feta.

Nikoz then asks us if he might come to our room later. He has nowhere to charge his

computer. I tell him where we are staying and say that he should knock and see if we are in before dinner.

“A real room, a real bed!” he laughs.

“You don’t have an apartment somewhere—not in Amorgos?”

“No. Just my tree! Or I stay with friends.”

“You must miss living somewhere.”

“I do wonder what’s happened to my books.”

“Isn’t there some place you want to remain?”

“Not yet.” He wipes tomato from his face.

“I haven’t found it either,” I reply. “I used to look for the best place: making charts, comparing costs, amenities, climate—”

“You do that? I do too!”

“Well, all I can tell you is that place is not London or New York or those big cities.”

“I could never live there. The darkness, the rain, the stress. I can’t bear being underground on those trains...”

“It seems crazy to live that way.”

“You should try Amorgos!”

I think about this for a moment: a year on a Greek island, turning into two, or three, or a lifetime. “I could teach English—”

“You could! But first, a swim.” He smiles back at us, pulling off his shirt, skipping toward the blue.

Sebastian and I sit, reading, wondering what to do with Nikoz’s phone, which he left on our table. An hour passes, perhaps longer, and finally we just give it to Michaelis and settle the bill for lunch. Nikoz’s *dakos* is on our cheque. Sebastian says, “Well, he’s probably still at the beach, planning to come back.”

“Michaelis could separate the bills.”

“I don’t mind buying him a *dakos*,” says Sebastian.

As we count out our money, a French woman at the bar, whom we’d met a few weeks earlier—invariably in black, even her bikini—turns to us between drags on her cigarette. “So, you’ve met the Breton sailor,” she says, calling him *le mythomane*. She’s also sleeping at the beach. “He was up all night telling... stories.” She exhales and stubs out her cigarette glumly, before putting on her shades.

Sleepy from lunch, we trudge down the beach, on our way back to town, squinting as the naked people come in and out of the water, and chuckle about all the places they must find

sand. I have carefully removed as much I can, even from between my toes, before putting on my shoes. I look up and down but do not see Nikoz. Ah, there he is! Under his solitary tree, eyes closed, sitting in the shade as the sun crackles, playing the clarinet to himself. I count the number of steps up the cliff until the music can no longer be heard.

≈ PANEGYRI ≈

Sebastian wakes from our afternoon nap to buy bottled water and instant coffee from the expensive grocery market. I take a long shower. The soap smells like the beach, of *kedros*. Why does bathing bring out sunburn? The bathroom window overlooks the hillside, the bleating of goats. Late sunlight pours in. In minutes, the tiled floor will dry. I'll fall back into the white sheets, read until Sebastian returns. Rest up a little more. Tonight is the festival, the panegyri.

Then I hear something. Sebastian wouldn't knock. I rinse and grab a towel. The shutters are open, latched against the wind; I see the shock of blond hair. Nikos leans through the window and gives a little grin.

"Hey! You found us. Just a minute," I say, as he takes in the room. I can't tell what is inside and what is outside. I miss the removal of an intercom or telephone, the chance to put myself together. But I also want to feel his eyes on me as I look around for underwear, except Nikoz waits patiently with his back to me, looking out over the basil plants, down to Stavros, where there is already music.

When I open the door, I see him from the waist down, his laptop in a battered plastic bag.

"You have an extra bed!" He looks at the three in a row.

My lips tighten. His feet are all sandy. He isn't wearing any shoes. He touches the end of the bed, to test its firmness, and looks back and smiles. "And a shower!" he adds.

He gets down on his knees by the bed and puts his computer on it, plugging it into the wall. "That should do it. Do you mind if I take a shower?"

I blink. "No, of course not."

"Amazing!" He takes off everything in front of me and steps into the bathroom. What feels

like a long time passes. I clean up the sand, sit for a while at the end of my bed, then go outside and watch the sunset, before the door opens and Nikoz's hair is all standing on end, like a bushel of wheat, and he is rubbing his shoulders with Sebastian's towel. Spaced all along one side of his chest are angry welts.

"That was amazing. How much are the rooms here?"

I tell him, and he muses that he really should get one. Perhaps noticing my gaze, he points. "You see, I got bitten under that tree. And when the wind was up, it was hard to sleep." He glances at the extra bed, with his computer on it, and says, "I better find a different tree."

"I can introduce you to Maria downstairs; she owns the place. You can ask her about a room."

"You see, I got bitten under that tree.

And when the wind was up, it was hard to sleep."

He glances at the extra bed, with his computer on it, and says, "I better find a different tree."

But Nikoz shakes his head, not looking directly at me. "No, no, don't do that. I want to ask around, find the best place." He looks up after he has thrown on his sandy clothes. "What should I do about getting my computer back?"

"How long will it take to charge?"

"It's slow. And when it's done, the panegyri will be in full swing. But if you want, just leave the key under one of those basil plants. I'll get it on my way back tonight. That is, if you're still out dancing," he suggests.

"Why—why don't I just bring the computer to the beach in the morning. You see—" I pause. "Sebastian has the key. I don't know when he'll be back."

I glance around the room, at the tables and ledges, to see if the key is somewhere obvious. Nikoz just beams his usual smile and says, "Of course, if that's not too much trouble."

It's already dark as we walk into town, and Nikoz tells me there will be *rebetiko* at the port. Is it by chance that we are on the island for the panegyri? He'd come especially from

Amorgos for it. There was already a score of activities I had missed, that afternoon and early evening: a Greek dancing lesson, a telescope that attracted every child in the village, then the procession and liturgy with the patriarch. I am only in time for the feast and dancing.

We continue across the town's beach, where we had first met Nikoz, toward the lights and music. He stops halfway at the darkest point and brings one arm around my shoulder.

It feels somehow uncomfortable there, but I also like it. He turns toward the sea, bringing my attention to its silvery movement, the threads tying and untying. Then he pulls off his shirt and his pants again, and cries, "Come on!" as I hesitate. When he is halfway into the darkened water, I pull off my clothes and follow, reassured that below the surface he can't see me naked. Once I slip into the waves, I feel the remarkable change, the way the Aegean removes every diffuse worry in its magnitude. Underwater, I even allow myself to open my eyes and look into the maw of the dark sea, and for once it does not terrify me. When I break to the surface, Nikoz is already back on shore, hooting gleefully, surprised when I tell him it was my first swim of the day. He points the way to the music.

I wait, withdraw my card, then turn to Nikoz and lie to him for the second time that evening.

As we come up the other side into Stavros, laughing, arms around each other, he tells me to wait, and walks over to the island's lone bank machine.

He returns with his salty eyebrows furrowed.

"What is it?" I ask.

"It's nothing." He shrugs. "It's just my card didn't work. Not last night either. I don't know what's going on. Could you try? Maybe I could borrow fifty euros until my mother gets here in a couple of days? I can pay back everything then."

I pause, then reach into my pocket. I'd left my wallet unattended on the beach as we swam and now it's full of sand. I walk up to the machine and put in my card. It seems to be working just fine; it's even asking for my code.

But I can't withdraw money: I have typed in the wrong code, just once. I wait, withdraw my card, then turn to Nikoz and lie to him for the second time that evening.

It's probably the panegyri. The machine is out because there are so many people on the island. Or the circuits are down. It's such a tiny island. Did you check with your bank? Maybe your card doesn't work in this machine." I am talking too much. I'm grateful when we run into Sebastian below To Kyma, two big bottles of water hanging from a plastic bag.

"Come on," says Nikoz, a little glumly.

"What is it?" Sebastian asks in my ear as Nikoz walks a few steps ahead.

"I'll explain later," I tell him.

In a line, the musicians hold their instruments. The table edges are painted blue, with white paper cloths that flutter. The Donousans have made food for the entire island: Greek salad, goat stew served with roast potatoes, free-flowing glasses of ouzo and rosé. I wonder, isn't this a Greece in crisis? How can they afford to feed everyone, even the tourists who can afford to pay for it? Sebastian says something about the hospitality of the ancients and how you never know if a guest might be a god.

"You can't flirt with the god?" I ask.

"Flirt, just don't touch."

"What if he's hot?"

"So hot he'll burn you to a cinder."

"Hot *and* dangerous then!"

Sebastian says I wouldn't stand a chance. I wouldn't be good at being humble, going unnoticed, making my offerings. "Just never give him your name," he warns. "Or he'll come after you."

"I don't mind coming first," I riposte, and Sebastian gives me a slap.

The music starts slow. We shuffle in circles; it's not hard to catch on. A young woman takes Nikoz's hand, and I find mine in his, joined soon by an old woman, children, and the German matrons. Voices join in, and then a solitary old man begins to sing. I thought *sirtaki* was about imitating being drunk, but when we break from the crowd and find ourselves at the same table, Nikoz tells me the meaning of the Cretan dance is deeper. It is like walking on a—he looks for the right word in English, unhappy with my suggestion of *tightrope*. It is like stumbling through

life down a slackline. He gets up from the table and sways into the crowd.

There are more tastes—anise, raki, resin, rakomelo. Spirits cut with honey for the honey-eaters, for people who see a god in a man washed up on shore. The children dance in their circle, charming and clumsy. A young woman enters the light, each of her movements more careful than the next. Nikoz approaches, puts one arm around her, says something in her ear. What did he tell her? What new lie? Something good! I look on, flushed with envy, as they disappear together for the rest of the night.

After a while, we get bored by the dancing that seems repetitive, and the circles of locals weary of including us foreigners. One man releases my hand when I stare too long and sends me spinning into the crowd. Better to walk down to the darkened beach again, follow it to our room, and fall into one of those drunken sleeps where you feel as dry as the landscape.

≈ ARRIVAL II ≈

It is late morning when I carry Nikoz's computer down the cliff path. He is not under his cedar tree, but his sleeping bag is neatly folded over his backpack. Michaelis takes the laptop behind the bar of the café, and I walk straight back to Stavros and fall into bed, where Sebastian is still sleeping. We wake mid-afternoon; I smell sweat and aniseed on us and blink in the severe sunlight as I walk onto the terrace.

Days pass. We see Nikoz sometimes down by the beach, but I notice his backpack is no longer under the cedar. Maybe the woman at the panegyri took him in. Maybe he repaid her in bedbugs. Sebastian and I enjoy making fun of le mythomane. The traveller with a holy mother. Of virgin birth. In communication with wolves and Russian shamans on the beach at Baikal. We compare him to characters in novels. Maybe he can't return home because he's wanted for a crime. We were street-smart about Nikoz.

It's Sebastian's move, as we peer down at the dock from our seats. The wind keeps blowing our pawns away. The crowd grows.

Engines sputter. Boxes are unloaded. People hold on to their hats. The *Skopelitis* is late from Naxos and there is a hush around the dock. The musicians pull their instruments to their chests. A woman draws her child in.

We drink more wine. And then the boat finally comes into view.

Sebastian shakes his head at how the *Skopelitis* rises and falls. Then, as the boat hugs the jetty, it cantilevers entirely to one side. I imagine the disarray—the tables and chairs bolted to the floor unfastening—before the boat springs upright, around the breakwater, and into the harbour, where ropes are thrown to land, to steady its white body.

Sebastian and I enjoy making fun of le mythomane. The traveller with a holy mother. Of virgin birth. In communication with wolves and Russian shamans on the beach at Baikal.

The silence evaporates as passengers emerge, falling into the arms of their relatives on shore. Those meant to continue onward to Amorgos debate vigorously about whether to reboard.

Leaning farther over the balcony, Sebastian points. Directly below us, obscured until now, is a young man in a pressed white shirt and linen pants. His hair is combed back and parted. He takes two steps forward, for off the boat comes a conspicuous woman who must be in her sixties, curated to look much younger, with a great mane of hair. A she-lion, remarkably unruffled, in an Italian suit jacket and cropped palazzo pants, she pulls a leather valise. After they embrace, she shrugs toward the boat with a casual gesture and pulls out a cigarette from a silver case. Her tailored satchel goes snap. Then, in the absence of a porter, Nikoz takes over the luggage and gestures the way into town.

The next day, we get a knock on the door. He is well dressed, in leather shoes, and a straw hat you might see on an Impressionist painter, inviting us to come by his hotel at *dix-huit heures* for an *apéro*. Nikoz's tone seems clipped. After a day at the beach, we

find ourselves fishing in our bags for something more elegant than tank tops and beach shorts and can't come up with anything except t-shirts and jeans.

We are surprised by the garden hidden behind the wall of reeds on the town beach. The houses are all brightly painted. A cat runs out of the manager's apartment, leading us to the last villa behind a row of palms, where on a terrace fringed with oleander, Nikoz and his mother bring out wine glasses and set a cloth over a wrought-iron table. The goddess gives us a smile that is both accommodating and indicates we have arrived too early. Sebastian mutters under his breath about *le quart d'heure de politesse*.

We chat as Nikoz bustles in the kitchen. His mother doesn't talk about herself; she only asks questions. Sebastian speaks to her about his research—Rabelais, *Pantagruel*—while I say little, my eyes drawn to her son. The salon is very clean, with hardwood—not tiled—floors. Two separate bedrooms adjoin it, perhaps with their own bathrooms. I think about going inside, to help, but don't.

Finally, Nikoz emerges with a plate in one hand and a chilled white in the other.

"Dakos," Sebastian notes.

Nikoz's mother brought the wine, a Muscadet, from their *terrains* near Nantes. It is dry, light, lemony, somehow perfect for this landscape so far from France. She tells us—the way parents do through others, to jibe their children—how Nikoz was never interested in the family's wine business and probably started travelling the world just to avoid it. All those years in Russia. And in Oman. What kind of son had she raised to prefer those places to the Loire? Then she laughs and puts one hand fondly through Nikoz's hair as he lowers his head to sip the wine. She sighs. "At least I've seen a lot of places I wouldn't otherwise have visited."

Nikoz doesn't say much for the rest of the apéro but he drinks three glasses.

Sebastian and I walk back in silence down the beach. Neither one of us feels hungry enough for dinner. We walk up to our room with its simple balcony and four basil plants. I look in at the three wooden beds and the rudimentary bathroom with its door half-open and turn back to look out at the sea.

"Doesn't matter now. You'll probably never see him again."

"It's just that... I feel like—" I hesitate.

"You want to stay somewhere better?"

"No. That's not it. Not it at all. We lost, Sebastian."

"Lost what? Him?"

"No—" I hesitate again. "No, not him."

That night, Sebastian lies in bed reading and I take the book from his hands. We close the blue door, pull in the shutters, close the latches so the moon does not see us. The embroidered curtains breathe as we push the three single beds together, fill the cracks with sheets, and undress. We make love like old couples sometimes do, surprised to find each other.

∞ AMORGOS ∞

Sebastian is wrong. I do see Nikoz again.

A few years later, in late May, we find ourselves on the *Skopelitis*, after a winter in our light-deprived city. The arrival in the Mediterranean is a shock of wildflowers and salty air after being hunched at desks, hassled by sharp elbows on public transportation, and enduring other metropolitan stresses.

When the *Skopelitis* passes by Donousa, we stand at the railing. Our room's terrace has someone else's towel drying on it. To Kyma is full and spies our arrival. I recognize Michaelis next to a motorbike on the quay, but he does not see me wave. Soon enough, the jetty glides away as we travel on to Amorgos. I watch the other passengers on the top deck—young couples, old women in black, their husbands in flat caps playing with beads, children racing from one side of the ship to the other—and regret ever making light of this boat in a storm. We're all on the *Skopelitis*, in some way or other. I even feel ready to help a total stranger if she needs to vomit down the hull. But the crossing is calm, and no one gets sick.

Amorgos nears. I am not prepared for what rises before me: the mountainous profile of a giant or a god, fallen asleep in his bath. Nikoz spends part of the year here. This I have not forgotten. But somehow, I push the information to the back of my brain as we go up to

the old town, the Chora, and walk around the whitewashed streets.

In the morning, wandering alone through the warren and into a cavernous café, I find Nikoz sitting in his loose linen clothes, blond hair falling over his face, an espresso cup patient before him, and a dog asleep at his feet. I shouldn't be surprised, but I am.

He looks up, in profile. I can see only one eye, but there is a moment of recognition: that first smile from Kedros—a warmth radiating from him, a breath of thyme, as if we are meeting on that beach for the first time.

And then—wiser—his expression hardens, and the light retreats from the windows.

“We’ve seen each other before,” he says.

“Yes,” I reply. “On Donousa.”

“But I don’t remember what you call yourself.”

“You’re Nikoz, right?”

He blinks, and we talk briefly about banalities—how long I am staying, how striking Amorgos is—but I have already broken into a sweat. I avoid his stare and make excuses,

apologize for interrupting his breakfast, tell him to enjoy his coffee, and turn quickly to cross the threshold into the town’s meandering surfaces. The sun has vanished, several corners are between me and the café before I halt in a darkened lane—a wall at my back. My head darts—left, right, and up—to make sure I was not followed through the maze, before struggling to take a breath.

He hardly recognized me: a stroke of luck. I’ve gone unnoticed.

I am no one, and fold my arms against the cold.

The last thing I’d have given him was my name.

Joseph Pearson is the author of three books of literary non-fiction, Berlin (Reaktion, 2017), My Grandfather’s Knife (HarperCollins, 2022) and a book about everyday stories of the Berlin Airlift, forthcoming from Pegasus Press in 2025. From Edmonton, Alberta, he is currently based in Berlin where he teaches creative writing at a peace project, the Barenboim-Said Akademie.

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End Times

EVELYN LAU

Parade of Storms

In the calm between one atmospheric river
and the next, I paused on the bridge
and watched a man string Christmas lights across his balcony.
Distance blurred detail, so all that was visible
in the mysterious vapour were armloads of sparkle
he hauled as if from the sea, a vast net of glitter
he looped over and under the rails, over
and under, golden orbs and silver spheres
spilling forth from his embrace—

There in the blue mist, drowned boats
sinking to the creek bottom, the rains fell
and kept falling like punishment.
This is the end times, we'd all agreed—
saturated earth crumbling, dislodging hillsides,
houses. Blighted harvests, bare store shelves,
cargo trains tumbled into crevasses.
Would the pipelines explode? Doomsday activists
sat cross-legged at intersections,
horses stampeded through soaked farmland,
numb faces on the news listed a litany of losses—
homes, livelihoods, generations of labour.

I kept watching. He was like a fisher
from a fairy tale, soon to catch the magic flounder
in his humble net, the one that could grant wishes—

Evelyn Lau is a lifelong Vancouverite and author of fourteen books, including nine volumes of poetry. She has won the Milton Acorn People's Poet Award, the Pat Lowther Memorial Award, a National Magazine Award, and was Poet Laureate of Vancouver from 2011-2014. Her most recent collection is Cactus Gardens (Anvil, 2022), which won the Fred Cogswell Award.

Cursing, Flailing

The world is on the brink of nuclear war,
says a voice on the radio, near the border
between Oregon and California. Our first road trip
post-pandemic, and motel rooms groan with cold
even as plum blossoms line the freeway. In America
food mashes into sweet pablum
against the roofs of our mouths—

a stir of chemicals and enriched flour, pre-digested.
Ding Dongs shaped like hockey pucks, corn chips
pushed through an extruder. 99 cents for a cup
of soda swill, small or X-large, so I cradle
a bucket-sized container of pop in my lap,
docile as a doped baby. Thanks to COVID
every plastic item comes wrapped in an extra film

of plastic, and turd-coloured rooms reek
of hospital-grade disinfectant. Praise to plastic straws
instead of paper tubes that disintegrate
in carbonation, leaving mush to slurp up!
Praise to the gleam of plastic cutlery,
its utility and malleability, its future journey adrift
for decades through miraculous oceans!
We unwrap burgers the size of our heads

while parked beside a tent city, gnaw gritty patties,
lick sauce dispensed in measured dollops.
On a beach between San Francisco and Santa Cruz
I crawl into a lean-to built by a homeless man
who will reclaim it at sunset. Will bombs
find us here? Only the ocean's painful roar, the sound
of a million creatures dying. It seems a crime

to walk in America, the few pedestrians
stumbling out of trailer parks and bars
scanning for trouble and cursing, flailing.
The motel lobby sign says there's a \$100 fine
for using hair dye—it ruins the towels—
but *everyone*, the clerk says, *wants to change*
their identity. Young women pass me in the halls,
hoodies up, PJ bottoms flapping, slippers slapping.
I squat on a curb by the entrance—COVID stacked away
the lobby chairs—and guests ask, *Ma'am, do you work here?*

Monsters

KATE CAYLEY

*The vines were biding their time, full of life force that
did not care about her or how sorry she was*

Her son followed her up the stairs, which were pale wood, curved like an instrument. The light cascaded icily from the glass dome over their heads. The door was darker glass, and a tidy woman scanned their tickets at a desk in front of it. The door was very heavy. She could not see through it. She laid her hand on his shoulder, warning him silently to stay beside her. He tensed but didn't pull away. She was buoyed by this small victory.

The space they entered was full of clocks. They ranged in size from pocket watches to a huge grandfather clock at the far end of the gallery beside an archway that led to the next room. The room was fairly empty, and the few people were silent, looking up. Staccato ticking filled the air, the clocks out of sync with one another. She could feel him straining like a dog tugging a leash, she was not sure at what. Something he had noticed that he wanted to go toward without her.

Her husband had told her he did not think the exhibit would be appropriate for a child, but she did not know if this was true, and their son was not an appropriate child. She wanted to go to an art gallery. She wanted to be someone who could go to a special exhibit at an art gallery with her child and have it be pleasant and interesting and not too meaningful. It was cold outside; they would go for hot chocolate afterwards to the café she'd seen across the street. At dinner later she would coax him into describing what he had seen. He would be relaxed, even-tempered, and his father would be surprised. She would be proved right. Much of her happiness, she admitted, lay in being proved right. She resented her husband's prissy use of *appropriate* and her son exhausted her; she would take happiness where it was offered.

The clocks were chimeras. Minute and hour hands were made of vertebrae or were miniature models of human arm-bones, skeleton fingers pointing. Some of the numbers were formed of dried flowers, glass eyes, some were tiny twisted figures with sad faces. One clock face was set into a halved stuffed head; she couldn't tell in the low light what kind of animal it was. A wolf? Forelegs jutted from the sides of the clock, the paws replaced by hands, sewn on with waxed red twine. She checked behind the clock for a tail, but there wasn't one. The bared teeth and yellow glass eyes discomfited her and she looked around for evidence she was not alone in this. The young man beside her seemed placid and undisturbed.



A cuckoo clock burst open to her left and instead of the bird there was a little withered man lying on a brass bedstead. He was wearing a top hat, not a night-cap, and pointed ears stuck out from under it. He sat up jerkily, then lay back down as the bed was indrawn through the door.

The exhibit was from the personal collection of a film director. She'd read a profile in a magazine. He lived in a house on the side of a mountain, accessible only by one private road, the house built in the 1930s by a producer of B-movies as a place where he could hold parties for younger and younger men, one of whom drowned in his swimming pool.

The director lived there alone. She had only seen one of his films, an early one from before his move to America. She remembered entrails that turned into mouths. Her tolerance for body horror had diminished after her son was born. He was an emergency C-section, lifted out flinching from the lights, a scrunched frog with impassive eyes. The doctors could not stop her bleeding and so they removed her uterus. Her son would probably have been an only child anyway. But it would have been nice to choose.

One of the clocks struck behind her head. A small clear chime. Her son froze until the sound died away.

She was jealous of the director, who did not prevaricate, who loved what he loved, was intimate with his most inappropriate nightmares. She was not even familiar with her nightmares; she barely remembered them but woke with a sense of nauseous unease, a bitter taste in her mouth that felt more significant than the taste of waking. Lay in bed in the early morning just before the alarm went off, looking at the woolly grey light outside, her husband asleep beside her, her son awake, even from her top-floor bedroom she knew he was awake below, staring at the ceiling with his familiar expression of beatific and focused indifference, as if the only things he actually saw were inside him.

He shook her hand off, went into the next room, and she followed.

The few people in the room were younger than her, she could not tell how young, she found it hard to tell anymore; enough to make her feel frazzled and sallow and middle aged. He was the only child present. Her husband was right, or at least everyone else would think so.

A man carved out of wood stood in the centre of the room, enclosed by a velvet rope. Antlers sprouted from his head, and he was spangled with dead butterflies with blue and green wings. Lesser figures lined the walls. These must be models from later films, nothing she remembered. His monsters. Her son stood in front of the carved man and she hoped he could become someone like the director, his self-absorption generative. Her son had a book of drawings that he hid from her. She went through them when he was at school, and was afraid. He was indisputably talented, more than most nine year olds, but she knew that was beside the point, given what was inside his head. She slid the book back into the hiding place under his mattress.

Above the man's head, a banner, looped black lettering across it: *The Erlking will do you grievous harm.*

When she met her husband they were both close to forty. He was divorced from a woman who'd moved back to America; she had just left a man who had not wanted children though that was not the reason she left, or not the main reason. Her pregnancy was nearly immediate and unplanned, a lucky thing she should be shrewd about, a gift it would be ungracious to refuse. They would have a child. They married just before their son was born.

Her husband was a history professor, his work focusing on union movements in the first half of the twentieth century, and he had the nostalgic handsomeness of a sepia portrait. She imagined he was loved by many of his students, probably discreetly mocked by the more sophisticated ones in reaction to his subtle neediness, his tetchiness when contradicted. He took himself very seriously, and she made mistakes, made the wrong jokes, not understanding this. She assumed it was the students, that it must warp you to be around people who, while ostensibly adult, were just beginning their lives, powerfully grandiose and powerfully fragile at the same time, too antagonistic and too adoring. He could not help being self-serious. There was nothing wrong with him. She quit her administrative job on which she'd supported herself since her art degree, along with occasional badly paid work illustrating children's books.

Her husband was surprised by his son, affronted by the disruptions to his time and attention. He thought himself a reasonable man betrayed in his reasonable expectations. She didn't ask him what he'd imagined, what he thought it meant, to have a child. She didn't show him the secret drawings. Her own drawings, while pleasing, were tentative, correct. She would offend no one. She minded this, a little. Caught sight of her own reflection, her zippered boots and looped scarves and flyaway dry hair, her worried face, and thought she had failed to cultivate her monsters.

She became aware of recorded sound: running water over stones, and the effect of the recording and the man with antlers and the butterflies and the other figures grouped around him reminded her of the dioramas in museums she'd visited as a child. She'd liked those. Her son had moved past the antlered man to a peephole in the wall. He pressed his face to it, his cheek mashed against the copper circle it was set in.

The Erlking will do you grievous harm.

She remembered the Erlking from a survey course on German Romanticism and the Brothers Grimm that she'd taken at the art college. They'd read a poem by Goethe: the father and child riding at night, the boy beckoned by something fearful and seductive, a shape in the trees which the father does not see. The Erlking whispers to the child. The father insists there is nothing there. Mist on the willows. They reach home, the father holding his son to his chest. He reins in his horse to find the child is dead in his arms. The Erlking has called for him.

She stepped closer to the carved man. She could not tell if the butterflies were specimens or models, and saw that the figure was also twined with vines, all along the legs, eliding explicit nakedness. A greenish beam of light shone down over the man's antlered head, like sun in a forest, and the fake leaves reached for the fake sunlight.

Before meeting her husband she'd lived in a studio apartment near a bank, outside of which stood a white plastic cube advertising mortgage services. She'd been horrified when vines had grown up inside the box, pressing themselves against the plastic, trying to find the sun. She could see only shadows, the leaves grasping and choking each other. It made her sick. At first she thought her sickness was pity or guilt, as if the box was a reminder of the violence of civilization, but she came to believe that her sickness was from a different reminder, a *memento mori*. The vines were biding their time, full of life force that did not care about her or how sorry she was. Her pity was useless. The vines would win. Perhaps the director thought this, wandering by himself at night through the rooms of his fantastical lonely house. He knew something he would not say aloud, something he would put into the carved face, the vision of hundreds of butterflies, something so brutally obvious it was trite but triteness was not a consolation.

She stepped up to the peephole. Her son watched her.

She drew back, incredulous, though to be fair there was a warning, she saw now, in small apologetic print below the hole. She forced herself to look again, wondering if her shock had been too hasty, if she was mistaken. The light was so dim. No, she wasn't mistaken, though she didn't think a printed warning was sufficient. The director was a fraud, a disgusting child, taken seriously because he was a man, able to barter a mixture of prudery and lasciviousness into some kind of authority. She made herself keep looking. Spread legs, severed limbs and torn breasts, the face of the horned god, seen now without his covering of butterflies.

She reached for her son but he wasn't there.

She walked around the room, back toward the clocks, feeling in front of her optimistically as if his thin shoulder could materialize suddenly under her hand, then through a smaller door to what she thought was the gift shop. She found instead a narrow empty corridor, one of those inexplicable corridors carpeted in grey, windowless and barely lit. The corridor turned sharply into another gallery, and she thought this must still be part of the exhibit, or there would be a sign telling her she was leaving.

It made sense that he had gone this way. He liked small spaces, hidden spaces. Cupboards, the dusty warmth underneath his bed, where once he had found a dead mouse, the fur shrunken around the bones, dried and scentless from the

effects of the poison she'd put down. He'd sealed the mouse in a jar on his desk, the sad grimace and filmed-over eyes facing his right hand while he sat drawing his hybrid faces.

She wanted someone to notice her distress and ask her what was wrong, but there was no reason anyone would. She knew that was one of her chief follies, thinking someone would ask her what was wrong, as if that was something people did, something she herself did, noticing the faces of strangers. If anyone had asked her, she would not have known what to answer. Her child moving out of her line of sight was not a reason to feel this surge, not panic yet but the flicker of it, growing nearer. She breathed. She was breathing. All she had to do was keep breathing. She told herself he was not far. He could not be far. There was nowhere he could go so quickly where he would come to harm or cause harm, she never knew which one she was afraid of. She would look for a minute down this corridor and then go back toward the clocks, where she remembered a security guard, an older man with lank hair, very tall, leaning against the archway.

Green and blue light flickered faintly ahead in the further gallery. She heard voices, and imagined her son's voice, and hurried, pausing as she entered the darkened space.

The source of the green and blue light was six large screens, almost as tall as the walls, which were staged in a hexagon shape with narrow gaps between them. Something was being projected onto the screens, and she stood uncertainly, assuming she was meant to slip between the gaps, afraid of what she might be shown, thinking of the peephole and the mangled flesh. Her hands tingled. Then she pictured him there already, her son, standing in the emptiness of the gallery, the cinematic light and whatever images it formed washing over his wedge of a face, drenching his body. She ran through the nearest gap, calling his name.

No one was there. The screens were innocuous, projections showing green grass rising up into hills, grey sky, the landscape sliced by the blackness between the screens. A man and a woman walked slowly across the grass. The man played a guitar, the woman kept time with a tambourine. They vanished briefly when they reached the edge of one screen before appearing in the next, as if they were real and had to cross that dark space.

Death is elsewhere, they sang, death is elsewhere, just that over and over, moving in a circle around her, and she stood transfixed and patient while they sang this one phrase, appearing and disappearing in the gaps and appearing again, and she knew she should go and find someone to ask for help but she didn't, she stayed in the centre of the circle and watched them and listened, death is elsewhere, death is elsewhere, the man's voice almost a drone, the woman's winding above to make a harmony, and at each disappearance she stared hard at the dark gaps and expected to see, before the figures reappeared on the next screen, the face of her son looking back, loved and familiar, except for the antlers rising up from his hair, the butterflies moving now, their wings opening.

Kate Cayley has published two short story collections and three collections of poetry, and her plays have been produced in Canada, the US and the UK. She has won the Trillium Book Award, an O. Henry Prize and the Mitchell Prize for Poetry. She lives in Toronto with her wife and their children.

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The Dead Viking My Birthmother Gave Me

JEROME STUEART

“The first time I met him, he caused me to float to the ceiling”

In May 2012, my birthmother Laurie was a medium-in-training, and when the dead co-operated, she did pretty well. She took weekly classes at a local spiritualist church on how to hear those who have “passed the Great Divide,” but who all now pile into an auditorium to be heard. After learning to discern one voice from the many dead who might be speaking, she then had to learn how to locate the right someone in the audience for this word from a loved one. As her final test, she had to go on stage and relay at least seven good messages to the folks who’d gathered to hear them. The dead, for their part, arrived eager to talk, and enunciated well. My birthmother passed the test.

“I had a hard time hearing their names—sometimes I just heard the first part. *It starts with an M*, I’d say, or call out several similar names until someone claimed them. It always turns out to be the right people connecting and, well, that’s a relief. When I relaxed, it all got much clearer.” She was so relieved and happy at becoming a spiritualist, helping people through their grief with these *further* messages, the ones that might be lost without someone like her.

She delivered messages like “You’re going through a hard patch, but it’s going to get better. Stay strong.” Or, “You’re not listening to an opportunity that’s been given to you several times.” People were so thankful to hear from their wife or sister or mother or friend. *Oh, that sounded just like Michael*, they told her.

She was going to be a great spiritualist, I could feel it. She had a knack for being able to talk and connect with anyone. I could understand her excitement. After all, it was our story all over again, every night on stage.

For every adopted kid out there, a birthparent connection is not a sure thing. We struggle with not knowing if we’ll ever reconnect, or feel afraid that if we do, the influence of one person on another may be too great. A new mother, or new child, could take over, upset the balance of our lives, change the dynamics of our own “previous” families. Some searching mothers are rejected by their children who already have fulfilling lives, and some find that their children have already died. The path ends before it can begin again. Why start such a difficult journey? And yet, for many birthmothers, as

Laurie learned, *not* ever finding their children is too much to bear.

An anonymous person put Laurie on my trail thirteen years before, and I think, maybe, for her, that becoming a medium—a go-between—was a re-enactment of that re-pairing. For her, giving me up and never knowing what had happened to me was akin to a death she couldn’t fully recover from, even though I might be living, because she didn’t *know*: she didn’t know how life had turned out for me. Adoption was a lingering mystery that was rarely solved. If only there were messages someone could deliver to all those mothers. Or perhaps, if *their* messages, from far away, could find their child of another timeline.

I often think about the first message she sent to me, the card that my own mother had opened and read aloud to me over the phone—how similar it was to the messages Laurie now relayed to others from the dead. *I’m here. I don’t want to interfere. I just want to be a part of your life.*

When my birthmother started getting into spiritualism more seriously, I was living in Whitehorse, Yukon. Laurie lived in Indiana. We were about 6,500 kilometres apart.



We'd not seen each other for several years, mostly due to the cost of travel. Nevertheless, we were having a good conversation on the phone—which meant I was offering up my heartache for her advice, and she was getting to play Mom.

“He wasn't the right person for you, honey. You need to let him go. Trust me, the right man is not going to suddenly stop communicating.” She talked about her own past relationships with partners who were not *the right person* for her—and how she had discovered that. This, I think, was important to her. She relished the chance to tell someone all the stories she'd saved up, dispense the kind of advice that mothers did. I was someone she could pass that wisdom down to.

“The problem is, you're like me, sonny boy. You go for the ones who don't talk much in the first place and think you'll get them to open up. Then you're surprised when they shut up. You have to learn to appreciate their silence, hon.”

Unfortunately, we'd found each other so late in life that we didn't have

many of these conversations in person. I'd moved from Texas to the far north two summers after we'd met, initially for a Fulbright fellowship in creative writing, and fell in love with Whitehorse, something I hadn't expected. I didn't make it easy for her to get to know me by moving so far away.

For her day job my birthmother was a cashier at Lowe's hardware store, and she needed another profession, something more fulfilling. I was trying to be supportive. A spiritualist, I thought. She'd found something she really loved doing—why was I having trouble with that?

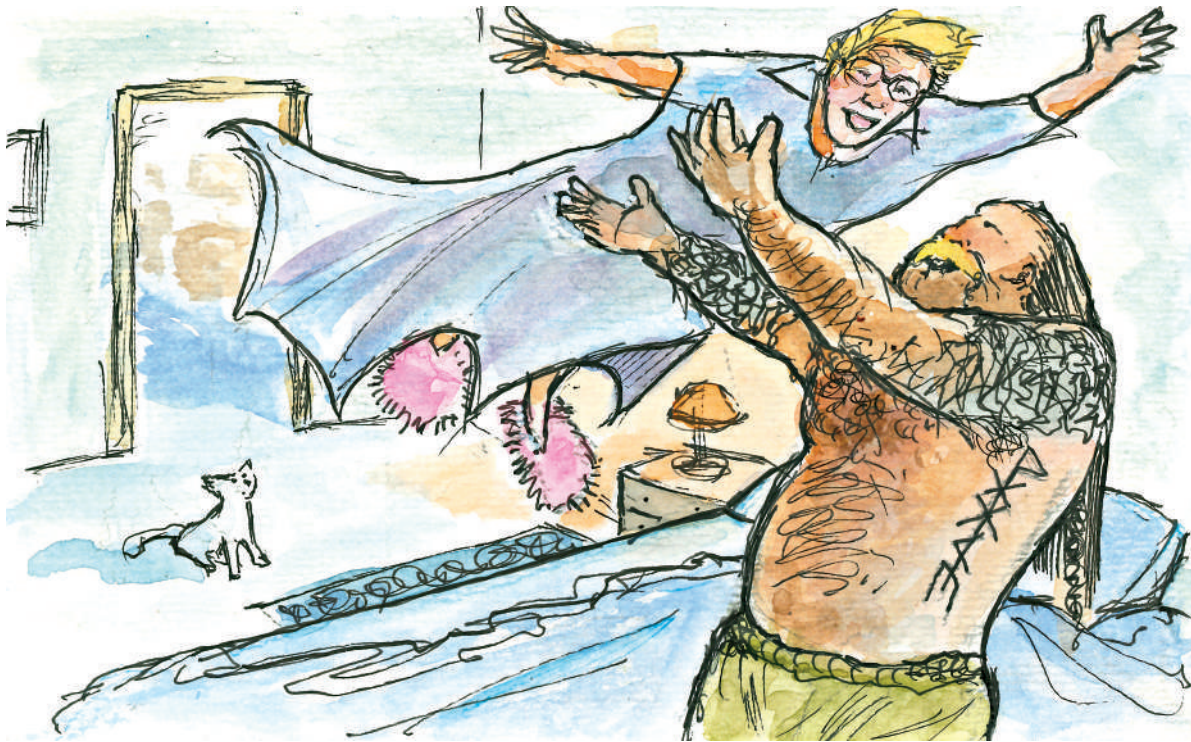
Maybe I didn't trust the dead. I didn't know their intentions with my birthmom. What did they have to gain? What did they want to say to the living? And why did they want us to listen?

Laurie made it sound as if we, the living, were merely people the dead were charged with encouraging along our paths, and spiritualists were Western Union—conveying those messages to loved ones as they could.

I'll admit my bias—my adopted folks raised me as a Baptist, so spiritualism made me nervous. Especially when she talked about channelling. She wasn't sure she felt good about being possessed. I certainly didn't like the idea of someone else speaking with my birthmom's voice. It would make me question everything she said to me. *Is that you or Gerald speaking?*

Even after thirteen years, sometimes I feared our relationship might be broken if I wasn't more open-minded. Religious differences can break any relationship—not just people who are dating, but any two people. I tried to be more enlightened. I could do this. After all, I was very close to Jesus, a dead person who spoke to me. So we had something in common.

The cold of the lingering winter crept through my triple-pane glass and formed frost inside my apartment windows as we talked. Laurie was telling me about her Viking spirit guide. Seven feet tall, bearded and broad-shouldered, a bit rough around



the edges, he sounded like someone's World of Warcraft avatar. He cared about her; he sounded warm, living, real. But, of course, he *was* real to Laurie. Her multiple spirit guides helped her cope with life. They comforted her, advised her, protected her. Since she was over sixty and living so far away, how could I be upset at a team of specialists watching over her? But I got jealous because I was lonely.

"The first time I met him, he caused me to float to the ceiling," she said.

"You floated to the ceiling?"

"Yes. He needed to prove that he was there. Then he pulled me down from the ceiling—he has very big arms."

Very big arms.

Back then, the Yukon was brimming with single men. Many of them were burly outdoorsmen, who loved hiking forests, canoeing rivers, and barbecues under the long summer days. However, due to our isolation there were few Out, Single Gay Men over thirty in the Yukon. I could count only five in Whitehorse. "Import, Import, Import," was the *cri de cœur* among the five of us.

There were plenty of closeted men who, for various reasons, did not think coming out was a good choice for them here—they feared worst-case scenarios. Loss of friends and family. Loss of jobs. You needed your friends so much more in an isolated place. For emergencies, for entertainment, for company. These fears were well-founded—I knew it personally. But you also never knew who might surprise you with a welcome.

I'd had a very loud coming out in Whitehorse, which eventually involved a series of sermons in my former church and an article in the *Yukon News*. That's the stuff of another story, perhaps. I lost friends and jobs. The rest of Whitehorse, however, took me in. People I didn't know reached out to me. There were better churches, kinder people, more affirming friends just waiting for me. They had big arms, too.

I still wanted someone to share my life with. As a fantasy writer and Dungeons & Dragons player, I had a soft spot for broad-shouldered warriors. Here my birthmother had her own personal thousand-year-old warrior.

"He *literally* pulled you into his *literal* arms?" I asked.

"Yes," she said, aware that my Baptist skepticism was rising to the surface. "You don't believe me?"

"I didn't say that."

"You want to cross-examine him. Make sure he's real."

"Yeah, lady," I said sarcastically, "I'd like to chat with your hunky spirit guide."

"Hunky? Well, if you like Conan the Barbarian, I guess so. And you *do*, I know that." She made yummy smack-ing noises through the phone line.

Oh God. I deflected. "I'd ask him his intentions toward my birthmother."

She chuckled, seeing right through me. "Baby boy, I don't think you could handle him."

"I want to make sure you're okay."

"Riiiiight. I'm your mother, I know these things."

I dismissed that quickly with a pointless wave of my hand that nearly took out my lamp. "Look, I don't even believe in him. But I am your son, and I deserve a say in which people give you advice. He should at least respect that."



“I can ask him to come visit you,” she said, with a warmth and an understanding that surprised me. Her sixth sense could read my heart across all that distance.

My birthmother had been into magnanimous gift-giving ever since she found me when I was thirty, her first gift to me. Six months later, she offered to find my birthfather for me. Then she sold a property she owned and used the money to pay for a trip to Ireland so we could spend time together. Partly, I think she was trying to make up for the thirty years we’d lost—she wanted these gifts to be huge, to bridge the years, to prove she was a good mother. She had a good heart.

Sending me her Viking spirit guide was another huge gift. But maybe it was also a chance to prove her spiritual beliefs true to her narrow-minded Christian son.

Laurie had been the first to accept me as her gay son—did I not remember? She’d had less to give up than my folks, and more to gain maybe, but she wrote to me in a letter, *I love you whether you are straight or gay*. That meant a lot. She’d known from

the beginning, she said. “No straight son calls his birthmother *darlin’* over and over.” I told her she was confusing being gay with being a Texan who called every woman *darlin’*.

As my birthmom, she accepted whoever I was because I was coming to her fresh, a first impression. It was easy for Laurie to win that one. My folks had a lot more history to rewrite than she did, and they were still struggling.

Hearing her son was hurting, Laurie reacted like a mother—by offering a gift only she could give. “I can tell him to come to you in a dream first. Because if he came for real, he would scare you.”

She said I needed to open a channel to let him into my mind. This scared me; I’d been warned all my life not to let spirits into my mind, and I was sure this rule applied to hunky Vikings too.

But I was lonely. “Okay, sure. I’m game. But just for a conversation.”

“When you get ready for bed,” she told me, “just say out loud that you’re opening a channel in your mind for him to come.”

I’d never told Laurie about my history with spirits visiting my room at night. Growing up, I was plagued by nightmares. While I felt awake, the room would transform in front of me, strangers would walk in, and heads would move up the wall, watching me. I was always petrified until the experience was over. It was classic sleep paralysis—hallucinations occurring between a dream and waking state—but within our spiritual context, it seemed more ominous. My parents hoped I would grow out of it, and eventually I did, but not before a particularly frightening moment.

I was sixteen. One night, after going to bed—I could still hear *M*A*S*H* on the TV in the living room—I was consoling myself while lying in the top bunk of the bunk beds. I must have been nervous about something scary happening, but then I said, out loud, in the most religious way possible, “Well, I’m a Christian,” trying to invoke some sort of immunity to spiritual activity outside the movements of God and the Holy Spirit.

Instantly, a guttural chorus of voices came from the ceiling and



swooped past my head, bellowing, “No, you’re not.” The sensation felt like a shark brushing past you in the ocean.

I couldn’t move. I couldn’t scream. This was different to my previous hallucinations, which had never *responded* to my voice before, had never felt so malevolent. I heard the laugh track from the TV filter down the hallway. Frozen, I was aware that although my parents were only in the next room, they couldn’t help me. I was vulnerable, even here.

I didn’t know how to tell my parents what had happened. I couldn’t even begin to put it into words—there was no way I could dismiss this moment as mere sleep paralysis. I still can’t. But I knew what I needed to do. The following Sunday, I walked down the church aisle and rededicated my life to Jesus, and again the Sunday after, and probably five or six more times. It was a public act with witnesses who would keep me accountable for my promise of increased devotion. An extra dousing of the Holy Spirit would protect me in my bedroom.

There I was, almost forty, a part-time English teacher with a deep faith in God, aware there might be more out there than I realized, and actually thinking of opening my mind to a Viking spirit, as if this were *Dead-Match.com*.

That night, I turned down the sheets of my bed, thinking about the hairy-chested Viking awaiting me. I tried to keep my thoughts friendly and positive, but that sixteen-year-old’s frightening encounter with spirits slipped back into my head. Surely, I told myself, meeting a Viking in a dream was a harmless fantasy. With the conversation with my birthmom so fresh in my mind, I would probably dream of a Viking regardless, a product of my overactive imagination.

When Laurie spoke of spirit guides, she sounded comforted. He has very big arms, she’d said. When I spoke of Jesus, I always thought of a soul comfort, but not a physical one. Was I disappointed in my religion? Was I frustrated at God for not sending me someone real by now? God wasn’t a pimp. But hey, couldn’t He be a matchmaker?

I was angry at my former church for their negative reaction when I came out to them, how they’d pushed me away. What did I owe to those beliefs, when other people abandoned them so easily? Since I’d discovered that the church had been wrong about being gay, being queer, couldn’t they be wrong about spiritualism, as well? Could my birthmother, so comforted as a single woman by these spirit guides, really have access to something otherworldly that I wasn’t allowing myself to try?

Oh God, I thought, did it really have to be a choice between having no one in my life, or opening my mind to a dead Viking?

I lay in bed with my lamp on, staring at the ceiling, imagining a wider, more spectacular universe than I had been taught to believe in.

I was ready, in some ways, for anything. I felt vulnerable. “If I open a channel to you,” I said into the room, “you have to promise not to hurt me.”

I heard myself—my voice—pleading. Oh my. That had to be a red flag, even if I’d been talking with a real man. Begging him not to hurt me.



I wanted to believe that God had someone out there for me, and I wanted someone in my bed. But I was afraid and confused. Laurie's gift was too much. I felt unprepared for what might come into my room, but I knew I'd hate myself if I didn't try.

The flesh was willing, but my spirit was weak. I turned out the light and the dark rushed in.

Some of us are not ready for magic. Not ready for the unknown to come into our room. We can handle the Holy Spirit because he's been around since Sunday school. We can handle God—sometimes aloof, often hands-off, a word of wisdom now and then. These are not *magic*. When the dark gets thick as it does when you turn out the light, when it comes and surrounds the bed like a liquid, rising above it to cover you, and you can't breathe because you know something could be there, you are not ready for magic, even if it could help.

"Protect me from myself!" I shouted, certain I was the most dangerous thing in the room. I turned my face into the wet pillow and had no dreams of Vikings. No dreams at all.

The next morning, I took a walk outside. The sun rose ten minutes early, and would continue to do so every day until our sky was filled with sunlight all day and all night long. I went scarfless, gloveless into the forest, happy that temperatures were rising. I stepped through the remaining snow, watching the light filter through the narrow trunks of pines and aspen. Two chickadees darted above my head. I imagined they were in love, as you do when you're not. I rested a hand against one of those pine trees for a moment to stop and appreciate what I had—the forest, the light, the snow, the wilderness, the crisp clear air. A chickadee lit on the back of my hand, only for a second, looked at me, sang and then darted away. I could feel that song resonate through his little warm body on my knuckle.

Brave. Man, they were brave. But then, I was mostly harmless.

I called Laurie when I got back to my apartment. I didn't want to confess my fear, how I had allowed it to ruin her gift. Or that I was afraid of what had clearly helped her. I wanted

to keep our relationship strong, above our differences in faith. How could I explain that the gifts of her faith weren't ones I knew how to accept?

I blamed the Viking, telling her that he hadn't come.

"I couldn't get him to leave me," she said, disappointed for me. "He's very loyal."

I imagined a burly Viking seated at her bedside, full armour, sword at hand, alert and listening, scanning her darkened room for evil. No voices would swoop past her head while he was on guard. That would be the gift I'd give her if I could.

Stay there, Viking. Stay there.

Jerome Stueart is a queer illustrator, writer and tarot reader. His writing has appeared in Geist, Joyland, F&SF, Tor.com, On Spec, Lightspeed and elsewhere. He was a finalist for a 2020 World Fantasy Award. Both American and Canadian, a former Yukoner, he lives now in Dayton, Ohio.

ENDNOTES

REVIEWS, COMMENTS, CURIOSA

AN ANTI-WAR GODZILLA

As **Godzilla Minus One**—the latest addition to the Godzilla-verse, and the thirty-seventh film in the franchise—hurtles towards its climax, the youthful Shirō (Yuki Yamada) begs his older crewmates to let him join the fight against the monstrous Godzilla. Having been too young to serve in the Japanese army during World War II, Shirō has spent the whole film asserting his valour and disappointment in having missed his chance to fight Japan’s enemies. “No,” his older crewmates tell him. “You should be proud of not having served in war.” This is the ethos of *Godzilla Minus One*, the first truly anti-war Godzilla movie. Godzilla has always had an uneasy relationship to militarism and war. On the one hand, the saurian monster is conventionally read as directly inspired by the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, a monstrous allegory for military technoscience run amok. On the other, his human opponents are often themselves soldiers or veterans of war,



and in more than one film Godzilla is ultimately defeated by their heroic sacrifices. *Godzilla Minus One* addresses this legacy explicitly, setting the film immediately after WWII and moving Godzilla’s ambivalent relationship to war from thematic subtext to explicit text. Its protagonist, Kōichi Shikishima (Ryunosuke Kamiki), is a former kamikaze pilot haunted

both by his choice as the war ended to flee rather than sacrifice himself and by an immediately subsequent encounter with Godzilla. The film is fundamentally about these traumas, blending together the figure of Godzilla as a monstrous reminder of the violence of war and Shikishima’s ongoing struggle over whether he has the right to continue living in the immediate postwar years. The ways in which the film answers this question are moving and thoughtful, as is its broader rejection of Japanese militarism and its ideology of sacrificial violence. *Godzilla Minus One* feels radically contemporary in this rejection, and exceptionally timely.

—Joseph Weiss

SONGS OF BATTLE

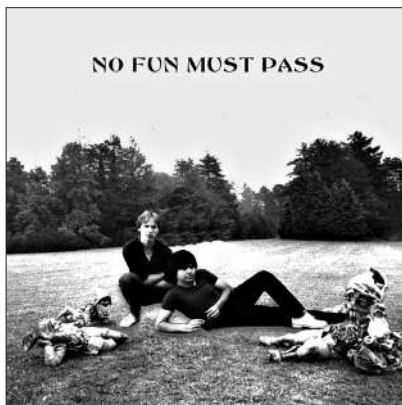
Daša Drndić’s **Canzone di Guerra: New Battle Songs**, first published in Croatian in 2019, is now available in an English translation (by Celia Hawkesworth) from Istros

Books. Described as “a collage of different genres [...] from (pseudo) autobiography to documentary material and culinary recipes,” *Canzone di Guerra* is set mainly in Toronto, among expatriates from the former Yugoslavia, who have fled the violence of the Yugoslav Wars of the late 1990s. Most have left everything behind—their homes, their friends and family, their possessions, their careers—and must start afresh. They speak of their past and of their new life in Canada with a mix of bitterness and resignation. Here is Marko, talking to a Canadian radio reporter while selling sausages on Toronto’s streets: “First I taught literature at a secondary school, later I was a lecturer at the university. I also worked as an editor for a publisher and wrote literary criticism. Then, I’m a poet. Yes, I’ve had books published. Excuse me... Hi! Spicy Italian or Polish? Three dollars please...” The narrator observes Canadian society with acerbity, finding it “a land of thick, rich forests, which are cut down in order to turn them into paper,” and “a land of very thrifty people.” A land of bureaucracy as well, with forms mediating every transaction, from an application for social support to the adoption of a cat. She also discovers that the old ethnic prejudices and animosities, suppressed in Yugoslavia for so many years under Tito, have simply migrated to Canada, where they live on among the expatriate community. She provides a helpful list: “What Do (Some Other) Immigrants Do In Canada After the Break-up of Socialist Yugoslavia?” Item #8: “They say that all sides in this war are equally to blame, and when they are told that yes, they are to blame but absolutely not equally, they stop speaking to you”; Item #19: “If you speak the Ijekavian dialect they ask you where you’re from so they know how to place you.” It seems that Tito’s vision of a united community of South Slavs has disappeared forever.

—Michael Hayward

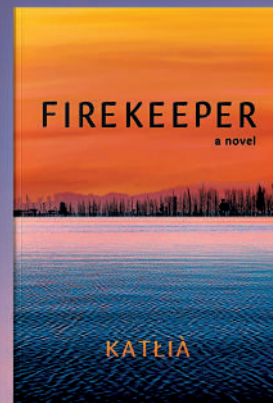
ONCE A PUNK BAND, ALWAYS A CULTURE BEARER

Vancouver’s *No Fun* began as a punk band in 1974 with their first recording, “Planned Disaster,” and the equally surreal, “She’s a Potato.” Now, fifty years later, Atomic Werewolf Records is in the process of reissuing enhanced versions of almost all the material *No Fun* has since produced. To rewind a little, in the 1970s *No Fun* had a “cult following” (more accurately, a tight community that grew up around them) based in their collective hometown of Surrey, BC. By the 1980s their fan base had expanded, and an influential champion for them was David Wisdom, dynamic host of “Nightlines” on CBC Radio. When David Wisdom invited *No Fun* to play live on air in 1988, they performed “Rich Folk Festival,” a recording soon to become as iconic as their definitive “Beatles of Surrey.” Bandleader David M’s continuous creativity is fuelled by the fact that, first and foremost, he’s a musicologist, an especially perceptive one. Performing and composing may be secondary, although his pitch-perfect rendition of the baritone sax from Lou Reed’s “Walk on the Wild Side” is anything but secondary. He plays it on the membranophone (that is, the kazoo) and what a world-class performance it is. Amongst their numerous original tunes, “Me and Warren Beatty and Mick Jagger (Have This Problem)” delivers the most daydreamy, teenage-angst chorus imaginable. Pair this with their cover



“
...gripping, touching,
and profound.

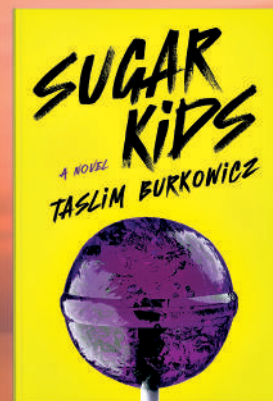
—ANGELA STERRIT



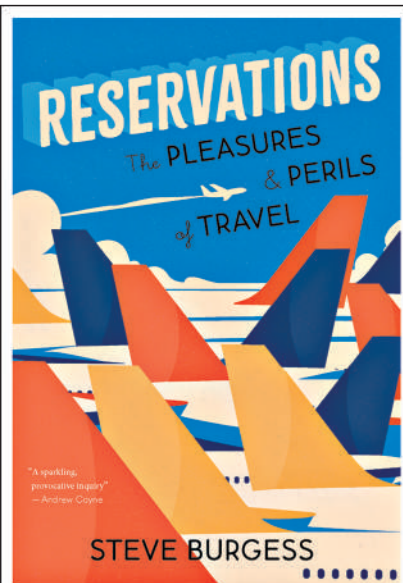
”

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—HEATHER BABCOCK



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“Tag along with journalist Steve Burgess, the perfectly funny and perceptive travel partner, to visit all the emotions modern travel evokes, from humbled wonder to globalizer’s guilt. His knack for weaving great yarns with sharp research makes the miles fly by. After this irresistible read helps you unpack the ethical quandaries of today’s tourism, you may be surprised where you land!” —David Beers, founding editor of *The Tyee*

“Steve’s sly humour made *Reservations* so much fun to read but it’s his candour about what leaves many of us conflicted about travel that has stayed with me—from the environmental impact of tourism to selfie culture.

...More than anything, this is a man who loves seeing the world and it was a joy seeing it with him.” —Ian Hanomansing, co-host of CBC’s *The National*

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version of Chad & Jeremy’s “Summer Song,” and its cleverly altered lyrics, and you have to marvel at the sheer wistfulness. Makes you long for a No Fun take on “Dirty Old Town,” if such a rarity exists. No Fun has covered a lot of ground since their Surrey days; all the while David M has hung onto a number of 4-track recordings from the 1970s, waiting to be completed. As he points out, “Add to that a vast number of live recordings of our shows, and Atomic Werewolf will be issuing No Fun product forever.”

—*Jill Mandrake*

INTELLIGENCE GIRLS

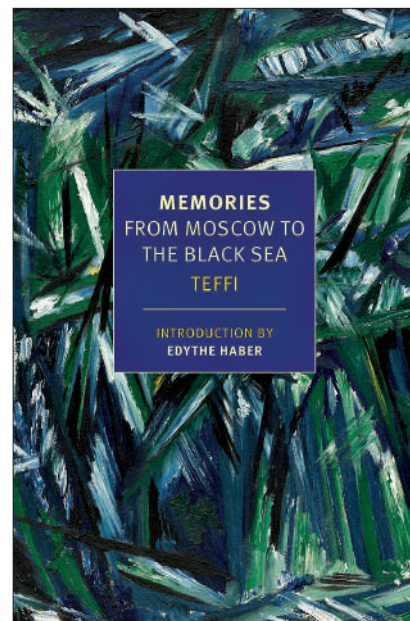
While WWII rages in Great Britain, Lucy Barrett is sent by her father to the island of Bermuda, to keep her safe, he hopes. She is fiercely intelligent and courageous, and longs to help the war effort as more than a censurette, reading letters taken from ships that pass through Bermuda. In fact, she and her three roommates (gorgeous spy Georgie, medical student Lark and brilliant, autistic Ruth) will encounter plenty of drama in Elizabeth Bales Frank’s *Censurettes* (Stonehouse Publishing), a highly readable character study and war adventure novel. After exposing a ring of saboteurs, Lucy ends up as an interrogator in Alexandria, where she almost gets blown up and falls in love with a gruff doctor. The story highlights the extensive range of vital work done by women during WWII, and does not shy away from the spectres of discrimination and violence against women. It is a deft portrayal of both exotic and mundane corners of intelligence work, while also deeply evoking the atmosphere of wartime life in Bermuda. Frank has pulled off a great feat in writing a thoughtful novel which does not conform to expectations of any genre; *Censurettes* is much more than a romance, mystery

or adventure tale, but is also a lot more fun than plenty of current literary or historical fiction. The clean, clear prose is a joy to read.

—*Kristina Rothstein*

FROM RUSSIA WITH LOVE

In *Memories: From Moscow to the Black Sea* by Teffi (New York Review Books), translated from the Russian by Robert Chandler, Elizabeth Chandler, Anne Marie Jackson, and Irina Steinberg, the Russian writer popularly known as Teffi tells how she was persuaded by an impresario (who uses the pseudonym of Gooskin) to take a break from her increasingly desperate and dangerous life in Moscow during the Russian Civil War, and embark on a reading tour to Ukraine. Gooskin deals with the red tape and the crankily dangerous bureaucrats, while Teffi and her companions rush from poetry readings to operettas to crowded cafés, simply to be in the presence of other people. Teffi’s name is recognized wherever she goes, even in a tiny shtetl on the border with Ukraine, and the group is constantly in danger of missing their next travel



connection because Teffi's fans insist that she give readings of her work. In Kiev, Teffi joins with others who hope to launch newspapers and open theatres, and it is only months later, with the Bolsheviks on the verge of entering Kiev, that Teffi and many of her colleagues flee to Odessa. From Odessa she manages to get a place on a rickety ship which takes her to Novorossiysk, where she is invited to a performance of her works for an audience of the tsarist elite. This performance turns out to be her "last bow to a Russian audience on Russian soil." Teffi eventually made her way to Paris, where she continued to write poems, plays and satirical essays for the rest of her life. In *Memories*, Teffi is simply one of the many who were forced by circumstances to leave their normal lives behind, and her observations about her fellow wanderers and their wild resourcefulness are recorded with humour and compassion. In the introduction (by Edythe Haber), humourist Arkady Bukhov is quoted as remarking that "in general Teffi writes so cleverly and beautifully that even her enemies would not call her a woman writer." One of the many good reasons to read this book.

—Patty Osborne

A PLAY IS A PLAY IS A PLAY

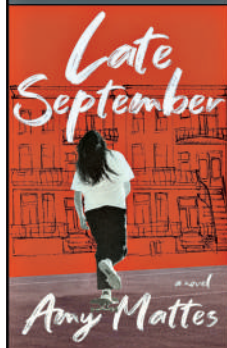
Jean and I drove all the way across town on a recent Friday night to catch one of the final performances of a "two hander" play about Gertrude Stein and her long-time companion Alice B. Toklas, titled—not surprisingly—**Gertrude and Alice** (United Players of Vancouver). The play opens with Gertrude (played by Tanja Dixon-Warren) and Alice (played by Kelsi James) walking from the wings to front and centre stage, where Gertrude addresses the audience directly. "How many of you have read *all* of my writing?" An

embarrassed silence. "Well then, how many of you have read three or more of my books?" Well, I'd read Stein's bestseller *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* years ago, and somewhat later, *Paris France*. And I'd started on Stein's first book, *Three Lives*—but had stalled about one and a half lives in. So it seemed best to keep my hands firmly in my lap, since I had no desire to go one on one with Gertrude, particularly in front of an audience: she was formidable! A force! And—in the opinion of many, including both Alice and Gertrude Stein herself—a genius! The play, written in 2018 by Anna Chatterton, Evalyn Parry and Karin Randoja, was a lot of fun: Gertrude and Alice trade banter as they lead us through the story of their forty-year relationship, and, following Gertrude's death in 1946, the twenty-one years that Alice lived on in Paris by herself. By the end of the play I think that most of us had been convinced—or nearly so—that Gertrude might have been a genius after all. For my part, I thought that I might make one more attempt to finish *Three Lives* when I got home.

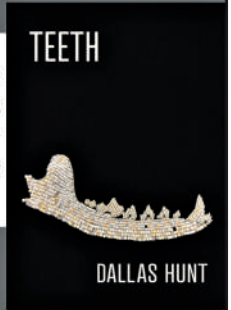
—Michael Hayward

ON PIRACY (AND PETRIFIED ORANGES)

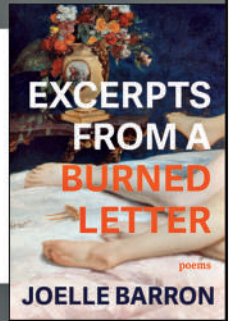
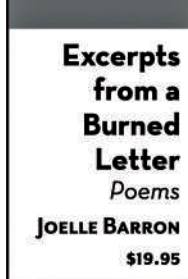
Our Flag Means Death (HBO Max): it's funny, it's sad and people get stabbed. This TV series by David Jenkins is spun loosely from the real-life eighteenth-century partnership of Stede Bonnet, a wealthy Barbadian landowner who ran off to sea, and Blackbeard, the notorious pirate. Stede is partial to velvet dressing-gowns and keeps a well-furnished library on board; he's more comfortable reading bedtime stories to his misfit crew than raiding other ships. Blackbeard wears full leathers and is jaded enough to consider his own death a novelty. Intrigued by the "Gentleman Pirate," he seeks



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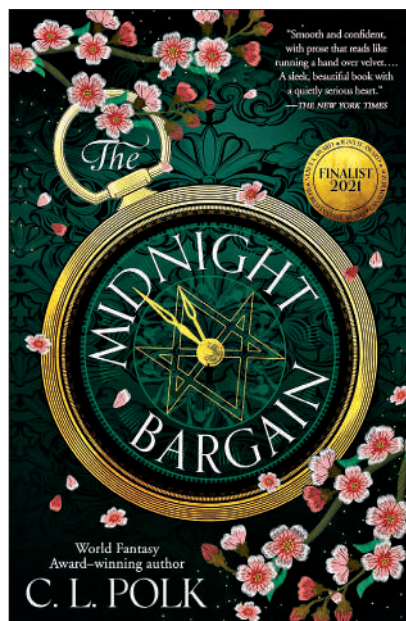
Stede out, swooping in when an encounter with the Spanish navy goes awry. Despite tension between the two men's crews, a bond grows between Stede (played by Rhys Darby) and Blackbeard (played by Taika Waititi, who also produced the show) as they navigate the hazards of pirate life together: scurvy, boredom, execution. There are also mermaids, sea monsters and lighthouses, but not where you expect them. Watching *Our Flag Means Death* is like riding a storm in a dinghy—full of highs and lows with a strong hint of the absurd. The writers and costume department have a deft touch with historical anachronisms, the soundtrack ranges from Verdi to Lou Reed, and love comes in refreshing variety, though little of it runs smooth. The women—and non-binary Jim—are tough as petrified oranges and the men sometimes cry, or try to turn into birds. The show isn't perfect—one crew member, "The Swede," veers close to caricature (until he sings!)—but it is crammed with characters of depth who say hilarious, heart-squeezing and sometimes profound things. No wonder fans have been campaigning to rescue a stalled third season.

—Helen Godolphin

PRIDE AND PREJUDICE MEETS DIANA WYNNE JONES

In *The Midnight Bargain* (Erewhon Books), C. L. Polk crafts a bright fantasy romance with high stakes between magic, love and ambition. Championed on Canada Reads a few years ago, I finally picked up this novel with the hopes of getting myself out of a reading slump—and it delivered. Our heroine, eighteen-year-old Beatrice, practices magic in secret and wishes to become a powerful mage, a role forbidden to women in her strict patriarchal society, where sorceresses are collared on their wedding day

to prevent spirits from possessing their unborn children. Instead, her severely indebted family needs her to find a wealthy husband in this year's Bargaining Season, a sequence of high-society parties, picnics and balls for eligible nobility. There, Beatrice meets the dashing Ianthe, a wealthy mage with feminist sympathies whom Beatrice quickly falls for, and she must decide whether to pursue her dreams of magic or stifle her ambition in a marriage. With Ianthe's sister Ysabeta, who has similar aspirations, Beatrice secretly summons a spirit to



help her navigate the impossible social pressures and find a way to happiness. A shrewd social commentary on patriarchy underscores the romantic narrative, as Beatrice and Ysabeta race to learn the secret rituals that will free them from the marriage collar while their families and suitors try to trap them in unwanted relationships. With its lively world-building mixed with Regency-style gowns and customs, this book feels like *Pride and Prejudice* meets Diana Wynne Jones. I liked Beatrice's determination not to compromise on what she wanted, the value she placed on her friendship with Ysabeta, and the relationship between Beatrice and her spirit friend.

It was fun to explore Chasland's shops and parks, its magical chapterhouse, the Lavan mansion and ships, and discover the secret threads of resistance underpinning mainstream culture. A quick pace matched with vivid writing and a good balance between adventure and romance made *The Midnight Bargain* an ideal escape.—Kelsea O'Connor

BEAUTIFUL AND SUBVERSIVE BOOKS

As we drove along bustling Hastings Street to Simon Fraser University, I saw a sign that read "Free Altercations." As I remarked on this, I realized that it *actually* read "Free Alterations." Synchronistically, alterations were the theme of curator Kathy Slade's talk at the SFU Gallery: **Jo Cook and Perro Verlag Books by Artists: The Unreadable Sacred.** The late Jo Cook and her partner Wesley Mulvin founded Perro Verlag Press in 2005, and until Jo's death in 2021 they created and published books by artists. But don't think "conventional" books; the books were printed by them on their letterpress in their home studio on Mayne Island, BC. They were beautiful and subversive. Jo Cook: "Perro Verlag is an idea that grew out of collaborative drawing sessions, comics exhibitions and barbecues at Lucky's Comics in Vancouver. Perro Verlag's roots go back to the energy of 1970s artist's mimeo magazines in which the page became an alternative exhibition space for artists to work in." So: the page is the space. I remember events like "Book and Beer" held annually at the Regional Assembly of Text in Vancouver, where Perro Verlag titles and other books were for sale. Some of the others, such as the tiny zines from the "pocket gallery," were artist-made books that would simply be pulled out of various creators' shirt pockets. The page is the space. Slade's talk centered on Jo Cook's time as

the Artists' Book Research Resident at Emily Carr University of Art and Design in 2016. Her project there saw her—well, actually you probably didn't see her—slip quotes by women artists, handwritten on small bits of vellum, into books by men—in this particular sub-collection in the library, *all* the books were by men. Free alterations. You can find out more about Perro Verlag at perroverlag.com; click on the photo of Jo's studio to enter.

—Peggy Thompson

FABLES GALORE

If you're looking for a novel to keep people faithful to your book club, pick up Michael Crummey's *Galore* (Doubleday). Crummey is great at capturing the ethos of place in stories that blend historical research with collective memory. *Galore* is set in Paradise Deep, an isolated fishing town in Newfoundland, between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and follows a couple of generations of townsfolk after a biblical-like event befalls them. Their intertwining stories are full of wit, love and minor political intrigue. *Galore* can be likened to a fabled recounting of history. It's more family history than the capital-H kind of history, and you might also consider it the history of a place you didn't know you needed to know about—a place somewhat like Macondo, from *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Through Crummey's writing, Newfoundland suddenly becomes Canada's most interesting setting for fiction, infinitely more interesting than Toronto, and punching above its weight when compared to stories set in the Canadian West. With its ironies, its struggles and its rooted logic, Paradise Deep seems as fascinating a place as New York City or America's Deep South, and as exciting as Nigeria, or India.

—Anson Ching



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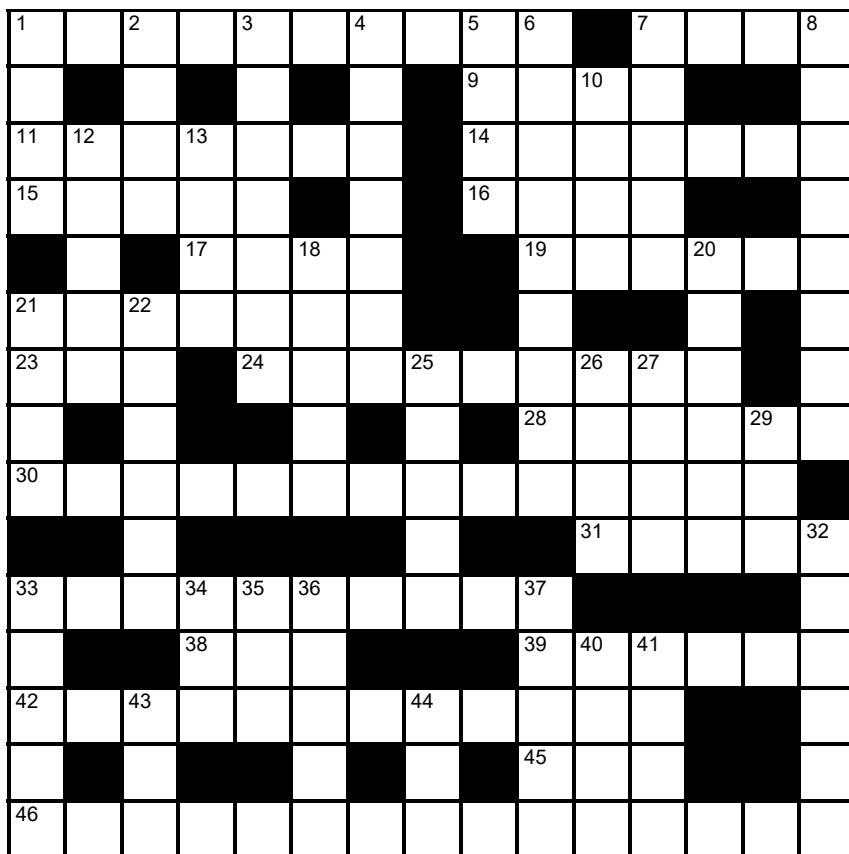
A winner will be selected at random from correct solutions and will be awarded a one-year subscription to *Geist* or—if already a subscriber—a *Geist* magnet.

ACROSS

- 1 According to Leonard, is poetry a sin or is that just what I heard? (2)
- 7 Remember when Lucien and his friends started a fiesta in the street?
- 9 Sounds like you're really chomping on that dessert coleslaw
- 11 In spring I like to take a slow pic of the yellow flowers
- 14 That red limo smelled mustier than usual
- 15 In Ireland, Nick had an aptitude for fighting
- 16 I was relieved when she passed the water
- 17 When old age smells like teenagers' shoes
- 19 I heard the French were in trouble for working one day in spring
- 21 Bob and his buddies were a ray of sunshine at the bar
- 23 Oops, I once started a business!
- 24 Don't be angry! Once the monks go in and change, fuming is prohibited (2)
- 28 I'm confused! Is it now a genre to make people angry?
- 30 OMG, isn't that crazy royal just a soft old herring? (4)
- 31 Sounds like there's a lot of bull on this block!
- 33 Hey buddy, your big brother is in the library (3)
- 38 Popular motor company ended by making Canada bilingual (abbrev)
- 39 Short forms use brackets, but here they might give things away
- 42 In BC, we can't explain the existence of rural peanuts
- 45 That exceptional rebuttal group produced quite a flashpoint (abbrev)
- 46 Upon reflection, did those dark misnomers cloud over reality?

DOWN

- 1 On a hot evening, I dream of ice hockey
- 2 Was Hawkeye from here?
- 3 For the reading, let in only fantastic people! Is that clear?



- 4 If you press me, I'll remember why Jo was kicked off the court
- 5 If the Hanoverians trip up, will their riders arrest them? (abbrev)
- 6 The little crafters on the night shift asked "Is he a smoker?"
- 7 Don't you think it's time that whathisname and his friends got their rave on?
- 8 You can't solve the Tory clue just using a straightener on Arwen's shoe (2)
- 10 Sounds like all of the fruits in that group droop
- 12 I'm available for a drink and a dance! (2)
- 13 I read that crystal is diving
- 18 Over 50% of your math needs to be checked before you go to the pub
- 20 They didn't seem bothered when we egged a house down the street
- 21 Don't just hang around on the sofa
- 22 Where's that wire at? In your shoe! (2)
- 25 Could we use wood to cobble together a home in Guantánamo?
- 26 We hope Adam will be at peace with this data structure (abbrev)
- 27 Brainy harmonies make me feel better (abbrev)
- 29 At the beach, this very good chugger is a leader on the dunes (abbrev)
- 32 Out east, malacopterygians are both valuable and controversial
- 33 We met Maria in the sanctuary at midnight
- 34 Put that tool down, we're going dancing!
- 35 How well do we need to speak to sound British? (abbrev)
- 36 Clement's jolly character had tiny helpers
- 37 When I heard them talking, I ran off
- 40 Did that all-British colony have a pub?
- 41 So much happened at the concert that I had brain fog
- 43 Pierre always wore his wellies to work (abbrev)
- 44 At the talk I learned that little cruiser was born in Calgary

Solution to Puzzle 125



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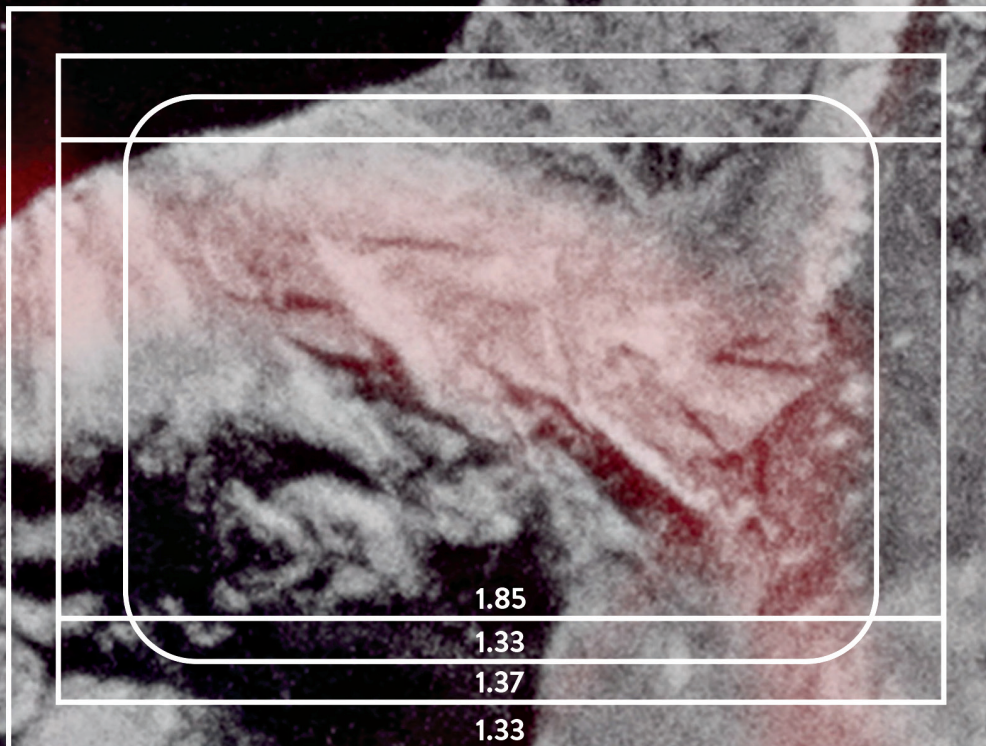
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