

# GEIST

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FACT + FICTION • NORTH of AMERICA



## RIGHTHAND JUSTIFIED

THE CRUSH AND THE RUSH AND THE ROAR

SLOW TRAVEL, PSYCHIC SPACE

BUFFALO POUND BOYS

LIVING THE DREAM

The  
**COINCIDENCE  
PROBLEM**

Selected Dispatches 1999–2022

STEPHEN OSBORNE



# THE COINCIDENCE PROBLEM

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STEPHEN OSBORNE

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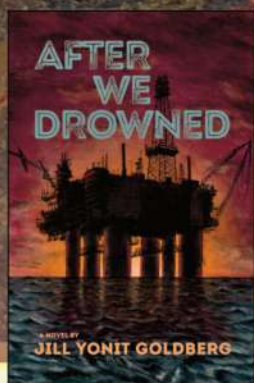
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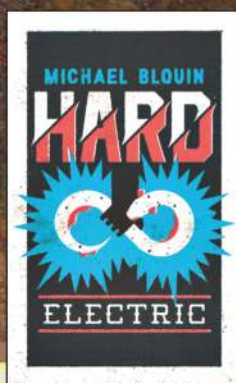
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# GEIST

Volume 32 • Number 128 • Winter 2024

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**COVER IMAGE:** *Debouttes*, 2021, inkjet print on Lasal paper, ed. of 3, 29.7 x 119.5 in. by Caroline Monnet. A note from Caroline, October 2024: "This work was created at the request of Théâtre Espace Go, as part of the event *Je suis une femme d'octobre*, in homage to the women whose mobilization had a profound impact on the transformation of society."



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## MISCELLANY



### MINI FESTIVAL SEASON

The lovely panellists at SpotLit: a mini lit mag festival, held October 5 at the Vancouver Public Library (above). *Geist* partnered with our friends at *Room* and *subTerrain* to offer a full day of writing workshops, a magazine market, publishing panel and triple issue launch, with readings from authors whose work appears in *Geist* 125 and 127. Shout out to our volunteers, Anson, Natasha and Patty!

### BEST OF THE WORST

At the tail-end of August, a handful of *Geist's* illustrious Reading Collective members and the editor-in-chief gathered online from various points across Canada, the US and even the UK(!). The Reading Collective is comprised of sharp, creative people who read and offer feedback on submissions—invaluable to the editor. What better way to get to know one another than through writing prompts that encourage the worst? It would be remiss of us to keep the responses to ourselves, so here is a curation of the worst (the best?).

Prompt: Write the worst opening line to a novel you can imagine.

*It was a regular and not-stormy day, which was good because my umbrella*

*was broken and stealing a new one still hadn't worked out, mostly because the ones I kept seeing were too ugly to be worth stealing anyway, so I was glad that the weather had been not-stormy.*

*In the beginning, everything was ants and grew into more ants, until the ants whirled together into stars and globbed into planets and piled high to form mountains and flattened out into seas; and the world of ants was peaceful, if a bit creepy-crawly and with far too many legs; and all was going well until the coming of the Great Magnifying Glass.*

*It was a dark and stormy night and the horse I rode in on wouldn't walk into the bar.*

Prompt: Titles you wouldn't want to come across in the submission pile.

- Gargantuan Melons: A Fruitful Romance (*fiction*)
- The Race Car Who Loved Me (*personal essay*)
- Floppy Disks to Floppy Dicks: How Technology Has Ruined Masculinity (*a 19-page essay*)
- A Non-Fiction Story (*autofiction*)

*Write your own worst lines and titles and share them with us! —The Editors*

## CHEESE OF THE LIDO

I thoroughly enjoyed the feature comic, "Long Lost Lido," by Onjana Yawngwhwe in *Geist* 127. In the late '60s and early '70s, my urban New Westminster, BC, commune/co-op was composed of twenty to thirty members. We had a need for cheaply acquired food. I would go to The Lido on Broadway for historically close-to-

terminal packaged and canned goods and incredibly cheap cheese, often with a mould problem easily rectified by pruning. —Bill

*Thanks to Bill Engleson for expressing his delight in Onjana's comic about the history and mystery of The Lido in Vancouver, BC.*

## OVERHEARD



*Overheard in a post-secondary school hallway in Edmonton, AB, by Kelly Shepberd. Comic by writer and cartoonist Alyssa Hirose. Follow her on Instagram @hialyssacomics for daily diary comics.*

## WRITE TO GEIST

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

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Arts, Culture  
& Tourism

**Jordan Bennett's** ongoing practice utilizes painting, sculpture, video, installation and sound to explore land, language, the act of visiting, familial histories and challenging colonial perceptions of indigenous histories, stereotypes and presence with a focus on exploring Mi'kmaq and Beothuk visual culture of Ktaqamkuk. Bennett is based in Nova Scotia and is Associate Professor in the Division of Media Arts (Expanded Media) at NSCAD-U.

**Laura Dutton** is a photo and video-based artist. She works with photography and video installation to unravel the materiality of lens-based images and disrupt our ability to look straight through to the referent described. She lives on the unceded territory of the ɫə́kʷəŋən peoples in Victoria, BC. Find her at lauradutton.com.

**Kate Greenslade** (*mine from home*) is an illustrator and bricolage enthusiast. She combines a range of traditional mark-making and lo-fi digital techniques in her work. Her research-based projects consider how social conventions are embodied and contested in the drama and play of urban life, both past and present. She lives in London, UK. Find her at minefromhome.com and on Instagram @minefromhome.

**Vanessa Hall-Patch** is a Canadian artist with an MFA in printmaking from the University of Alberta. Her art is part of both public and private collections and has been exhibited nationally and internationally. She lives on Bowen Island, BC, and commutes by boat to Vancouver, BC, where she works at the Emily Carr University of Art + Design. Find her at vanessahall-patch.ca and on Instagram @vanessahallpatch.

**Alyssa Hirose** is a comic artist, illustrator, writer and editor based in Vancouver, BC. She's been drawing daily autobiographical diary comics and posting them online since 2018 (you can find her work on Instagram @hialyssacomics). Her writing has been published in *Vancouver* magazine, *Western Living*, *NUVO*, *BCBusiness* and other local magazines and blogs.

**RJ McDaniel** is the author of the novel *All Things Seen and Unseen*. Read RJ's comic, "Petrine," on page 16 of this issue.

**Caroline Monnet** (Anishinaabe/French) is a visual artist and filmmaker. She has exhibited in major museums in North America and Europe. Her work is included in numerous collections in North America and at the permanent UNESCO collection in Paris. She is based in Montréal, QC, and represented by

Blouin-Division Gallery. Find her at carolinemonnet.ca and on Instagram @coco.monnet.

**Helena Rakic** is a graphic designer and illustrator working and living in Montréal, QC. Find her on Instagram @helena.rakic.

**Sarah Snip Snip** is an analog collage artist and known for her intricate mini stamp collages. Her detailed, hand-cut designs have been recognized in shortlists and featured in prominent art magazines. She is from Québec. Find her at sarahsnipsnip.ca and on Instagram @sarah.snip.snip.

**David Trautrimas** explores contemporary cultural phenomena in a multi-media practice encompassing sculpture, installation, photography and printmaking. Oscillating between abstracted and representational renderings, his works have examined those popular icons, ordinary objects and architectural spaces that influence and inform everyday life. His work has been the subject of numerous public exhibitions in Canada and internationally in the United States, Japan, South Korea, the Netherlands and Australia.

David lives in Hamilton, ON. Find him at trautrimas.ca and on Instagram @trautrimas.



## Becoming Canadian

S.I. HASSAN

*I traffic deep time in a great storm, guilty of ignorance and omission*



Great-great-grandmothers, I am writing to tell you I made it. You made it.

We survived.

Picture your Egyptian great-grandson meeting your German great-granddaughter. They have a couple of kids and immigrate to—wait for it—Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. Now I, their daughter, live in a picturesque city colonially known as Victoria, British Columbia.

You might not know where that is. You probably thought of Canada as often as I think of Eritrea, Latvia or Uruguay. Maybe you'd heard of it and pictured igloos. Now you're

here, and when (if?) my great-great-grandchildren trace their DNA, they will be surprised that you existed at all. Their future history is entangled in your mystery, and I am their unreliable bridge.

I traffic deep time in a great storm, guilty of ignorance and omission. I write the lines of a third-culture immigrant whose sense of belonging was exported for new opportunities. My father told me to be grateful and I am. *Can you imagine yourself in a hijab? With that big mouth of yours? You'd have been stoned to death, you stupid girl.*

I rewrite ancient tales of the Sumerian goddesses Inanna and

Ereshkigal and how they navigate the Underworld. My sons stuff my stories into their pockets. I know death enough to know that they'll find my crinkled-up pages after I'm gone. They'll bring out their flashlights and look for the meaning I'd hoped to impart. If they can't find it, they'll make something up. Something about hubris and climate change. Something about civilizations making the same mistakes over and over again. A bit about sacrifice and how much I love them. One of them might wonder, *Didn't she say something about reverence?*

When asked where he was from, my father would say, in his thick and ambiguous song, *Edu-mon-ton. You want to see my passport or something?* My mother said nothing, to hide her accent. My sons say they're from here and no one bats an eye. They live comfortably on stolen land and barely grapple with their privilege—everything my formerly occupied father hoped for.

Grandmothers, I tell my boys stories I've made up about us. Like, when I make bread, I pretend I come from a long line of bakers. Maybe I'm a puppet, and you pull my strings. I want to believe my hands hold your memories—that you followed us here.

*But where are you really from?*

Edu-mon-ton?

I like to imagine that my real parents are the reeds between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, but I was born in a coal mining town called Gelsenkirchen and given an Egyptian passport. I'm the daughter of Hosam El-Din Ibrahim Hassan, Ursula Mowe and Pierre Elliott Trudeau. I'm from the coldest day of 1968, but not the psychedelic, free-loving,

bra-burning '68 of our California dreams. No, I'm from a sober, post-war, obedient virgin who jumped into action the second her angry husband screamed. I'm from her capitulation. I'm from the grief of losing my daddy.

I remember my German accent and my father's brown skin. I can count, swear and pray in Arabic, but don't know the difference. I shocked my cousins when I unknowingly called their mother a whore, believing that I was counting to ten. Als ich fünf Jahre alt war, dachten die Deutschen, ich sei ein Einheimischer, but now I stumble over those words.

I grew up hearing about drunk Indians who didn't pay taxes. Not a word about residential schools by

the time I graduated high school. Canada's origin story was delivered with colorful cartoon characters that looked like ancient history. There were the Indians (them); running naked savages, cutting off each other's heads, and the settlers (us?); white, clean, organized folk who just wanted a better life. I was told we belonged to this country more than the Indians, but not and never as much as my friend Susan, whose British family had been here for five generations and had helped lay the foundation for this fine nation. We were betwixt and between, working overtime to fit in.

After speech therapy, after boobs, full lips and tanning easily, I was so popular that I walked ten steps in

front of my parents. It was like I'd never even met them.

This is how to become Canadian: *forget everything.*

(Grandmothers, what were your names again? I've looked and I've looked, but I can't find them.)

---

*S.I. Hassan is a writer and MFA student at the University of Victoria. Her essays, short stories and poetry have appeared in the Malahat Review, Arc Poetry, Prairie Fire, Dark Matter, Focus and other publications. She was short-listed for the Constance Rooke Prize in creative non-fiction and a finalist for a National Magazine Award in personal journalism. She doesn't know if her grandmothers are cheering her on or rolling over in their graves.*

---

## Buffalo Pound Boys

CONOR KERR

A thousand miles from anywhere quite like home

I'm waiting for the train when Bob Seger, Against The Wind, starts playing on my headphones. And I think back to how your parents set that up for the funeral slideshow, background music. Watching photos go by in the windows of passing cars. One of you and me, twenty years ago, before elementary school one morning, catching crayfish and garter snakes in the backwaters of the ponds and creeks off 9th Ave. Railroad-scummy, creosote-laden waterways. Dodging the rocks the trains kick up and scatter over our heads. Harvesters, figuring out how to survive another day.

Cold tunnel air, pushed by the train, knocks me down and I'm on my knees on a platform surrounded by people and wondering why everyone is gone on their own terms. The air is cold for the coast but not for the prairies. Stack friends because you never know when the next one will leave. It's been a long couple decades and I don't know if it's going to get any better. All I got is sunrises.

Against the wind.

We should have never stopped running. Away through the back hills of Buffalo Pound, forts and old bison skulls, there's no sand in a lake of a million bones. Just shattered pieces from a long, long time ago. Before trains, and Bob Seger, and I moved to Vancouver, and you were still around. Watching another sunrise and not getting the wind knocked out of you by early morning trains passing by.

---

*Conor Kerr is a Métis/Ukrainian labrador retriever enthusiast from Edmonton. He is the author of the poetry collections An Explosion of Feathers and Old Gods, and the novels Avenue of Champions and Prairie Edge. His work has won awards and lost awards.*

# Christmas in Lothlórien

SADIE MCCARNEY

*It was a gruesome war, Santa added in Papyrus font, but the forces of Good eventually emerged victorious*



In our nearly ten years of correspondence, Santa Claus had not once mentioned his cousin, Gandalf the Grey/White.

There was probably an element of rivalry to the whole thing; they were both wizards, sure, but strip back the layers of time and Gandalf is still Gandalf. Rub off the sheen of Coca-Cola ads and Rankin/Bass animation, however, and Santa Claus is forever that hinterland oddball, Radagast the Brown, communing with squirrels

and brewing herbal concoctions in the glen. It must have softened the blow when hundreds of elves, exiled from their millennia-old home in the woods of Lothlórien, chose to follow him to the North Pole to start a new elvish settlement. Galadriel (forever the ultimate Good Witch in my hazy hagiography) took up the sexless post of Mrs. Claus to Radagast's Santa.

At age ten, my bizarre mishmash of folklore, pop culture and Tolkien became something like religion to me,

aided by a string of Christmases in which Santa granted my increasingly bizarre requests.

Because he could do anything. Because, unlike some of the other adults in my life, I could always depend on Santa.

## EXHIBIT A: MAGIC WAND

It started out small, at age five: a magic wand that could “really truly grant wishes.” A reasonable request of a being who possessed infinite power. But on Christmas morning I woke to a wooden dowel, gold-painted stars clumsily hot glued to the tip. And an explanation from Santa, printed on expensive-feeling cream cardstock.

The magic wand, Santa explained, was impossible. Thousands of years ago, there had been a great war between the forces of Good and the forces of Evil, fought over who would get to hold and wield magic wands. It was a gruesome war, Santa added in Papyrus font, but the forces of Good eventually emerged victorious. To ensure this dark period of history could never be repeated, the forces of Good eradicated all magic wands, and everyone lived in peace for thousands of years.

Santa Claus had just linked his own world to the world of *Lord of the Rings*, though I didn't know it yet. I kept his letter in a drawer near my twin bed and frequently pulled it out to ponder it, like a Gideon Bible in a motel nightstand.

## EXHIBIT B: PINK FLAMINGOS

The year I decided to test Santa by asking for pink plastic flamingos (the kind that invade a work friend's lawn on their fiftieth birthday), he delivered two of them to the front of my grandparents' house, each perched one-legged in the snow beside the slumbering hostas. I was six, but I beamed like I had just discovered a new periodic element. My grade 1 teacher

(a popular villain in my grown-up nightmares) had something else to say. In my class journal I wrote all about how Santa was invincible, how he had improbably brought me the weird thing I had asked for. Her response in the margins, in cramped teacher's handwriting, was, "Your parents were very clever to get you those flamingos." How tragic, I thought, that this woman had never known the magic of Santa. O ye of little faith!

**EXHIBIT C: FAIRY DUST**

The magic wand had been a dud, but at seven I tried again with fairy dust (so that I could fly, obviously) and waited with eager certainty. But that Christmas morning, I received an empty velvet bag with a smattering of glitter in the bottom, and a note from Santa. He had run out of fairy dust for the sleigh and had to borrow mine to make sure Rudolph could keep flying. He gave me his bell to thank me—an enormous,

scuffed-up and credibly antique livestock jingle bell. Santa hadn't let me down, though—by including me in his flight plans, he ensured that I felt closer to him than ever.

**EXHIBIT D: INFLATABLE COUCH AND RUBBER CHICKEN**

Grandma's new hairdryer was mysteriously broken on my eighth Christmas morning, but my green inflatable couch was fully blown up in my grandparents' living room, and the rubber chicken I'd asked for waited expectantly under the blue-lit Christmas tree. There weren't any notes from Santa that year, but I didn't need them—by then I fully believed in the Big Guy, all furry red suit and quadruple-bypass waistline, and I proselytized enthusiastically for the Cause of Claus. He was a grown-up I could depend on, maybe even confide in one day if I met him.

**EXHIBIT E: IKEA SIDE TABLE**

The year I broke my ankle on uneven blacktop, I read *The Hobbit* for the first time and all the nebulous pieces of my belief system began to click into place. My book report that year was a page protector over a facsimile of the Lonely Mountain made entirely from beans and legumes—white navy beans for the peak, brown lentils farther down. I'd made the connection that Santa came from Tolkien's Middle-earth, and I treated the project with reverence usually reserved for the live Nativity at church (braying donkeys, squealing infant, the whole nine). Because of the broken ankle, I spent most recess periods inside, propped up on brought-from-home pillows—my own version of the Lonely Mountain.

My other fixation that year was IKEA. I obsessively watched old episodes of *Trading Spaces* and then pored over the IKEA catalogue to find decor that matched. And I made lists. So. Many. Lists. Not just of "a chair" or "a sofa," but "EKTORP Sofa, \$997.99." That Christmas I asked Santa for IKEA furniture, but I also told him I'd rustled his Radagast the Brown secret and that he didn't have to worry. I wouldn't reveal something so sacred to *anyone*. I received two triangular LACK side tables (\$14.99 each), and I had never felt so loved or understood. I started reading *The Fellowship of the Ring*.

**EXHIBIT F:**

**MARGE SIMPSON WIG**

For inexplicable reasons, my TV-hawk mother allowed me to watch *The Simpsons* at age ten; I simultaneously had a strong fascination with wigs. I was also elbows-deep in Tolkien lore and knew with a lacerating certainty that the elves of the North Pole were the same elves as the ones from Lothlórien, their lithe and slender frames warped and distorted by mainstream media. Or maybe the elves themselves were responsible for

**GUERNICA EDITIONS**  
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Allie Duff

**IN A TENSION OF LEAVES AND BINDING**  
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Marty Gervais

**LIKE A TROPHY FROM THE SUN**  
Jason Heroux

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the sleight of hand (sleigh of hand?) PR campaign, doing everything they could to obfuscate the truth.

But I knew. I wrote to Radagast and Galadriel and requested a Marge Simpson blue beehive wig. If they delivered a gift requested under their true names, I reasoned, that was tantamount to admitting the identities they'd been hiding. I waited patiently. Lovingly, even. I was barely surprised when Santa left the Marge Simpson wig beside the treeful of twinkly blue lights. I had the most forceful connection to the Big Guy that day—one of the closest things I have ever felt to holiness. I was old enough that most of my classmates Knew About Santa Already, but I brushed off their naysaying like so much lint; they didn't understand Santa Claus/Radagast the Brown in the intimate and profound ways I did. They hadn't tested him as rigorously, and thus hadn't felt enough of his all-encompassing love.

I was more sure of his magic, it's true, than I had ever been sure of myself.

#### EXHIBIT G: THE FATHER CHRISTMAS LETTERS

One day, about a week after Christmas, I was rooting around in the bedroom that had been my sister's before she decamped for university. I found not-quite-put-away-yet holiday decorations (in truth, our dusty tree stayed up all year, smothered in hearts on Valentine's Day and bedecked in eggs come Easter), beat-up old shoes of my sister's that were no longer in service. And a bag. A semi-transparent plastic shopping bag, through which I could clearly read the magical name Tolkien and trace the sharp right angles of my favourite object (a book!) with eager fingers. The title was *The Father Christmas Letters*.

I grabbed the bag and ran to the kitchen, where my mother was taking notes on a radio show.

"Did you know there was a new J.R.R. Tolkien book? And it has pictures!"

Her head snapped up as though she had been electrified. She flicked off the radio (not a common occurrence; to this day, my mother likes to keep a radio on in every room, so she doesn't miss any of her favourite CBC programs).

"It's Tolkien, Mom!"

"Yes, it is," she said, her upper lip tense. "We need to talk."

---

*Sadie McCarney's poetry books are Live Ones (University of Regina Press, 2019) and Your Therapist Says It's Magical Thinking (ECW Press, 2023). Her writing has appeared in the Best Canadian Poetry, Grain, the Walrus, the Malahat Review, and the Fiddlehead, among others.*

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## Dummies Raising Goats

MADELEINE PELLETIER

*Time to call a professional*



Yes," I said, before the woman selling the house had even finished her question, before my boyfriend could stop me.

"Yes," I said louder, as she looked at me with relief and he reeled in shock.

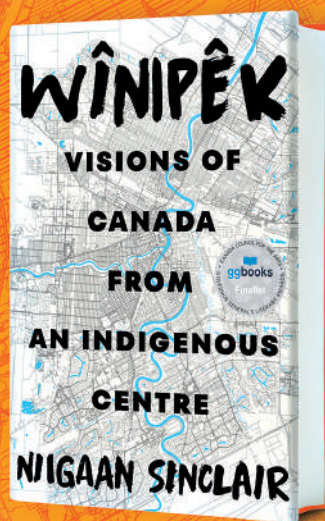
Two months later, we moved into our new home, an eighty-five-year-old farmhouse nestled between agricultural plains and ancient forest in southern

Québec, armed with good intentions and a copy of *Raising Goats for Dummies*.

Our first month as goat owners was nerve-racking, but we settled into a routine. Each crisp fall night, we followed the previous owner's instructions and fed the six goats a small amount of grain, divided equally between six red buckets hanging from the fence. Goats love grain, and soon the goats loved us.

# NATIONAL BESTSELLER

A book that demands change and celebrates those fighting for it - one that reminds us of what must be reconciled, and holds accountable those who must do the work



Unfortunately, goats do not love sharing. This led to our first spot of goat trouble.

Peach is the queen of our tiny herd. Perhaps this is because she is mother to four of the others. Or perhaps it is because of the large horns that curve gracefully toward her back, horns she frequently uses to her advantage. Either way, when we poured out the grain, Peach smashed lesser goats—her own progeny—hither and thither and took what she wanted. This triggered a trickle-down of body smashing and furious bleating as the rest of the goats fought for scraps. We, a couple of city-slickers from Montréal, were horrified, convinced the goats would all be maimed and we'd be bankrupted by vet bills before end of year. But a quick check of *Dummies* (and the internet, when we didn't believe the book)

told us that this was goats being goats. We decided not to change their routine. Thus, evenings remained very stressful, prompting a lot more shouting and crying—mostly from me.

Then the long, dark and bitterly cold Canadian winter rolled in, and we worried about warmth. Sure, they had thick, fluffy coats and a lovely *Dummies*-approved three-sided goat house, but it didn't seem like enough. Should we put in a heater? Or tack a canvas flap over the open side? Knit them sweaters? *Dummies* told us no, no and no. It said a well-fed goat is a warm goat, since they generate heat while digesting food. We increased their grain and widened the access to the hay feeder, just in case.

By spring, our goats were round as Laughing Buddhas. Even our hay man advised us to cut back on hay. We followed his advice and forced them

to graze in the pasture. There was more shouting and crying—mostly from the goats—but they slimmed down.

Next, we noticed Caper, one of our two male goats, peeing suspiciously like a girl. *Dummies* made no mention of this strange behaviour. Neither did the internet. I'm embarrassed to say how long it took us to figure out that Caper was, in fact, a girl. Certain the old owner had said there were two males, I spent the next week staring at goat bums like some kind of caprine pervert, waiting

for tails to flip up, hoping to see them pee. Finally, I could confirm that Rosemary had secretly been a boy all along.

We must have mixed up their names during the handover process and then assumed Rosemary was female because, well, no one would call a boy Rosemary.

This explained why neither of them ever came when I called them. But what to do? We tried coming up with alternative names, but nothing ever sounded right and, eventually, we just quit trying. Caper was cool with it, but I'm pretty sure Boy-Rosemary still bears a grudge.

Less than a month later, a new goat crisis popped up, this time in the form of udders. Specifically, Peach and Sophie's udders, which seemed to be swelling.

I knew they couldn't be pregnant. I'd studied our goat genitalia enough to be confident the boys were castrated. Could it be their udders were always this size and we hadn't noticed? After the Caper/Rosemary incident, us dummies knew anything was possible.

A few more weeks of watching the wrong side of goats and I was sure. Their udders were expanding.



Those lumpy, lop-sided sacs hanging between their knees looked so uncomfortable, and *Dummies* had nothing useful to offer. What could I do to help? Milk them? I tentatively stroked an udder and got a quick, painful kick in response. Time to call a professional.

The first thing the vet told us was to put the goats on a diet. She assured us our Saanen goats, descendants of Swiss mountain climbers, loved cool weather and did not require double food rations in any season. She also told us Peach and Sophie had precocious udders, a condition which sometimes occurred in milk goats. An expensive shot of hormones to dry the milk up and all would be fine. Cue more staring at back ends and waiting for things to deflate.

Summer and fall proved no less eventful.

Oliver jumped the fence and ate our grapevines, and we discovered we were no match for goat strength, speed or stubbornness, not necessarily in that order. Luckily, Oliver is fond of his place in the herd. After an afternoon spent pillaging our gardens, he was begging to be let back into the pasture with his friends.

When the neighbour's horny goat came looking for love and refused to go home, our girls were delighted. Our boys, not so much. We grew exhausted from trying to protect the virtue of our swooning maidens while avoiding the colliding heads and horns of their male kinfolk. This happened three times before our "too busy for this bullshit" neighbour got sick and tired of us calling him to come pick up his wayward Romeo, and he fixed the hole in his fence.

Then Peanut, our sweetest—and my favourite—goat developed a limp. My boyfriend was convinced he had to shoot her, which nearly caused us to break up over a small pebble caught in her hoof.

The days grew shorter and the

ground was covered in snow before the horny-goat-owning neighbour came by again. He was looking to rehome his rabbit colony and asked if we wanted any.

"Yes," my boyfriend and I shouted in unison. "Yes."

---

*Madeleine Pelletier lives in an old farmhouse near Montréal, QC with three cats, six goats and one grumpy old man. Her short fiction has recently appeared in the Book of 42<sup>2</sup>, Short Édition and Globe Soup. Follow her @madpelletier.bsky.social and on Twitter/X @mad\_pelletier.*

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## Clearing Out My Mother's House

ROSE DIVECHA

*The large supply of nine-volt batteries suddenly made sense*



Cancer had not been on my mother's radar when a checkup for a stuffy nose revealed a malignant tumor. She always thought her final demise would be brought on by cardiac arrest, prompting her to keep a steady supply of low-dose Aspirin on hand. "Are you trying to give me a heart attack?" she'd rage when disagreements erupted, and since disagreements were always erupting, never once triggering anything close to a heart attack, my siblings and I had learned to accept her outbursts as a systemic character flaw,

complete with a profound contempt and distrust toward anyone who could, potentially, induce such a life-threatening event. Even in the hospital, she thought the staff were trying to kill her.

Can it be she's forgotten she's dying of cancer? I wondered after one such outburst, only to have a physician confirm my thinking. "It's probably spread to her brain," he said. But the truth is, my mother had always been paranoid.

Josephine was not an easy person to get along with. Over the years,



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the state of our relationship swung like a pendulum, back and forth between obligation and estrangement, remaining tense and painful most of the time. Occasionally, the pendulum would rest at centre. I'm grateful her cancer diagnosis came during one of those lulls. I stepped in and did what I could, accompanying her to medical appointments, tending to yard work and grocery shopping. My sister and I regularly received calls to pick up bananas, parmesan cheese, mini chocolate bars and cases of Ensure Meal Replacement drinks. Always frugal, my mother phoned us whenever she spotted a good sale. Just days before discovering the cancer was no longer treatable, she dispatched my sister in pursuit of prickly pears. There were still a dozen in her fridge when she was admitted to the hospital, and I brought one to her when she could no longer stomach the meals provided. I peeled it and fed it to her as she expressed disappointment about the fact they were the green fleshy type, and not red, but she devoured it anyway. She knew you didn't always get what you wanted in life.

My mother was born in 1941, in the midst of World War II, and while she was too young to actually remember it, she never forgot the lingering effects. Imminent threats and potential shortages always lay on the horizon. You had to be prepared, and prepared she was. Even after the disappointment of Y2K (and we all laughed), she continued to amass a steady supply of batteries, candles, bottled water and canned goods. My mother remained vigilant right to the end. It was almost like she knew what was coming.

She passed away on October 29, 2019, with few companions in her life. But what my mother lacked in personal connections she made up for in possessions. My brother, sister and I wandered through every room of her house—four bedrooms,

two kitchens, three living areas, a crawlspace and garage—marvelling at the mass of supplies she had squirreled away, including surgical masks and toilet paper, never imagining that just six months later, the global pandemic she'd been preparing for all her life would have us all scrounging and stockpiling.

We laid out a plan for how best to clear out the house our mother had lived in for thirty-three years and made a list. It was overwhelming, but our strategy seemed sound. In the first month, we dealt with trash, unwashed laundry and the remaining prickly pears. We pushed off processing the loss of our complicated mother and instead focussed on simple tasks: donating cases of Ensure Meal Replacements to local food banks, redirecting the mail and cancelling her cable subscription. Her house was sealed tight with an alarm system and multiple locks on all windows and doors, an attempt to stay safe while keeping everyone else out. I would think of this often in the coming months as COVID-19 safety protocols forced us all to follow suit.

In the meantime, we set about sorting her vast wardrobe. Facilitated by the Shopping Channel and a house too large for its lone occupant, it spread from room to room, infiltrating every closet and cupboard. We consolidated fur coats and evening gowns, sweatpants and pyjamas, some items still sealed in plastic wrap. There were pieces we'd never seen our mother wear and others that held onto her scent, often prompting us to stop and ask, "Remember this?" We fell into a rhythmic motion as we liberated jackets, blouses and pants from hangers and pulled garments out of drawers, piling them into plastic garbage bags labelled "donate" and "trash." Each decision seemed to carry the weight of how we'd choose to remember our mother.



As we entered 2020, I took over the majority of purging and packing and made my way steadily through my mother's belongings as news of COVID-19 intensified. Having cancelled her cable TV subscription, I listened to reports on her little clock radio. (The large supply of nine-volt batteries suddenly made sense.) I often wondered what she'd make of the crazy world we found ourselves in. Would she have said, "See, I told you so?" I thought of her constantly but rarely felt her presence in the house. I hoped she had moved on. I tried to reflect upon the times my mother had been a source of comfort. The darker times, like her possessions, I tried to relinquish. I couldn't hold on to everything. I went through cabinets, closets and drawers, moving items into manageable categories, obsessing and inspecting even the tiniest objects—elastics, twist ties, string and wire, buttons, needles and thread, glass jars, plastic bags and newspapers—before deciding which garbage, recycle, donate or keep pile it belonged to. The stacks of newspapers from the 1990s proved especially helpful in the packing up stage.

The glass jars and margarine containers she had kept were another story. When did she last eat margarine? I thought, before shoving the plastic tubs and vast quantity of empty glass jars into recycling bags, then walking them down the driveway to be collected the next day.

That night, I received a phone call from my mother's next-door neighbour, Doug. "Rose, I noticed you put out some recycling in front of your parents' house. I don't think the city will pick them up like that."

"You don't?"

I felt emotional and tired. I was doing the best I could. At my request, my siblings had left me to handle the bulk of the job on my own. I needed to be in control. That

was the problem. It had been my mother's problem also. We were two people attempting to sort things into neat little boxes, but the messiness of life could never be contained. I resented her for trying to dictate my life. Now I was beginning to see she had only been trying to hold onto what she could.

On the other end of the phone, Doug awaited my response. I could tell he sensed my hesitation. "I'll just drive them to the recycling depot for you," he offered.

I blinked away tears—I didn't have to carry this weight. It wasn't mine alone. I thanked Doug for this kind gesture, and the empty reminders were soon gone.

In the end, the things I kept were few and random. Jars of buttons, which my daughter and I sorted one bored day during lockdown. Records, including Sicilian pressings, *Elvis' Christmas Album* and countless 45s—all of which I organized, matching album to sleeve to cover, attempting to find order at a time when things seemed to be spinning out of control.

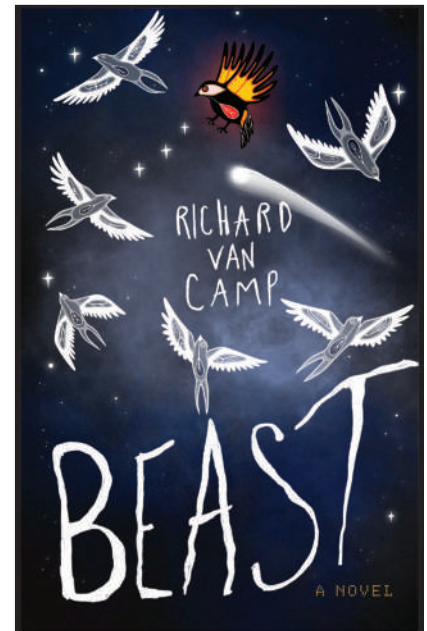
I kept the antique Singer sewing machine, the one my grandparents purchased second-hand in Montréal when they first immigrated to Canada. My mother used to make my sister and I matching outfits.

I brought it home, along with the buttons and thread and the old black metal fabric shears—small remnants of her life and the large impact she had on ours.

It wasn't all as bad as I remember ... was it?

---

*Rose Divecha is a writer residing in Hamilton, ON. She spends much of her free time on Pelee Island, reading, writing and riding her bike. Rose's personal essays focus on family and the vibrant communities she calls home.*



"Reading Richard Van Camp is like coming home. It's like pushing your chair back from the family dinner table with a full belly, sore face from laughing and eager ears still hungry for more stories. No one does horror, and no one does a funny, awkward, gangly teen hero like Richard Van Camp. Is *Beast* like the *Indigenous Stranger Things*? Kind of, but also with Ceremony, community, and even more metal! This book is as cool as an Iron Maiden album cover. It's the literary equivalent of Corey Hart and Sebastian Bach having a baby. This book is like a mixed tape with lots of AC/DC. I love this book!"

—KATHERENA VERMETTE  
author of *A Girl Called Echo*



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**Petrine**  
by rj mcdaniel

I didn't remember until I looked at my  
old Facebook messages last year.

I was seventeen, fresh out of the  
hospital.

Killing myself hadn't worked.

So I decided

I was going to live

at any cost.

I made a plan to get out.

I just didn't know how to tell anyone.

My older brother had gotten out at eighteen.

He went to the US —  
far away, almost as far as possible.

He was going to be a priest.

I thought he was a genius.

As a priest, he  
would be idolized.

The favourite.

He would never

have to come home.

I had been so sure he would help me.

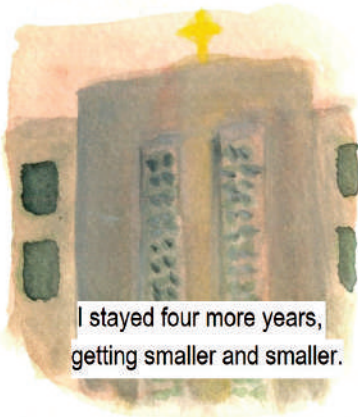
I got on the phone with him.

I don't remember the call.

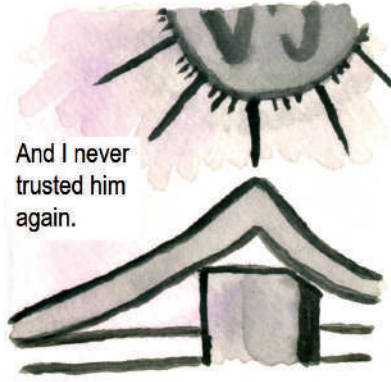
All I know is

Listen  
at nervous  
feeling.

I didn't leave.



I stayed four more years,  
getting smaller and smaller.



And I never  
trusted him  
again.



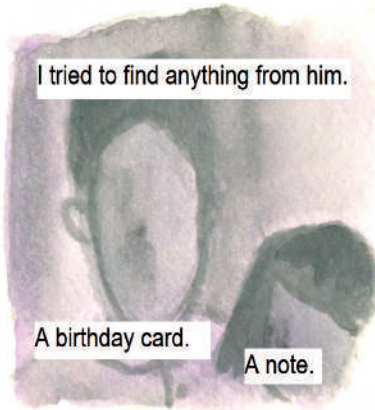
When he came back,  
shattered,  
I couldn't help.

I was afraid of him.



US

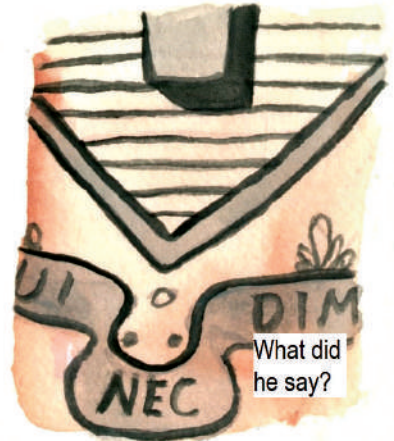
What did he say to me?



I tried to find anything from him.

A birthday card.

A note.



What did  
he say?



He is dead.



The fear blurs.



Little Wells Gate  
Regional Park  
**NO JUMP**  
**DANGEROUS**  
**CURRENTS**  
**BELOW**



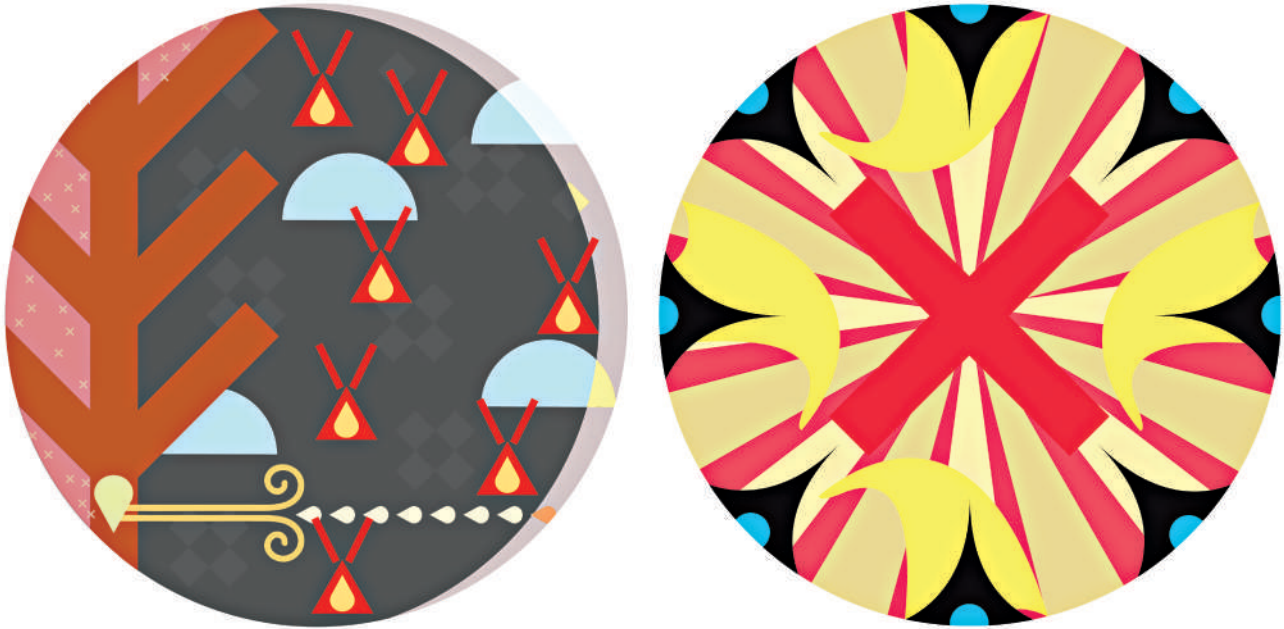
I don't

recognize it

anymore

# FINDINGS

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Maple Sugar-Siwkewikús, 2020, Birds Lay Eggs-Penamuikús, 2020, Frogs Croaking-Etquljuikús, 2020, and Leaves Full Blossom-Nipnikús, 2020, giclée prints by Jordan Bennett. These are part of a series of thirteen prints titled 13 Moons and derived from elements that were created for the 2019 Toronto Nuit Blanche, Kings and Queens of Scarborough project titled Tepknuset. For this site-specific installation, a series of large suspended fabric prints referencing porcupine quillwork and aluminum elements portraying Mi'kmaq petroglyph depictions of stars were suspended over a busy public space while thirteen circular prints, each representing a moon in the Mi'kmaq year, were mounted on the ground below. The elements of the installation spoke

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## Slow Travel, Psychic Space

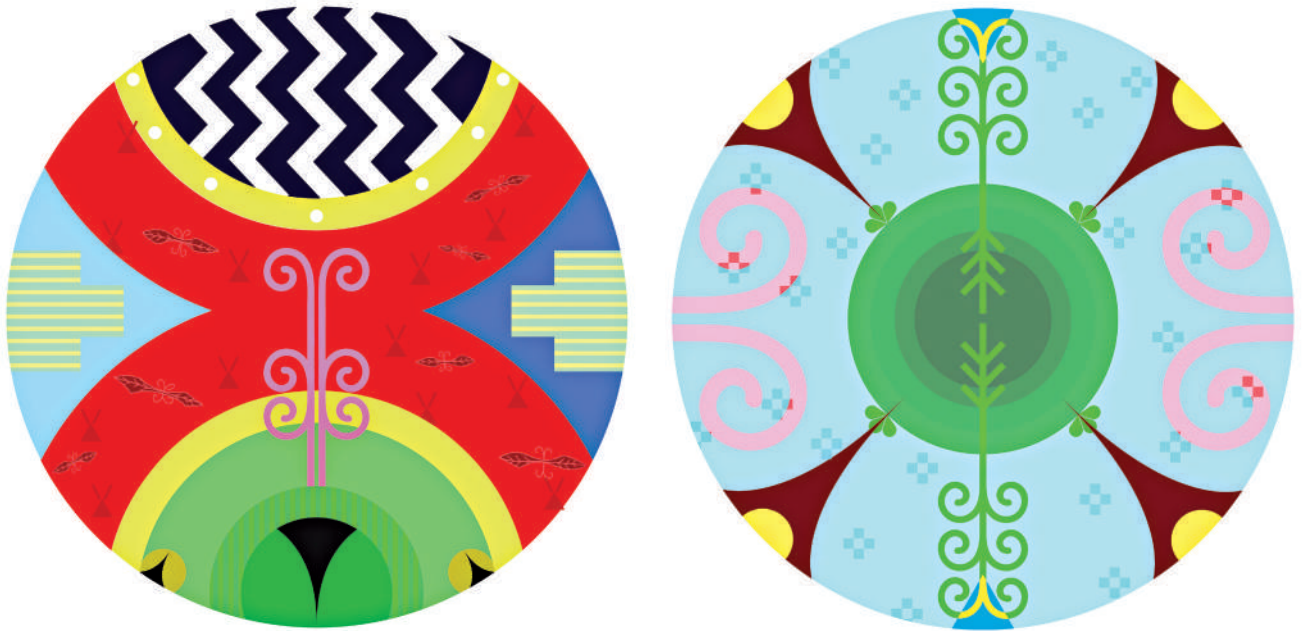
PAMELA MULLOY

*From Off the Tracks by Pamela Mulloy. Published by ECW Press in 2024. Pamela Mulloy is the author of As Little As Nothing (ECW Press) and The Deserters (Véhicule Press). She is the editor of the New Quarterly and director of the Wild Writers Literary Festival. She lives in Kitchener, ON.*

For the past twelve years, on a day late in June I have boarded a train in Kitchener, Ontario, with my daughter, Esme, the first time when she was just five years old. Two further trains and

twenty-seven hours later we disembark in Moncton. In those first moments as we roll out of town, we point out rat boxes behind the bread factory, fishermen on the shores of the Grand River, and, gaining speed, we poise ourselves at the window to catch a glimpse of what we've dubbed "the castle house," a garish paradox amid this pastoral farmland, with its battlement roof and gated boundary. Who are they trying to keep out, I wonder. From our window, we have the perfect, albeit fleeting, view of the castle house and it feels like our secret discovery, an intrusion on those owners who want to be seen and not seen.

This seeing and not seeing is what we do during this entire journey: a rusted car, a stack of firewood, an empty swimming pool. Our eyes drift to the outer landscape, to the panoramic



*of place, time, changing seasons and environment as embedded in Mi'kmaq visual culture. The piece was read as a story, but a story that could be narrated from any entry point, following shape, colour and form, to experience the narratives of land, home and our place in the universe. A giclée print is an archival-quality printed reproduction of an original artwork, made using a specialized ink spray process (giclée is French for “to spray”) developed exclusively for fine art printing. Giclée prints are printed either on canvas or fine art paper using 100% archival inks and media. The giclée print is the closest possible reproduction of an original work of art afforded by technology and has become the new print standard for artists.*

view, then flicker back to what is immediately before us, rushing by.

This back and forth, this shifting perspective is something we take for granted, so accustomed we are to this mode of travel we now consider “slow.” We are given a view, framed by the window, and have time to take it in, our eyes scanning lazily as though hypnotizing ourselves into a meditative state.

If we were a mother and daughter travelling in the nineteenth century, before trains came into popular use, we might travel by stagecoach and in so doing have an even more intimate connection to the flowers and trees outside our window. We would feel the breeze, perhaps tug at a shawl against the chill, hear voices of travellers on the road, or of farmers in passing

fields. This is a connection we rarely have now with our environment as we travel. Our aim is to move swiftly, to get to our destination as quickly as possible. Who has time to determine what sort of hawk that is flying overhead?

If we were travelling when trains came into use, we might have been agitated by the speed of this new technology, which had so many images storming past our window. We would not be able to smell the lilacs, acknowledge the faces of those standing on the roadside or in a field, see the detail in the flowers on the embankment. Victor Hugo described the view from a train in a letter dated 22 August 1837: “The flowers by the side of the road are no longer flowers but flecks, or rather streaks, of red and white ... the grain fields are great shocks of

yellow hair; field of alfalfa, long green tresses; the towns, the steeples, and the trees perform a crazy mingling dance on the horizon; from time to time, a shape, a spectre appears and disappears with lightning speed behind the windows; it's a railway guard."

In the time of pandemic slowness, when we were considering the condition of the entire planet, when we couldn't travel anywhere, I decided to go back in time, to think of the social history of train journeys, not only in longing, but also to understand what it is that we gain in movement, in travel. In doing this I wanted to think about what we see, and how we observe, on such journeys. I was thinking of that imagined stagecoach journey, and the actual train trips I've taken, and those I hope to take. There

## LENDING LIBRARY, HEAVEN

*From The Chrome Chair by Danielle Devereaux. Published by Riddle Fence Publishing in 2024. Danielle Devereaux is the author of the chapbook Cardiogram (Baseline Press). Her poetry has been published in Arc Poetry, the Fiddlehead and elsewhere. She lives in Saint John's, NL.*

Heaven's library held copies of every book that made a ding 'til the tech-wings got wind of e-readers—*My God, think of the space we'll save!*—modern thinking isn't really His thing, but real estate was at a premium.

Some rare first editions were dropped back to earth, appearing in attics and Sally Anns, fun for the auctioneers and *Antiques Roadshow* fans; the bulk tucked in storage. Recall notices were sent to all library patrons, which

went well (they'd grown used to letting go), until Hitchcock sent back *Silent Spring* with pages missing. Horrified, the head archivist called Jesus Christ, going on and on—the value of the printed page, respect for public property. *The dead, she wailed, should know better by now, than the bloody*

*living!* Back at the office, Jesus finds the flask in his file cabinet.

*Listen, Hitch, the librarians are pitching a fit. What in Pa's name were you thinking?* Stroking the hat in his lap, Hitchcock slowly shakes his head. *It's that first chapter. The one where no birds sing. Christ, I just can't get enough of it.*

are also fictional and remembered conversations with fellow travellers over the years, those casual, intimate, sometimes intense exchanges that can come through travel, when something in us has loosened. All that was beyond us as we sat in our homes, and so this remembering and reflecting felt all the more urgent.

On our annual journey, the train is often running late, and as it moves through the dry Ontario countryside, I begin to worry about the connection to Montreal at Union Station in Toronto. My eyes settle on the parched Ontario farmland and I am reminded of my own childhood summers on my grandparents' farm in Prince Edward Island: the dry heat, the dust in the yard, the scratch of hay against my bare legs as I hoisted bales onto the trailer. My daughter's summers are marked by travel—to one set of grandparents in the Maritimes, then later to the other set in England. When we journey this way, our backpacks are filled with books, notebook and pens, a computer for movie watching later on. Our trip begins with the stillness that allows us to indulge in these pursuits. In this age of air travel, it is but a slow swagger across the landscape. We can read, write, think, or daydream. Later we will succumb to the screen.

Coming into Toronto, there is an abrupt loss of green, the savagery and banality of this entrance into the city—a mountain of broken pallets, gas canisters lined up like soldiers, rows of truck containers, loading docks, roads criss-crossing, a patch of wild grass, electrical pylons like giants passing rope to each other. The entrance to a city by train is rarely marked by beauty. Instead, there is a messiness to it that feels true and authentic of what's really going on, the functions laid bare. Like the tangle of shoes at the back door that says, yes, we live here.

A quick change of train at Union Station with my daughter in charge of counting bags—an annual responsibility first assigned when she was five—while I hold the tickets and determine our car number. We find our seats, claim what we need from our bags for this five-hour leg. Time feels fluid and restlessness sets in as I flitter from writing to reading, and for her, a video game or listening to music while reading. At times we stare out the window in a dreamy state, the view ordinary and familiar. We don't fully settle in, for the coach is full and noisier

than we want it to be and we are anticipating the next train we'll board in Montreal, the one where we will be in a cabin.

That train is called the Ocean, the longest-running named train in Canada. In 2003 it celebrated its centenary, and in the hundred plus years it's been operating, it has had the same route: Montreal to Halifax. On this train, we often see the poet Zach Wells, whom I know from my work. He works on the Ocean as a service manager, and it has been our ritual to seek him out. When he is not working on our train, we are disappointed. Once, when we were sitting in the dining car, he stopped to chat and in the midst of our conversation we heard the voice of the engineer on Zach's radio announce that there was a moose on the right side of the train, and he pointed it out as we flew by it. It is this moose I think about when I remember Victor Hugo's sentiment—catching a glimpse that becomes a blur we barely register.

“What is it,” a friend asked, “that draws you to trains?” A question for which the answer seemed both obvious and ungraspable. In this time of the pandemic there will be no train journeys so I am left to consider this question. Yes, indeed, why trains? I have no ready answer for my friend and so when I can't explore the question by travelling again, I decide that I will explore it through past experiences, lost opportunities.

Why trains? I expect it is, for me, to be moving, to be going somewhere. And I anticipate that this act of remembering and imagining trains and travel will find it to be true. The anticipation of travel, as well as the looking back, tends to take me partway into the journey. I enter this psychic space and feel both the calm and thrill of actual travel. This compulsive imagining is mind-travelling, a kind of simulation of the actual journey. Fanciful but effective nonetheless.

In Montreal we enter our cabin, a bench on one side that will turn into two bunks, space under it for our suitcases, a narrow cupboard where we can hang any garments if we had any that needed hanging, and a bathroom where you can brush your teeth while you sit on the loo if you are so inclined. In a wall pocket by the window there is a booklet with historical or cultural tidbits about each of the twenty-eight stops on

our route. Number 9, Trois-Pistoles, Quebec, Mile 161.7: “Legend has it that a French sailor passing through the region in the 17th century lost his silver goblet, worth three gold pistols (an old type of coin) in the nearby river. That's how a very picturesque name was given to the river and later to this small industrial town on the Lower St. Lawrence.” Number 27, mile 0.4: “Truro is home to the famous Stanfield Underwear Company, which invented cotton stretch knitwear and the trap door in long johns...”

Soon after the train leaves Montreal on the last trip we took before the pandemic we are called to dinner for the first sitting. We make our way to the dining car, tickets in hand, and are seated, a table for four with a white linen tablecloth and napkins. We are joined by a woman in her late sixties, a professor of anthropology, and then Heather, an administrator at a hospital (overqualified, she assured us) sits down, wide-eyed and chatty. She tells us about clearing out her father's basement after he died and finding live bullets from World War II. Then she talks about the Halifax Riots on VE-Day, when soldiers and sailors waiting to depart for Europe rioted after the fearful city declared a no-liquor policy.

The anthropologist, whose name we never find out, tells us that she makes this journey twice a year, from Vancouver to Halifax. She is terrified of flying. She once made a trip from Washington State to China by land and sea—two ships and several trains. On one trip the return sea voyage was cancelled and she was stranded in Beijing. She called her sister-in-law in Newfoundland who agreed to fly all the way to Beijing to accompany her onto a plane. They spent a week together in the city, then with the help of five Ativan she boarded the plane and slept most of the way. Once, when she did wake, she told her sister-in-law that she would need a wheelchair to get off the plane. We talk to these women about my daughter's interest in social history and her passion for Ruth Goodman's living history documentaries on the BBC.

For that hour we are dinner companions, revealing more of ourselves than intended. We eat our dinner, drink our wine, while outside the Quebec landscape is turned a crimson orange by the setting sun.



On these journeys we are often taken to a table of four and joined by two strangers. The forced intimacy differs from the sense of separateness we feel on the rest of the trip. I liken it to stagecoach journeys, where conversation was said to be natural and expected.

The stagecoach encouraged rapport because the passengers were snugly packed inside and out—with some sitting on top or next to the

coachman. This gave everyone a sense of shared experience, travellers, coachman, and guard alike. A passenger might call out to the driver to check on the weather, or make an observation on passing crops, or ask a question about accommodations. There would surely be the feeling of having more control over the journey than we do now in a train or plane. Could we ask to stop if we felt sick, if we wanted to take a closer look at the brook we've just crossed? For stagecoach travellers there was a more immediate connection to each other and to the passing landscape.

For passengers on the first trains in Europe, which were designed with isolated compartments without a corridor, the train guards and porters were physically separated from them during the trip, so there was no opportunity to point out landmarks or respond to questions about arrival times. In addition, the train itself was too loud and too fast to be conducive to much banter, and most conversations were limited to initial niceties and requests to open or close the window. This soon brought about a social shift that was frequently written about in publications such as *The Railway Traveller's Handy Book*: "Generally speaking, the occupants of a railway carriage perform the whole of the journey in silence; but if one passenger be more loquaciously inclined than the rest, he is soon silenced by abrupt or tart replies..." Of her journey in a railway compartment, the American writer Harriet Beecher Stowe observed that "a stranger might travel all through England, from one end to the other and not be on conversing terms with a person in it."

This was in first class. In third class the mood was altogether more raucous as noted by French novelist Alphonse Daudet: "I'll never forget my trip to Paris in a third-class carriage... in the midst of drunken sailors singing, big fat peasants sleeping with their mouths open like those of dead fish, little old ladies with their baskets, children, fleas, wet nurses, the whole paraphernalia of the carriage of the poor with the odour of pipe smoke, brandy, garlic sausage and wet straw. I think I'm still there."

In North America the carriages were designed with an open interior, benches on both sides and a coal stove in the middle. Charles Dickens describes them as being "like shabby omnibuses, but larger" and was struck by the freedom of speech that prevailed where the conversation could range from politics to banking to the price of cotton. "Everybody talks to you, or to anybody else who hits his fancy."

## DRACAENA

*From Teeth by Dallas Hunt. Published by Nightwood Editions in 2024. Dallas Hunt is Cree and a member of Wapsewsiipi (Swan River First Nation) in Treaty Eight territory in Alberta. He is the author of Creland (Nightwood Editions), Storytelling Violence (ARP Books) and Awâsis and the World-Famous Bannock (Highwater Press).*

broken toenails, bone  
broth for lunch, a smile

a chandelier, a balcony  
a respite, where embarrassments

and conversations  
flow freely

missing sadness  
because it makes you

know what loss is.  
yearning for planets

colliding, a horse  
sinking in mud

a tipped-over  
trashcan feeding

the earth, with metal  
teeth the mother

of the world  
pollution from

earth affects venus  
an eleven-year-old

taught me that shortly  
before kicking a soccer ball in my face



Train travel today carries some of both these attitudes. Once in my twenties when travelling the Ocean on my own, I entered the packed dining car and, along with the man before me in the queue, was shown to a table where two men were sitting, an MP who was on his way home to New Brunswick and a truck driver going on holiday. The young man who had joined the table with me, who the others thought was my partner and whose face was painted blue, had come directly to the train after the Bastille Day celebrations. The MP kept the conversation moving along as best as one could with such disparate

company, especially when one of the passengers is a blue-faced man, and it turned out to be a jolly evening with conversation zig-zagging across various points of interest.

We have become accustomed to the imposed company that comes with travel, the mixing of strangers, the confined space, yet the ability to go to the dining car and engage in such a fundamental ritual as eating together creates a small society. Sometimes we are in solitude in this society, sometimes we make connections.



## FIVE BUSINESSES BETWEEN 118TH AVE AND LITTLE ITALY

*From Moving to Delilah by Catherine Owen. Published by Freeband Books in 2024. Catherine Owen is the author of fifteen collections of poetry and prose. She lives in Edmonton, AB.*

### 1 Fast Shoe Repair

Forty years it's been here, the red stucco proverbial hole in the wall, wall to wall with leather slabs, rubber soles, steel machines, shelves of un-picked-up shoes, a wonky chair by the door to slip on your fixed pair and a cash box (bills only and not even up front) on the scarred countertop. Gino used to run it but retired, finally, to dance, and now Manny from Ghana has taken over, though he tires already of the cheap, everyone wanting everything for less and how, he says, am I to cover the bills, to keep paying for the lights to stay on.

### 3 Norwood Dental Centre

The dentist of my childhood was like this: about prizes (though the plastic cowboy & Indian sets have been nixed), about pleasures (hand-held Frogger then, now Netflix, vibrating chairs, weighted blankets). This office even more affable, with its appellations of "friend," its offerings of coffees before your root canal, though in the end, as even the fish in their waiting room tank may sense, it's still about pain: its relief, its return.

### 5 Zocalos

A dream of exotic, bright, when melancholic you can just walk into this world, there will be a ceramic parrot for your sorrow or plants in tiny pots shaped like turtles, a plethora of lush green, beaten tin mobiles, fountains, hummingbird stakes for your roses or just—sit with an apricot beer, a muffin from the sunrise and, amid other dreamers, those who hold out gardens as hopes, who know a dose of colour cures—sometimes it's simple to heal awhile and you will never emerge sadder than you were.

### 2 Pink Polish Nail Salon

None of them have names we know in that soft Vietnamese tongue, but their friendliness extends through the white room with its phalanx of massage chairs, wall of rainbow-hued bottles, Plexiglass shields, a TV playing infomercials, the usual stations for feet and hands and in the back, the secret ministrations of the face.

Always a vague guilt, whether with a shoe shine or pedi, at participating in a hierarchy of un-absolvable depths, but one pays to feel good and so, the limb extends, is scrubbed, trimmed, rubbed and painted, for a time, a colour that reminds you of youth.

### 4 Wee Book Inn (shut down in 2020)

There is a cat, of course, that wanders the stacks, plops, basketed by the till, and the predictable Rod McKuens, fantasy pulp, self-help tomes. Music bios are their forte, classic Canadian novels, even forgotten vinyl, and always the one crony blabbing, the kid trying to snag a buck off a set of his grandad's Britannicas, the reader who never purchases, just stands entranced in the aisles, held by the slow bird-flutter of the pages.

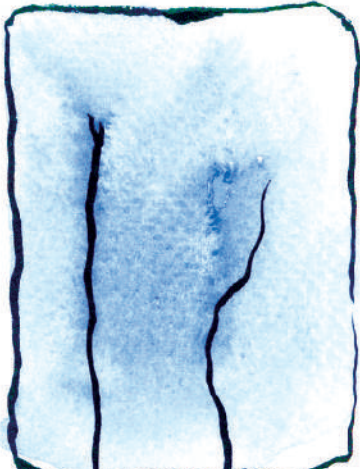
# Keep reading



From *Something, Not Nothing* by Sarah Leavitt. Published by Arsenal Pulp Press in 2024. Sarah Leavitt is the author of *Tangles: A Story About Alzheimer's*, *My Mother and Me* (Freehand Books) and *Agnes, Murderess* (Freehand Books). Find her at [sarableavitt.com](http://sarableavitt.com).



The horses  
don't change  
anything.



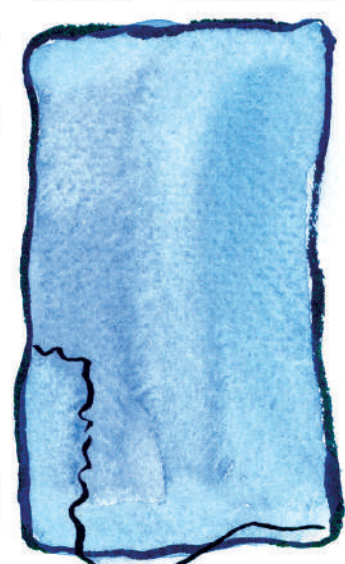
Everyone  
who died  
is still  
dead.



I continue  
to despair

I continue  
to rage. So  
does everyone.

But  
keep  
reading.



Here is a horse.



# Seasonal Attraction to the Void

ANN POWERS

*Excerpted from Traveling: On the Path of Joni Mitchell by Ann Powers ©2024. Published by Dey Street Books, an imprint of William Morrow/HarperCollins Publishers Ltd. All rights reserved. Ann Powers is a music critic and correspondent at NPR.*

“River” is the kind of pop song that serves a cultural need. An argument for loneliness, it gives the listener permission to openly mope. Organized cheer can be oppressive, especially in winter’s darkest days. This carol eradicates the cinnamon scent of happy holidays with a shot of freezing air; a nonjoiner can hum it to herself when everybody else is holly jolly-ing. Over the years, its uses have extended beyond the season. It’s a staple at public memorial services and in private mourning sessions, and within Hollywood rom-coms like *Love, Actually*, in which the “cold English wife” played by Emma Thompson declares that Mitchell’s music taught her how to feel. The realization that you’ve lost something, the admission that you’ll never get it back: these are just some of the emotional crises “River” has come to represent. Joni Mitchell didn’t necessarily mean to surrender this divulgence of her own alienation to the entire world, but the world took it, and now it flows like the water underneath a stream’s gelid surface, moving where it is pulled.

At its source, though, “River” was something specific, and when Mitchell released it in 1971, new. Its core of cool, formed by the limpid melody and floating rhythm and a chorus built around the hushed word “wish,” prevents full immersion in any one emotion. This makes it a quintessential Mitchell song: an inquiry, as she also famously described her open-tuning chords. For a woman to make such a scrupulous investigation of her own sense of stymied dislocation in the world was daring; Nina Simone had done it, as had Billie Holiday, but the rock world had little room for this. “River” resists catharsis, even resolution. It takes up the problem of sadness, instead of creating a comfortable place for it.

*I’m so hard to handle*, Joni sings, and then comes that line. She pulls in her breath in the middle of

the phrase as if she knows it’s a risk to say it. *I’m selfish and I’m sad*. It’s the kind of thing a woman says in real life. “I’m selfish” is what you tell a lover to get them to not walk out the door. “I’m sad” is the cry you sound in the silence after it’s shut. There’s so much in that word combination. Does being selfish guarantee Mitchell will be sad? It is sad to be selfish? Selfish to be sad? The rest of “River” undulates around this uncertainty.

Mitchell’s delivery, powered by the breath in and the breath out, makes you think about how “selfish” so often passes judgment on “sad,” especially when applied to a woman. A woman needs to hold her sorrow in place as in a picture frame, containing it so that it kindles just enough sympathy in others, but never letting it push beyond its justified edges. That would be selfish. Tantrums, crying jags the children might hear, days spent in bed, suicide. Sadness from women, when not picturesque, disrupts in dangerous ways.

What makes “River” so powerful is how it makes us think about being sad: about the crises sorrow perpetuates, the urgency with which it takes over and the energy it takes to fight back. To be selfish and sad is to demand the right to negative emotions while recognizing the harm they do to oneself and others. “River’s” tight circle of a melody and the way Mitchell sings it embody an inner battle for composure. Her voice surges, then pulls sternly back. The piano lines are grounded in simple chord changes, with every right-hand flourish slightly restrained by a stern quarter note from the left hand.

“River” captures what it feels like to be sad, but also to question one’s right to be sad, to long for and simultaneously worry about the urge to get lost in the sorrow. It’s also about wanting to get away from others who see you as sad, and from the circumstances reinforcing your sorrow. It’s this song that most directly captures the mood of the epigrammatic writing of Mitchell’s literary twin, Joan Didion, the queen of migraines and malaise. It especially recalls her classic 1970 novel of women’s fatal sadness, *Play It as It Lays*. In sparse prose, that book relates the story of Maria Wyeth, the female Hamlet of swinging ’60s Hollywood, driven to quiet madness by her inability to act when life throws disaster in her wake. “I have trouble with *as it was*,” Maria Wyeth famously says, relating her story of a lost/abandoned daughter and a bad marriage and dead



parents and a friend's suicide (which she assisted), telling her story from some anonymous clinic for the mentally broken down. This broken beauty inhabits sadness because she can't do anything else; she can't even tell a story straight. But in that, she's an ordinary woman (qualifying terms: white, heterosexual, wealthy, desired) of her time.

In those days sadness unto death, or at least unto inertia, was a cultural marker that made the isolation of middle-class white women within suburban homes seem glamorous instead of pathetic. It made their husbands feel needed without really asking them to solve anything. Popular culture offered a steady supply of midcentury modern neurasthenics and hysterics. I'm thinking about the death-driven heroines of suburbanite novels by John Updike and John Cheever and Richard Yates (and that boy's girl Didion), and of Peggy Lee singing "Is That All There Is?" in her Valium alto, and of Marilyn Monroe overdosing in her Brentwood bungalow. In these songs and films and lives, sadness was a form of protest that negated the self. A river you can skate away on doesn't really get you anywhere, does it? Except alone, for a few precious moments, in the cold.

"River" expresses an attraction to the void, but Joni wanted to be sad and to stay alive, moving through it. In another song on *Blue*—"Little Green," the one about the daughter Joni had left behind, trusting that the baby would be better without her—Mitchell uses the word "sad" again, but she finds a way out of it this time. "You sign all the papers in the family name," she sings. "You're sad and you're sorry, but you're not ashamed." At first her singing recalls what she does on "River." "Sad" feels like a breath in; "sorry" a breath out. But then "not ashamed" comes in a burst of air, burying the others. In this lament for her Kelly Dale, Mitchell confines sadness to the deep layers of her consciousness. "Sorry" says goodbye to the pain, and "not ashamed" is what Joni will embody after doing so. But in "River" there's no such resolution. "Selfish" and "sad" circle around each other. How, the song asks, can a woman survive the grief her life creates without it burying her? How can I be sad and be a good person, a good woman, too?

The sadness in "River" or *Play It as It Lays* is the kind you can't clean up. It stays in the water. The women's liberation movement identified it clearly but couldn't eradicate it, either, though it did give some women a way to imagine themselves beyond it. Still, even today women (many of them white,

heterosexual, middle-class, desired) are writing novels with antiheroines who stay in bed for a year, and essay collections with titles like *So Sad Today*. These contemporary takes on the subject frame it in relation to the self-fictionalization that happens online and the perilous recalibrations of now-ubiquitous psych meds. Time has shown that liberation is a repetitive process. "I think of how sadness can be an inheritance, a feminist inheritance," the theorist Sara Ahmed wrote in her 2017 book *Living a Feminist Life*. She also called sadness a pedagogy: a way of teaching about the ways of the world. The feminist encounter with sadness, like Mitchell's music, recognizes the persistence of the problem of *as it was*.



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## Precipices, Brinks and Finding the Moose

SARAH COX

*Excerpt from Signs of Life: Field Notes from the Frontlines of Extinction copyright © 2024 by Sarah Cox. Reprinted by permission of Goose Lane Editions. Sarah Cox has won numerous awards for her journalism and writing. She is the author of Breaching the Peace (UBC Press). She lives in Victoria, BC.*

In the Mi'kmaw language, the word for moose is tia'm. Labrador spoke about how losing mainland moose represents a loss of culture for the Mi'kmaq, who inhabit North America's eastern coast. "The bones were used for tools, the antlers were used for tools," he said. "Their hides were used for clothing and shelter. Everything was used. Even the intestines were cleaned out and used. The hooves we used for medicine. Moose would feed a lot of people. It was for survival. It wasn't for the sport of hunting."

Labrador also lamented the increasing scarcity of high-quality birchbark used to make traditional canoes and moose calls. He had just finished constructing a sixteen-foot traditional canoe he built with his daughter during a residency at the Lunenburg School of the Arts. The workshop, open to the public, presented an educational opportunity. Sometimes, he said, he spent more time talking about his craft than practising it. But that didn't

bother Labrador, who'd trained as a teacher and was eager to share his knowledge and skills.

The canoe sat in Labrador's driveway on wooden racks. Darker birchbark demarcated its bottom half while lighter bark framed the top. Step-like seams of black spruce gum from the sap of a spruce tree divided the canoe into sections and framed etchings. The etchings included handprints and footprints, representing children, and a sun-like symbol, representing the seven districts of the Mi'kmaw Nation.

Sometimes, Labrador said, it took several days to find a good tree for a canoe after travelling through the forest and paddling lakes and rivers. Increasingly, birch trees had inconsistent bark. And too many layers peeled off in the summer. He made moose calls from bark left over from building canoes and brought out one he had fashioned the previous day from thick bark, peeled from just the right tree.

The cone-shaped moose call was simple, yet intricate. Each one took Labrador a full day to make from birchbark, a supple sapling shaped into the bottom rim, and honey-coloured spruce root, boiled and whittled, for whip stitches. The Canadian Museum of History, near Ottawa—which had one of Labrador's eighteen-foot, decorated, ocean-going birchbark canoes on display in the Canadian history hall—purchased some of the moose calls. Private buyers snapped up dozens more.

Labrador hadn't seen a mainland moose for almost forty years when he chanced upon one on the highway near his home. Hit by a tractor trailer, the moose didn't survive. He'd spotted moose droppings, he ventured, perhaps fifteen years earlier, maybe more. I asked him what it was like to make traditional moose calls knowing they wouldn't be used to call Nova Scotia moose.

"I've known this for many, many years. It bothers me a lot. But we just try to tell our story and let people know. But without governments doing their part . . ." Labrador's voice trailed off. "It's an uphill challenge because you have all these industries going against you. And the government is basically in the middle. Money talks. . . For us, it doesn't matter what government is in there. We're still trying to protect and preserve." At Lori's urging, he lifted the moose call to his lips, tilted it to the sky, and blew. A deep honking bellow filled the air. It was rutting season, but the woods were silent.



## Mino-dibikad o'o waawaateg

NIIGAAN SINCLAIR

*Excerpted from Winipêk by Niigaan Sinclair. Copyright © 2024 Niigaan Sinclair. Published by McClelland & Stewart, a division of Penguin Random House Canada Limited. Reproduced by arrangement with the Publisher. All rights reserved. Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair is Anishinaabe (St. Peter's/Little Peguis) and is a regular commentator on Indigenous issues on CTV, CBC and APTN.*

*Mino-dibikad o'o waawaateg.* I first heard this phrase on a Greyhound bus as a kid travelling to Winnipeg from Ashern, Manitoba.

"It's a nice night for the northern lights," said this kind grandmother who sat beside me. As we talked more, I asked her what language that was. She said Anishinaabe—my language. I wish I could remember her name. I was eleven.

My sister and I would travel on the bus south for three hours to see our father every second weekend. I don't know if that would be safe anymore but in the 1980s, we thought nothing about it.

On Friday evenings, especially during the autumn months and leading into the winter, I had a front row seat to watch the northern lights. As I watched the yellow and green swirls dance across the sky, I remember being in awe. I recall thinking it was better than the four channels we had on TV. I also remember trying to figure out why they were so bright.

For the Anishinaabe, my people, the northern lights are messages from our ancestors. It is said that the lights in the sky are reflections of a great fire lit by Waynabozhoo (also known as Nanabozho or Nanabush), the first human. It is also said that the motion and beauty of these lights is our relatives dancing as they travel in the spiritual realm.

When Cree elders see the northern lights, they announce: "*Cîpayak nîmibitowak!*" ("The spirits are dancing!"). Children are then told to not whistle at the sky or they risk being taken to the spirit world before they are ready. Inuit knowledge keepers call the northern lights *aksarnirq*, meaning "playing with a ball"—referring to the games played by spirits in the sky. Dakota and Lakota people say northern lights are the spirits

of generations to come. Any child born while the sky is lit up is seen as a teacher.

Dene people say you can “hear” the northern lights crackling. The great Cree astronomer Wilfred Buck once told me that his grandparents told him that you can “smell” them. Tlicho people say you can call them to come to you by rubbing your fingernails together.

In all explanations, the northern lights are framed as indications of distant and loved relations, combined elements of earth and sky, and creations of light and electricity. It’s not enough to call these Indigenous theories “legends.” They are parts of truth—like cups of water in an ocean of knowledge. Another word for this is science, Indigenous science.

Indigenous science was on display again in March 2023, as the Manitoba sky was lit up with aurora borealis. Let me explain what I mean.

Anyone reading the news would have heard that NASA astronomers spotted a giant “hole” in the sun’s corona. According to the science, “holes” in the sun are generally harmless and cyclical, but this gap was huge (some twenty to thirty times the size of Earth) and was witnessed ejecting powerful, high-speed solar winds of charged electrons, protons, and alpha particles with high kinetic energy.

These waves might be lethal for humans if not for the Earth’s atmosphere, which protects and deflects these particles toward our northern and southern poles. As the particles collide with gas in our planet’s sky, colours are released from the reaction, creating light in waves across the sky. The most common colour is produced by oxygen (yellow and green) and the farther north and south, the more you see.

In other words, the northern lights are a message from a very distant and old ancestor that teaches us about life, power, and creation—the mysterious ingredients that make up the universe. Whether particles striking the atmosphere or a great fire by Nanabozho, both are scientific explanations and equal sides of the truth of science. All of science.

There has been so much death in Indigenous communities in my lifetime. I’ve written so many posts on social media and columns about elders who have passed away I’ve lost count. It seems like while communities were able to protect knowledge keepers and language speakers from COVID-19, we weren’t able to stop time from

taking them. With them has gone so much of the history, science, and stories in our cultures.

A friend said to me recently my generation are the adults now. We are the ones making the decisions, stepping into the leadership positions, and struggling politically and socially for an Indigenous future. For some, this has happened earlier than for others, but those of my age group are in these positions in our families, our communities, and society now. The truth is: I still feel like that young Anishinaabe kid on the bus, watching the northern lights with awe. So unsure, uncertain and wondering what it all means.

Some days, I hear that kind grandmother’s voice on that bus in my ears, teaching me my language. It’s probably because she’s still around, dancing in the sky above me. I hope she knows how much I appreciated her words that one Friday night.

Mino-dibikad o’o waawaateg.



## STAGES OF NOMENCLATURE

*Common names of native plants compiled from The Flora and Fauna of Coastal British Columbia and the Pacific Northwest by Collin Varner, published by Heritage House in 2018.*

Enchanter’s nightshade (*Circaea alpina*)  
Fool’s onion (*Brodiaea hyacinthina*)  
Leatherleaf saxifrage (*Leptarrhena pyrolifolia*)  
Pearly everlasting (*Anaphalis margaritacea*)  
One-sided wintergreen (*Orthilia secunda*)  
Ladies’ tresses (*Spiranthes romanzoffiana*)  
Dog vomit slime mold (*Fuligo septica*)  
Stringy butt rot (*Perenniporia subacida*)  
Turkish washcloth (*Mastocarpus papillatus*)  
Siberian miner’s lettuce (*Claytonia sibirica*)  
Giant vetch (*Vicia gigantea*)  
Manroot (*Marah oreganus*)  
Alpine pussytoes (*Antennaria alpina*)  
Heart-leaved twayblade (*Neottia cordata*)  
Alcohol inky (*Coprinus atramentarius*)  
Fried chicken mushroom (*Lycophyllum decastes*)  
Falsebox (*Paxistima myrsinites*)  
Carbon antlers (*Xylaria hypoxylon*)  
Fluted black elfin saddle (*Hevelia lacunosa*)  
Seabeach sandwort (*Honckenya peploides*)  
Star-flowered solomon’s seal (*Maianthemum stellatum*)  
Artist’s conk (*Ganoderma applanatum*)

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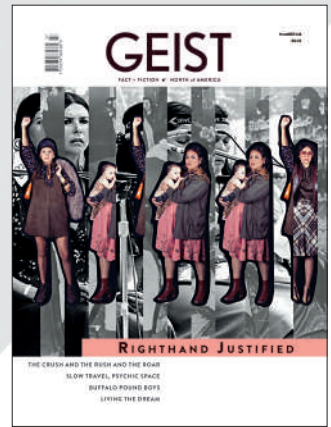
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**Living the Dream**

SHELLEY WOOD

My gloved fingers are deep in a soured pleat of flesh that has not known air or light for years when the body drops past the south-facing window of the cardiac ward. Our second jumper of the year and it's only January. Another doctor, that's what the other trainees will say. One of us. I hadn't seen the first; I'd just come off call and was snatching a scrap of sleep.

This one I see. My hand continues its grim probe, but I am averting my eyes from my patient, his antipathy and shame, so that the body, falling, cleaves my peripheral vision and I know without turning to the window that a life is plunging past. By the time I extract my hand and dash over, the life will be no more.

They'll say she hoisted herself over the ledge of our apartment building next door and into the knife-cold sky. One of us, they'll say, because despite the cigarette burns in the Astroturf and the Doritos bags drifting under the HVAC units of the rooftop "garden," it's doctors who live here, most of them foreign medical residents. Farahs and Yuliyas and Sunils, thousands of miles from home and mere steps from our place of work.



They'll say she wore her white coat, which flapped and billowed as she fell so that everyone would know: she was one of us.

As the body is falling, I'm murmuring about glucose tests, coronary plaques and weight loss. Fruits and vegetables and physical activity. My patient huffs—part sigh, part smoker's growl. He has already complained about my accent. I want to speak to the doctor.

I palpate for a femoral pulse and say it again: I am the doctor.

What I'm thinking, when the body slices past—snowflakes clinging to the sweep of her hair—is of sleeping. Of

nightshifts and fellowship interviews, of securing a permanent placement. Of getting to stay.

And I'm thinking of my mother, waking up eleven time zones away, window thrown wide to the fleeting cool of morning. Hunger already gathering like a punch. My proud mother, stirring in her thin bed, whose first thought of the day will be for her only daughter, two oceans away in America. A physician in New York City. Living the dream.

Are there no REAL doctors at this hospital? These were the first words uttered by my patient when he woke from the anaesthetic, a rough seam of wire cinching his rib cage shut over his heart's new plumbing. Now, under my weary

hands, he grunts through his teeth to show he's heard me and glares at the ceiling as if imagining for himself a life lived better, a different path. One that could have led him anywhere but here.

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*Shelley Wood works as the Editorial Director for the Cardiovascular Research Foundation in New York, NY. Her short fiction and essays have appeared in lit journals and newspapers across Canada, and her most recent novel, The Leap Year Gene, was published in August 2024.*

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## SECOND PRIZE

# Desperate

MJ MALLECK

Hudson was just a few days old when a rock fell from the sky and almost killed him in the crib. I was still bleeding, asleep like the devil, as the roof caved in. It was Ma who heard and found the big chunk beside him. She picked up my screaming baby, dusted him off and shook me awake. Figured it was Mike, that idiot, finally showing up. He used to throw gravel at my window in the night. But there were the stars twinkling in through the roof, the wood splinters on my bed. It wasn't Mike wanted to get my attention.

There's not much to see in Desperate, Ohio. People in small towns all say that, but this postcard is proof. There're only two postcards you can buy in Desperate. One of the "Welcome to Desperate" billboard outside of town, and this one here. The one of the two FBI agents standing guard on our front lawn.

In the morning, Pa turned the rock over in his hands. It was deep black, and his fingers got all smutty. He said it was a burned-up piece of an airplane. But there was a sparkle in it, like it brought down some of those stars. I was going to keep it as a souvenir. To remember Hudson by.

Ma heard on the radio about the meteorite, and the number to call if any more pieces were found. We weren't even supposed to touch it.

"See if the Ruskies are blasting at us," figured Pa.

Once we phoned the FBI, we weren't allowed to leave the house. It was Joe from the General Store took the picture of the agents standing on our lawn. Waiting for the Governor to come and get the rock.



Mike Hudson's timing is bad. When he does something stupid, like robbing the Watson's place or stealing Guthro's car, he always gets caught. His bad timing is why I got pregnant. We had a big fight about naming the baby.

"I'm not giving him some Hollywood name," I said. "But Hudson I like."

Only for a week or so, till he got adopted out.

Course Mike showed up right after the FBI. He didn't phone. Pa would've told him not to show his dirty face. He just parked on the curb like he owned the place. Didn't even bring flowers.

“What the hell?” he asked Joe, who spat on the sidewalk and turned away. No one in Desperate likes Mike. His feet weren’t even to the steps, Ma said, when the agents grabbed him. She saw them lift Mike clear off the ground, saw his legs kick like Hudson’s when he cries.

“Let me see Rock,” he yelled. “Rock!”

It would’ve made a more interesting postcard, Mike being carted away by those men. But I’m glad for

Hudson—or whoever he is called now—that Joe didn’t take it. Imagine seeing your dad flailing like an idiot on a Desperate postcard.

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*MJ Malleck grew up on the Canada-USA border and still likes her weather report in Fahrenheit. Her work has appeared in EVENT and the Dalhousie Review. She is an associate editor at The / tēnz/ Review. Find her at [mjmallick.com](http://mjmallick.com).*

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### THIRD PRIZE

## Should I Be Worried?

CARRIE MAC

Wren wandered outside to look at the northern lights and hasn’t come back. I joined her out there for five minutes or so, and saw nothing but a bunch of people admiring a thin, undulating smudge of pale green above the shipping cranes, so I went back to bed. The next-door neighbour says Wren told him that no way was she missing out on the most spectacular show of aurora borealis in five hundred years, and that she was headed for the park, hoping to catch them dancing more enthusiastically over the harbour there. The woman at the end of the block was up with her baby, pacing at the window. She says Wren waved at her as she ran by. The man who sleeps by the CN Rail fence with his pit bulls says that when the dogs heard her coming, they got excited. He let them out of the tent so they could get one of the treats she keeps in her pockets. That was a few moments before the sky cracked open and the star matter fell.

The clatter of all that diamond light hitting the roof woke me up. The cat freaked out and wedged herself into the hole Wren kicked in the wall that time the truck convoy drove down 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue, barging into our neighbourhood with their Fuck Trudeau signs and anti-vax rhetoric and their god-damned Canadian flags, wrecking it for all the sensible people. Anyway, the cat has been in there for the two days since. I put down some tuna to coax her out, but so far she’s ignored it.

News reports say the particulates fell for less than three seconds, even though the damage to roads and crops will take years to fix. I watched satellite footage of the instant the aurora borealis turned on their edge and sliced right through the exosphere, as though determined to pull us out before we died inside the mother. There’s no way of telling if that’s not, in fact, what happened to Wren.

The CN Rail security cameras captured those two pit bulls looking for another treat, their big blocky heads tilted



toward the sky as it zipped back up. Their owner appears a few seconds later. He grabs the dogs by their collars and drags them out of the frame, and then all that’s left is the railyard with its slumbering trains and the fence with the overgrown blackberry bushes and the divots the stars made in the sidewalk.

Wren eats those berries right off the bush, even though they’re always dusty with train grime. She doesn’t care. She says the sweetness is worth the grit.

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*Carrie Mac’s most recent novels are Last Winter and Zombie Apocalypse Running Club. Her work has been published in PRISM international, the New Quarterly and Room, among others. She lives in Vancouver, BC, with her two kids, overlooking the shipping yards and the North Shore mountains.*

## Thus Spoke Nietzsche

RITA SIMONETTA

*I put the book back, but within moments it hurtles off the shelf again and lands on the coffee table, open to a passage I highlighted decades ago: “Become who you are!”*

The front door of my apartment shuts behind me. I slump against it in the dark and turn loose the heavy sigh I’ve been carrying around in my chest all day. That’s when I hear his voice for the first time, like sandpaper on metal.

“Life is hard to bear.”

I turn on the lights and see Nietzsche looking at me from my unwashed coffee mug on the kitchen counter. His walrus mustache twitches. “Life is hard to bear, but do not pretend to be so delicate!”

As my finger picks at the diagonal chip just above his porcelain hairline, he flares his nostrils. I slam the mug down in the sink, switch off the lights and head to bed.

But I can’t sleep. I think of my father in his new bed at the nursing home.

The woman who answers the phone at the nursing station is already annoyed. “Yes?”

“This is Rose Morri,” I tell her. “I’m calling about my—”

“You just left.”

“Is he okay?”

“Fine. We are administering his medications and getting him ready for bed.”

“Maybe I can come back. Sleep in his room. In a chair. I won’t bother anyone.” *Anyone* being my father’s roommate, a tall, burly man with a penchant for wandering and whose dementia is more advanced than my father’s. What if the man wakes up in the middle of the night and becomes angry at the stranger in his room? Or what if my father can’t sleep because he’s confused about his surroundings, afraid? I imagine him looking around. Searching for me.

I stare at the dark corner of my bedroom as the nurse says something about my father needing to get used to his environment.

“He’s probably wondering where I went.”

“He hasn’t asked about you.”

The words slug me in the gut.

Before hanging up, she says, “He’s in good hands.”

I think of my father’s hands, once a zigzag of cracks and calluses that smoothed out from inertia as his memory faded.

“It’s gotten out of hand,” my brother told me after our father went door to door in search of our mother, who had died years before. “Dad needs to go somewhere he can be looked after.”



He forced my hand. So I put my hands up. Gave in. Gave up. My hands were full with work and the separation, I yearn to explain to my father. Now I've handed you over. But I never wanted to. My hands were tied.

**B**efore I head to work, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* flings itself from my bookshelf. The first Nietzsche book I ever read. I touch the torn jacket cover and flip through its musty-smelling pages. I used to reread it during bus rides to and from campus, convinced Nietzsche was right—that I could create the person I wanted to be and live the life I desired despite the obstacles and chaos around me. In the end, my books are all I got out of my Philosophy major. That and Vincent. We met in an Introduction to Existentialism course. He transferred after the second class but asked for my number after the first.

I put the book back, but within moments it hurtles off the shelf again and lands on the coffee table, open to a passage I highlighted decades ago: “Become who you are!”

Later that night I slump on the couch and eat leftover spinach frittata, a dish my father once loved but is now averse to. After I've demolished everything in my Tupperware container, I listen to Vincent's last voicemail, the one he left three months ago. Before we decided to separate. Before he decided for me.

I transfer it to speaker phone and Nietzsche opens the office door wearing my fuchsia slippers. “The demand to be loved is the greatest of all arrogant presumptions,” he snarls.

I respond by replaying the voicemail. Nietzsche shakes his head in exasperation.

**A** man is standing outside my front door with boxes at his feet when I get home. From far away he looks like the guy who never wipes the treadmill after his workout. As I move in closer, I realize it's Vincent. I blink in confusion.

“You said I could come by to pick up the rest of my things,” he says.

I didn't forget but I thought he hadn't meant it. That he would put it off and then finally just return home.

I make a show of dropping my keys, then jiggle them in the lock loudly before finally opening the door. I switch on the lights, scanning for any sign of Nietzsche. But the house is quiet.

Vincent steps inside and looks at the living room like it's his first time here. His eyes dart from the bookshelf to the floor lamp to our travel souvenirs on the fireplace mantle.

“I like to know where to find everything,” I say.

He stacks the boxes on the floor and I notice his shiny loafers, a pair I've never seen before. Then he sinks his hands in his pockets. “How's your dad?”

“Hard to tell.”

Vincent nods and I study the beard he's grown since the last time we saw each other. It covers up his dimples—something I miss. “You have a new look.”

He caresses his beard. “Thought it was time for something different.” Then he reaches for the boxes, holds them up—“I'll be out of your way soon”—and makes a break for the bedroom.

“Take your time,” I nearly yell.

As he shuffles through drawers and hauls boxes out to his car, I busy myself in the kitchen, setting out fruit and the coconut cookies he loves, though they're a little stale. I make two espressos.



*Nietzsche becomes  
fascinated by everything  
in my house. My electric  
toothbrush. The hair  
dryer. Toaster oven. My  
computer is an unending  
gem of curiosity. I don't  
tell him about the  
Internet. That's a rabbit  
hole for both of us.*

Thirty minutes later he appears in the hall with a flushed face, the last box on the floor, filled to the brim. "I think I got everything."

My shoulders go slack, but I gesture to the cookies. "Have something."

Vincent puts his hands out, like *don't shoot*. "Thanks. But I gotta go."

"An espresso, then."

"I've cut down."

I grab both demitasse cups and step toward him. "How's work?"

He stares at the steaming cup in my outstretched hand. "It's ... you know."

Wipes his palms on his jeans. "The usual joys of teaching high school Geography. Glacial retreats. Altered ecosystems. Significant landform changes."

With a glance at my face, he turns and hoists the final box onto his hip. "Rose, I need to get home."

I will my voice not to falter. "This is your home."

"I'm sorry. But not anymore."

Vincent's words are still seeping into my mind hours later, after I have examined the bedroom. Scoured the closet. Pulled out every drawer. Run my hands along the entire surface of the dresser. He's taken everything that reminds me of him. Left me with nothing.

When I finally come out, Nietzsche's sitting at the kitchen counter.

"Please. Not a word."

"I'm not interested in words at the moment." He dunks a cookie in his espresso, takes a bite and smiles.

"Didn't you say coffee makes a person gloomy?"

He shrugs and dunks again. "Come join me."

When all the cookies are gone, he helps me set up my makeshift bed on the couch.

The summer heat reaches a peak and Nietzsche becomes fascinated by everything in my house. My electric toothbrush. The hair dryer. Toaster oven. My computer is an unending gem of curiosity. I don't tell him about the Internet. That's a rabbit hole for both of us.

If he's not feverishly typing at the computer, he's enamoured by the TV. While perched on the rocking chair, he watches soap operas, rom-coms, game shows. Throws his head back and roars with laughter long after the programs have ended.

I introduce him to several of my favourite films, including *The Way We Were*. For days afterward, he watches it on repeat.

**M**y father sits by the window, tapping the dented side table like he's sending Morse code. The fake plant I bought to brighten up the room is precariously perched on the ledge. Each time I visit I find it in a new position; occasionally it's been watered.

As a gust of early fall wind rattles the windowpane, my father covers himself with his beloved grey cardigan. No matter how much of its yarn has unspooled over the years or how often its shell buttons go missing, he remains committed to it.

When he sees me, he pulls me in close, eyeing Mr. Renda, who paces the other side of the room, patting his hands on his T-shirt inscription—*I'll Be in the Garage*—as if absorbing the immensity of its meaning. "He was in Petawawa," my father whispers.

At *Petawawa*, I freeze. Search his face.

In 1940, my father's father was interned at Camp Petawawa. And when my Nonno came to live with us later on in life, I hid around dark corners



to find out what secrets he would divulge to his son when they were alone. But I could never decipher details. I only heard them repeat the name with a mixture of reverence and fear—the way ancient people uttered the names of gods they were certain could destroy them.

The name hunched my Nonno's shoulders and swelled his knees. It stuck to him like tar underneath his construction boots. It beat down on him like the hot sun on his back.

My father never talked about it.

"Petawawa," I repeat, stretching each of its four syllables. "No, it was Nonno who went to Petawawa." I turn to look for Mr. Renda, who's now rifling through my father's closet. He pulls out a pair of shoes and tries to squeeze his enormous feet into them. "That's your roommate," I tell my father.

But he shakes his head and turns away. Reaches out for the large tweed cap next to his lopsided lamp and flops it over his head. On the backside, white stitching spells out "RENDA."

"This isn't working out," I announce at the nurses' station. "I'm worried about my father staying in the same room as that man."

"Mr. Renda was in the room first," a nurse says. "He's lived here for several years."

"Then I'd like to move my father to another room."

She exchanges a look with her colleagues as if to communicate that those in front of the desk live in another world than those behind it. "That will take a very long while." Then she looks past me and I follow her gaze. My father and Mr. Renda are exiting their room, muttering to each other and laughing. They trudge down the hallway and disappear around the corner.

One Sunday evening I attempt to repair my father's grey cardigan. With rudimentary knitting skills, I fill in gaping holes and sew on buttons I'm certain won't survive the winter. Nietzsche slouches on the rocking chair, sighing dramatically as he channel-surfs. It takes a half hour before he switches to a channel that makes him sit up.

A preacher two-steps across a dais that looks more like a well-buffed stage, pumping his fists in the air. As he hollers about redemption, he wipes sweat from his face with an embroidered handkerchief, as if to signify that doing God's work is a laborious task.

Nietzsche turns to me. "My father was a man of the pulpit. He was a—" "Lutheran minister."

Nietzsche tilts his head, trying to remember when he divulged this information. Then he continues, "When I was young my father became very sick. A brain disease. It made him blind and then bedridden. Finally, he forgot who he was."

I accidentally prick my finger. "My father is forgetting more each day."

"One evening, my mother guided me to the side of his bed. I didn't fully understand what my father was telling me—I was very young. But I do remember that he kept calling me Ludwig, my brother's name."

I suggest that he must have been confused—scared, even—but Nietzsche shakes his head. "Not at all. My father was speaking. I knew enough to listen silently. Logic is not the way to truth."

By the time I finish the cardigan, Nietzsche has fallen asleep. His hair is flattened against his skull on one side. I turn off the TV and drape a blanket over him. He fits about for several moments and then begins to snore. It's not loud and thunderous as I would have imagined, just a slight wheezing that soon fades.

*The name hunched  
my Nonno's shoulders  
and swelled his knees.*

*It stuck to him like  
tar underneath his  
construction boots.*

*It beat down on him like  
the hot sun on his back.*

*Not long ago, Vincent  
couldn't look up at the  
CN Tower without a  
dizzying fear of heights,  
and now he rock climbs  
places with names like  
Rattlesnake Point,  
Old Baldy and the  
Outbreak Wall.*

**M**y father and Mr. Renda sit outside their room, munching cookies and slurping juice. Before dementia set in, my father disdained all things sweet. His palate only appreciated the bitter that the world offered up. He drank his espresso black and sometimes sucked on lemon rinds while my mother and brother and I watched on and cringed.

When my father sees me now, his face lights up. “Can you give my Papa another cookie?”

I glare at Mr. Renda, who’s dunking the last of his in a glass of orange juice. “That’s your roommate,” I say. “Not your Papa.”

Mr. Renda leans over and says something incoherent to my father, who nods with complete understanding. Then the food cart creaks by and my father reaches out to the health care aide. He asks for another cookie for his Papa.

The woman chuckles and hands Mr. Renda a treat. “It’s nice that you always think of him.”

My father nods. “He came back from Petawawa. They said he was an enemy. But now he’s home.”

**N**ietzsche begins to leave his belongings at my place. He constantly forgets his round-rimmed glasses everywhere—on the TV console, by the bookshelf, next to my wedding photo. The smell of his pipe tobacco seeps into my cushions and loose tobacco falls into the crevices of my office chair.

He insists I show him how to text, which both fascinates and disgusts him. I give him my old, clunky cellphone, and he practices for hours each day.

When I’m in the other room, he texts, “Where R U? LOL.”

If I’m listening to Vincent’s voicemail, he writes, “Bruh! Don’t B So Xtra.”

In time he asks me to teach him how to take pictures. His initial attempts show only a blur or are marred by his arm blocking half his face. But soon he works out the kinks. Most evenings when I return from the nursing home he’s still out, snapping photos of himself in front of Casa Loma or browsing the Ontario Food Terminal or perched on a Zamboni.

While Nietzsche explores the city, I scroll through Vincent’s Facebook page and find a series of photographs captioned “A New Life Adventure Begins.”

Not long ago, Vincent couldn’t look up at the CN Tower without a dizzying fear of heights, and now he rock climbs places with names like Rattlesnake Point, Old Baldy and the Outbreak Wall.

His most recent post shows him standing in front of Lion’s Head with sparkling white cliffs that look like daggers. Below, a dizzying drop into the cold waters of Georgian Bay. He and his girlfriend wear matching neon orange tops and camouflage helmets as they look straight into the camera. I can tell that she is, unlike me, emotionally available by the way she has her arms tightly wrapped around him and the fact that she smiles with her teeth.

**T**he nursing home walls are decorated with cardboard bats coloured outside of the lines. Resident names are printed on each one. I search for my father’s offering. His bat is scribbled with black crayon. “PETAWAWA” is all that’s written on it.

There’s a tug at my arm and I look down at my seven-year-old niece. Isabel strikes a pose, planting her legs a few feet apart and pressing her hands on her hips. She’s decked out in a pressed suit with a black tie that I recognize as my brother’s. A red cape is draped behind her suit jacket and her white dress shirt is strategically unbuttoned to reveal a T-shirt emblazoned

with a glittering S. Her wavy hair peeks through a rubber wig. After I plant a kiss on her cheek, she removes her black-rimmed eyeglasses with dramatic flair and greets me as only Clark Kent/Superman would: "I'm here to fight for truth and justice."

I take her hand.

She leads me to the dining room, which is dressed in orange streamers and smells like burnt onions. A nurse with a witch's hat playfully sweeps residents' slippers with her broom, while the Mad Hatter tips his hat to everyone. Wheelchairs and walkers and canes are propped against the wall. Nurses guide residents to the dance floor to shuffle along to "I Put a Spell on You."

Isabel plops down on the seat beside her father, who wears a vampire cape. He looks me over, asks about my costume.

I peer down at my sneakers, stretchy jeans and faded blouse. "I came as a disgruntled middle-aged daughter."

He flashes his bloody fangs.

I scan the party. "Where's Dad?"

My brother motions to the centre of the room, but it takes several moments to spot my father. His hands are not his own anymore—they've been transformed into massive werewolf paws. He waves them in the air, out of time with the music. Beside him is Mr. Renda, his face painted green, wearing a tattered jacket. A volunteer positions his arms straight out in front so he can do his best Frankenstein impression. As "Monster Mash" begins to play, my father turns around with delight.

A chirpy health care aide leans over. "He's happy because he's dancing with his Papa."

I scowl at her and then at Frankenstein. "That's not his Papa," I shout over the music. "His Papa died twenty years ago."

The care aide's smile disappears and my brother shoots me a glance I refuse to acknowledge. "Dad looks like he's having fun," he says.

Isabel, ecstatic at the sight of her Nonno letting loose, begins to mimic his dancing. My brother cheers her on.

"It's the disease that's making him do that," I yell.

A resident's family member looks in my direction, another shifts in his chair. My brother takes in a deep breath and begins to say something, but his words disappear in the air as I jolt out of my seat.

Nietzsche has appeared beside my father.

Mr. Renda begins to hop, so my father does the same, pumping his claws.

Nietzsche joins in. "I'm so amped," he hollers to me. "Your father is slaying." He raises his hands in the air, pumps them in sync with my father's.

I lunge forward and plant myself between them. "That's enough!" I grab the werewolf mitts and try to pry them off. But they're cemented on.

With another strenuous tug, I trip over the Joker's feet, stumble into Anne Shirley and come crashing to the floor.

As the music dies out, the world looks down at me. The Joker and Anne Shirley whisper to one another; several witches and ghosts shake their heads. Isabel clenches my brother's hand.

"Everything is gonna be okay," I assure her, though the pain in my shoulder competes with my embarrassment.

Then I see my father, claws still intact, moving toward me. "Why are you there?" he asks.

Mr. Renda shrugs his massive monster shoulder pads, either because he doesn't have an answer or he's wondering the same thing.

I tell my father the truth. "I don't know."

*Nietzsche joins in. "I'm so amped," he hollers to me. "Your father is slaying." He raises his hands in the air, pumps them in sync with my father's.*

He leans over and gently glides his werewolf mitts across my face, sweeping away strands of hair from my eyes.

“I’m sorry, Pa.”

He nods before the nurses guide him and the other residents out of the room.

At home, Nietzsche is already splayed out on the rocking chair, humming “Monster Mash.”

I hover over him in fury. “I don’t want to hear you.”

He cranes his neck. “What you did was cringe, TBH. Watching your father enjoy himself is going to live rent-free in my head for years to come.”

I drag my blanket and pillow into the office. The floor is cold and hard and my shoulder still aches but I don’t care. As I lie in the dark, Nietzsche shouts, “Those who were seen dancing were thought to be insane by those who could not hear the music.”

**T**he next night Nietzsche tells me he needs to talk. “Your father at the party—the dancing, the music, his love of life—it was exhilarating.”

I shrug, unwavering. Still upset.

“It’s time for me to return to my writing,” he continues. “I’ve decided to go to Turin.”

I blink. “No.”

He narrows his eyes. “Nonsense. I’m going to immerse myself in the city and its people. And I’m going to write.”

“Please,” I mutter. “Stay here.”

He chuckles. “Why this face of despair?”

This is where you have a mental breakdown, I yearn to tell him. You’re declared insane. Brought to an asylum. Then taken in by your mother and sister who allow strangers into the house to ogle at you. You never write again.

But all I can say is, “Don’t go.”

“It will be an adventure.”

I shake my head. “Eventually, your sister, Elisabeth—”

“What about her?”

“She dresses you in white robes,” I blurt.

His face twists, then breaks out in laughter. “White robes! I am no prophet.”

“And as time goes on, she adds to some of your ideas. Expands them. Alters others.”

Nietzsche shakes his head. “The author must keep his mouth shut when his work starts to speak.”

“Please listen. If you go, it will happen. You will change. You will be different.”

“Different?” His voice takes on an airy tone, as if he’s playing along to a child’s mutterings. “Who do I become?”

“I don’t know,” is all I can say.

Before heading out, Nietzsche leaves a plate of spinach frittata on the kitchen counter. Next to it, he’s propped a note: “You must be ready to burn yourself in your own flame. How could you rise anew if you have not first become ashes?” He signs it *Dionysus*.

*As the music dies out,  
the world looks down at  
me. The Joker and Anne  
Shirley whisper to one  
another; several witches  
and ghosts shake their  
heads. Isabel clenches  
my brother’s hand.*

**M**y father stares at the blank TV screen in his room. The air is stale and cool, so I slip his grey cardigan over his shoulders. After a few moments, he screws up his face and hurls it to the floor. I resurrect it from

the corner, pick off a tumbleweed of dust and empty out a pocket filled with cookie crumbs. In the other pocket I find crumpled pieces of paper. Ironing them out, I discover they're pencil sketches perforated with tiny tears. My father's pressed down with such force that the images seem engraved. In one sketch a row of identical wooden cabins is half-buried in snow. In another, a large group of men in overalls stand behind a fence, looking out at no one. At the top of each, he's scribbled, "Camp 33."

I turn to my father, whose hands are clenched in a fist. When I show him the papers, he nods. "I was there," he mumbles. "I will never forget."

"Pa, you were never in—"

His fist uncurls. He reaches for the drawings, holds the paper like it's glass. He taps his forehead with his forefinger. "It's all right here."

I crouch by his chair. "Tell me everything you remember."

**T**he day before Nietzsche leaves, we rearrange everything in the bedroom and living room. They look airy and spacious and new. We share a joint and dance to "Sheena Is a Punk Rocker" until we get hungry. Then we devour pizza and spinach frittata while watching *The Way We Were*.

I replay Vincent's voicemail.

"Hey," he mutters. "I know you called earlier but I was swamped. Had to finish marking. Gave the kids a quiz today and half of them thought Oceania was a country. And none of them knew what continental drift is. Anyway, it's late, I know, but I'm finally leaving work now. I'm wired on espresso and haven't had anything to eat. Did you eat already? I'm going to pick up dinner from that place I took you for your birthday. I forget the name. I'll grab something from there. Not sure what you want, so I'll surprise you. Even though you don't like surprises. I dunno. Maybe you'll like this one."

Before I go to bed, I erase it.

**I**t's early spring, but in Petawawa, it still feels like winter. I stuff my hands in my jacket pockets while the Ottawa and Petawawa rivers send a burst of frigid wind in my direction. My boots sink into the soggy ground.

As I'm about to make my way into town, Nietzsche sends a text. "Greetings from Turin," he writes. It's a city he'll come to love. Each day he'll take long, solitary walks, sometimes accompanied by a notepad to record his thoughts and ideas. He'll marvel at the museums, architecture and local theatre.

In the picture, Nietzsche stands on the cobbled street of Via Carlo Alberto. Smiling broadly and waving. Just behind him I recognize his apartment window, where he'll live and write for the next several months. And though the sun shines over him, he's bundled up in my father's grey cardigan with all its buttons intact.

*In the other pocket  
I find crumpled pieces of  
paper. Ironing them out,  
I discover they're pencil  
sketches perforated with  
tiny tears. My father's  
pressed down with such  
force that the images  
seem engraved.*

---

*Rita Simonetta is a freelance journalist and fiction writer in Mississauga, ON. Her articles have been published by the CBC, the Globe and Mail and the Toronto Star. Her short fiction has appeared in Prairie Fire and the Antigonish Review, among others.*

## RIGHTHAND JUSTIFIED

RAYYA LIEBICH

*Language built on sounds of delight, coloured in the gardens of Beirut*



↓

cibarA nI  
thgir morf daer uoy  
.tfel ot

I cannot read Arabic  
despite a year of Sundays  
in a basement that smelled  
of mildew, pressed  
next to my sister  
criss-cross apple sauce,  
ashamed  
in a circle of real  
Lebanese children  
only there to play  
Rin Rin Ya Jaras,  
a version of duck, duck, goose  
with a brass bell.

I may have learned to write my name.

I may still know how to recite the alphabet.

A jumble of words with no meaning still swim under my tongue: sleepy traces of the Lebanese nursery rhymes my grandfather stroked in my palms and idioms like Yalla! and Mabrouk! and still I forget these are sourced from another language. I'm told I should no longer italicize words from another language in my essay. Doing so compounds the experience of "othering." In any case, the lexicon of my childhood home was built on borrowing from other cultures and mixed with a multitude of my own semantic combinations, grammatical exceptions, and iterations.

One Christmas, when I insisted we all give homemade gifts in opposition to consumerism, my father crafted me a dictionary of Rayyaisms. He alphabetized the trilingual and invented vocabulary that was part of my everyday communication and printed them on red and green cardstock. He two-hole punched the edges and laced the booklet together with a ribbon of gold. Forty-two pages of phrases that only our nuclear family could understand.

### F

#### *Faz*

Abbreviation of the Arabic word FAZIAH, meaning "marvelous" or "wonderful."

Understandable only to speakers of Liebich Arabic.

See list of abbreviations by Rayya, including "shuks" for SHUKRAN and "maj" for MAJNOUN.

### S

#### *Smiet*

Abbreviation of Polish word ŚMIETNICZKA—dust pan used with broom.

(For obscure reasons, this abbreviated Polish term, beloved by Rayya, persists.)

Polish was my father's mother tongue, a language I can parrot now only from those Saturday mornings spent listening to his side of the conversation. My sister and I loved to impersonate him lying on the green carpet with his knees bent, receiver pressed to one ear, replying in monotone to his parents' questions:

Nie, nie

(no, no)

Tak, tak

(yes, yes)

Tso, tso

(??)

Because my father taught himself Arabic (along with Russian, German, Spanish and Italian—to never have to read "the greats" in translation), my sister and I trained our ears by eavesdropping from the top of the stairs as our parents discussed topics in Arabic they did not want us to understand. What were they bickering about? Would we be allowed to get a kitten? Could we get our ears pierced?

If language was a shield to keep us out, we would have our own secret language.

My sister tried to teach me a version of Pig Latin:

Iuba luba ouba vuba euba yuba ouba euba.

It didn't matter how much I practised; I couldn't spell.

After tears (mine) and yelling (her), she gave up on me.

Because my parents insisted on speaking to us exclusively in French and sending us to school in English, my sister and I agreed to take the easiest path of resistance. We committed to English as our language of revolt.

I graduated with a Bilingual I.B.  
French and English literature coveting both  
left and right chambers of my heart.  
After all, I had been trained as a child  
in politicized Québec to be neither  
Anglo/Franco.  
I dwelled in both/neither.  
Answered the telephone in one breath:

Allô/Hello?

Somehow that was never enough for my Lebanese relatives.  
My mother shamefully admitting to everyone who asked, but already knew:

No,  
my daughters don't speak  
much Arabic.

My knowledge of her mother tongue was built on sounds of delight  
coloured in her kitchen and in the gardens of Beirut:

Names of dishes that swish—  
riz bi sharieh and loubieh bzeit;  
humour and rudeness  
in the moniker of the putrid-smelling  
flower, fusse uta (cat fart);  
and the phrase  
sa3daan teezeek hamra  
(the monkey has a red ass).

Of course, I was going to have bilingual children.

My babies chewed board books in my mother tongue.  
Read, reread, read, reread exclusively en français.  
Babar. T'choupi. Pomme D'Api.  
Before they could form words on their tongues,  
I taught them to sign in French with their hands.  
Manger: beak with fingers pressed to my lips.  
Dodo: head tilted, palms pressed in prayer, tucked under my ear.  
I rocked them to my chansons françaises CDs twice a day,  
pacified them in the backseat of the minivan with  
*Mes Chansons Babidoux*.  
Repeat. Repeat. Repeat.

I had to give it up.

Blamed my husband for his lack of language  
muddled through the larger challenges of motherhood,  
of mother  
loss.



When we went to Lebanon for the first time as a family, it was to plant an olive tree in memory of my mother. Then, we crossed oceans to live with my father in Switzerland. Enrolled our young children in a French school just months after she died. A dream my mother held close to her heart for years, but never witnessed. When we moved back to Canada six months later, I stepped into a new life as a motherless mother. Despite being in a new home and in a new community, my grief followed and swallowed worlds. I scratched poems in the dark while my children slept and cried all day while they were at school. The ripples of loss blurred and buried any politics and priorities that once seemed to define me. Losses begotten by loss.

My youngest son is ten now.  
Just starting a Late French Immersion program.  
He's in a class with other children who look like him,  
who love mountain biking, snow and maple syrup.  
They all find Clif Bars in their lunch bags.  
Fill up \$40 Hydro Flask bottles in the halls.  
His identity  
doesn't hinge upon this  
second language he can take  
or leave.

My son comes home with flash cards:  
Mouchoir. Pupitre. Fenêtre.  
He laughs at the sounds.

I had almost forgotten that for years  
my mind dreamed, sang, read and laughed  
interchangeably in English and French.

We play Snap and Memory.  
I feign slowness to give him a chance of success.  
He gloats his wins, one word at a time.  
He holds language in his hands.

Sometimes, I start poems and essays on the right.  
Out of protest, confusion, or the ancestral tug  
of a language that I cannot read, cannot write,  
my mind wired for connection,  
primed to reconcile loss.

Always searching in white space  
for my origins of belonging.

---

*Rayya Liebich is a writer, educator and activist of Lebanese and Polish descent. Passionate about writing as a tool for transformation and changing the discourse on grief, she is the author of the award-winning chapbook Tell Me Everything (Beret Day Press) and the poetry collection Min Hayati (Inanna Publications).*



# The Crush and the Rush and the Roar

ANIK SEE

*And a sort of current ran through you when you saw it,  
a visceral, uncontrollable response.  
A physical resistance to the silence*



In a small town in Canada's north, just below the Arctic Circle, two ravens are having a conversation. (A third turns it into an argument.) Two planes fly overhead each day. The noon whistle still goes off at noon. There's a grader for a single day at the start of summer, repairing the winter potholes. Distant voices from the other side of a hedge, soft enough to not be able to make any words out. That's it.

An immense river sweeps quietly, continuously—like suction—through the vastness beyond the town, a reminder of what was there long before our time. Yet it also flows quickly, unerringly enough to offer a sense of possibility. Or—at the very least—a way out.

The town, and the silence. On your first night here, you heard a woman scream—a long, horror movie kind of shriek—at three in the morning, but it was dead quiet after that and hard to take seriously in all that twenty-four-hour summer light. A joke, surely. And no news the next day of anything bad having happened. The trust and comfort of living in a small town: if anything happens, you'll hear about it. Perhaps not accurately, but it will be known. You can't miss a thing.

It's not just the quiet, the silence. It's having all that land, all that space and water, all that emptiness and promise stretch out before you. The occasional Ford truck chortles past, and you try hard to think of another noise, but you can't. Not even a dog barking here or there.



You once met a Dutch man at a party in Amsterdam who told you his whole life his dream had been to drive across Canada, to get away from the stifling crowdedness (his words) of the Netherlands—of the microchip-like quality to its landscape, all straight lines and predetermined—and get to a place that was raw, whose fate was as yet undecided, to stand somewhere and see no one.

This man, he drives from east to west, starting in Toronto. He drives and he drives and after a few days of only driving, of not really having paused, he decides that the prairie—which he's reached by then—is the place to get out of the car and experience the vastness of the landscape. It's his first time, and so it has to be just right. He turns off the highway and drives down a secondary road

until he thinks he's reached his place. He gets out of the car and walks into the middle of a field. He stands there, waiting. He doesn't *really* know what he's waiting for. Off in the distance, his car door dings. He looks around and sees nothing. No house, no tree, no hummock behind which something could be hiding. There is nothing to suggest human existence, or any life at all. Except for himself.

The thing he's been waiting for starts to arrive. Slowly, slowly. But it's not what he thought it would be. It's panic. He starts to suffocate. Can't breathe. He runs back to the car, the dinging door, and tears down that road back to the highway, never leaving the car again—except to gas up—until he reaches Vancouver four days later.

Turns out vastness is not what he wanted. Turns out a small, crowded, microchip-like country is just fine when presented with the opposite.



Maybe the desire for silence or solitude is cultural, or at least a question of habit. You think of the American cowboy, setting off into the lonesome, westward expanse. Then you think of the cars you encountered on desolate highways in South America, racing to catch up to the next one, not wanting to be alone. You think back to your own time in Holland, years ago. You were on one of the Frisian Islands, where the edge of a village met the sand and the sea. There was a café, which was full of Dutch visitors drinking espresso and coffee with milk. A split-rail fence surrounded it and the village—the kind you see in a horse paddock. The kind that wouldn't keep much out. It was more of an idea, a demarcation that signalled something different was happening here than on the other side of this thing. Here = social. There = antisocial. You were standing on the outside—*there*—by the sand and the sea.

The tide started to go out, and fast. The Wadden Sea, between the islands and the mainland, is shallow, and sometimes a pathway between the islands emerges at low tide. So, when the water started to withdraw, you were suddenly faced with hundreds of metres of sand which, minutes before, had been submerged. You walked toward the beach and kept walking, following the water as it retreated, hardly keeping up. You turned around to see how far you'd come. You saw thousands of people

hemmed in by the split-rail fence, having their coffee, surrounded by each other. You saw that you were the only one out on the sand, which by now stretched for a kilometre in either direction around you. You wondered if you'd done something wrong, if suddenly you'd start sinking into quicksand, or get swallowed up by a whale. But there was no danger. Just differing preferences of a place to be.



You have lived in remote places. You know vastness and silence. You crave it. But even though you might be comfortable in it, you know where the Dutch man was coming from. You might, like him, suddenly want the opposite when faced with it.

A few years ago, you were invited to spend a month working in a stone house in the middle of a remote valley in eastern Iceland. It was the middle of February and—inevitably—you arrived in the dark. A woman picked you up from the airport and you drove for about three-quarters of an hour through complete blackness. Not a light in sight, not another vehicle on the road. You arrived at the house and she let you in, then stepped back into her car and drove off. The sound of her car was quickly swallowed by the sound of a gust of wind moving up the valley. You stood there, waiting for the wind to hit. It did, and then it was gone.

And it was quiet again.

There wasn't a single sound. Not one. Not a breeze, not a leaf whisking across the snow (it was a treeless place), not a shrew scampering by, not even a bird. You strained your ears for a sign of life. Anything.

The next morning a jet liner flew overhead, a flash in the sky, no vapour trail. So high it couldn't be heard.

In the distance, the steeple of a small, red-roofed church poked up over a hill. Without the steeple, that absolute silence would have been okay. But the church was a reminder of humanity, and made it even more obvious that nothing alive could be heard. And a sort of current ran through you when you saw it, a visceral, uncontrollable response. A physical resistance to the silence.



If you lean back from your desk a bit in that small town in Canada's north, Robert Service's late nineteenth-century cabin comes into view. It's a roughly hewn cabin, surprisingly bright inside—if the door is open. It's just the right size too: one room for thinking, writing and cooking; one room for sleeping and reading.

Robert Service was a bank clerk, but he quit to write. Even he felt the tug of silence and solitude.

*"I want to go back to my lean, asben plains;"* he wrote in that cabin.

*"My rivers that flash into foam;*

*My ultimate valleys where solitude reigns; ...*

*My forests packed full of mysterious gloom..."*



You heard a theory once that people get tired when they exchange their busy urban lives for a weekend (or longer) in a quieter place, because the brain's beta wave activity slows, adjusting to fewer stimuli—from frenetic and anxious to thoughtful, considerate. The usual clutter of human activity and productivity is replaced by a simplicity beyond the ego and control.

Don DeLillo wrote, "Cities were built to measure time, to remove time from nature. There's an endless counting down."

There is no counting down here. You pass a young guy practising his harmonica with one hand while walking down the town's dusty, unpaved street. Early twenties, hipster facial hair, his other hand clutching a library book and a bag of bread made that morning at the bakery a few blocks over.

A dog lying in the middle of the road.

A cashier at the grocery store, checking her mascara in the reflection of a staple gun.

*That* kind of slow. Not a bank clerk or stockbroker in sight.

You hear another young guy, whose wristwatch is set two time zones to the east, describe the town as nostalgic summer camp for adults. It makes a kind of sense.



*"I feel it's all wrong, but I can't tell you why—*

*The palace, the hovel next door;*

*The insolent towers that sprawl to the sky,*

*The crush and the rush and the roar."*



You wonder how the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in must feel. Their land stolen and torn up in pursuit of gold, the caterpillar-like tailings from decades ago heaped as tall as the full-grown aspens that now stand beside them. The ground hollowed out, the silence shattered, the people whose ground it was banished downriver. The infinite landscape turned into infinite towering hummocks of burrowed dirt still there, visible from the air.

The first of the two planes that fly over the town and the tailings each day is a prop plane, en route to Old Crow and eventually Inuvik. This plane reveals the impossibility that flying is. Noisy, clunky, difficult. Ridiculous, even. A privilege.

The second plane, the one that comes in the afternoon, is a jet, full of cruise ship passengers from the Holland America Line, and when it flies over the town as it prepares to land, it feels and sounds like an F-16, blasting in out of nowhere, dragging its noise behind it, disappearing within seconds behind the mountains that hem the valley in.



On an island in the middle of the river a few hundred kilometres upstream of the town, you find a grave with a name carved into a rough, weather-beaten board a hundred years old.

### *R.I.P. L. Davis*

You look at the mound, at the board fastened to an iron stake that serves as its tombstone, and you think of it in the winter, without visitors, without anyone to stumble upon it.

The river is wide and flat but deceptively fast, bulging at the horizon between two distant points of land, as though you've reached the end of the earth. Melting ice pans hit each other, clicking, clicking. It's quiet enough to hear the clicking. The tops of the ice pans melt first, leaving most of the pan submerged just under the water's surface, chunks shorn and layered like charcoal.

The natural rhythms of nature are tangible here, like tides.

Farther downstream a man waves from the forested shores, stopping you to say that someone jumped off a bridge into the river a few days earlier, just to go swimming, and never resurfaced. No sign of him even after four days of looking. "You keep an eye out," he says to you, jerking his head downstream after a moment of silence. "It was my son."

It's only a few hours later that you wonder about the practicalities of finding a body. There's no phone service for hundreds of kilometres, and the closest RCMP post is either Dawson or Carmacks, 400 kilometres apart, and you're exactly halfway in between, in a canoe.



The Holland America tourists land at the town's tiny airport, descending from the plane and walking directly onto pristine, temperature-controlled buses—the only vehicles in town without cracked windshields. Their luggage is

directly off-loaded to avoid the small, cramped terminal that's good enough for the locals. The simplicity of the town is seen as quaint and, yes, nostalgic by those who demand more.

By September, the temperatures drop quickly, snow starts to fall. The jets and the pristine tour buses stop coming; this is a reality only locals choose to endure. The small town in Canada's north reverts to its original silence: a conspiracy of ravens chatting, the noon whistle, the occasional truck. Robert Service's cabin sits empty—no more visitors to ponder the quiet, or *the crush, and the rush and the roar*.

You bicycle to the outskirts of town, by the gas station, where the plains hit the mountains pretty fast, where the giant coils of tailings fade and the landscape never ends. Without warning—*whooshwhooshwhoosh*—three cars rush past. You didn't even hear them coming. One big, golden, two-door car, and two police cars in close pursuit, sirens wailing, kicking up gravel, the whole bit. Two hundred kilometres an hour, easy.

You stand and watch the chase for you don't know how long before losing sight of them. They're headed south, over a plateau stretched out like a never-ending carpet—what the rest of the town was like before the gold. The police are only a couple of car lengths off the other's tail, and there are no other roads that intersect this one for the next 100 kilometres. You look up and see a group of sandhill cranes circling in invisible updrafts by a nearby cliff, their chirps and rattles floating down in the still air. After a couple of minutes another group of cranes appears, and the calling stops. The birds make their formation again, reconvened, and veer off silently southward, following the wake of the chase. You watch and you cheer them on, shouting out over that silent landscape, for once making noise.

*Editor's note: The quoted text by Robert Service is from the poem "I'm Scared of It All," published in his collection Rhymes of a Rolling Stone (William Briggs, 1912).*

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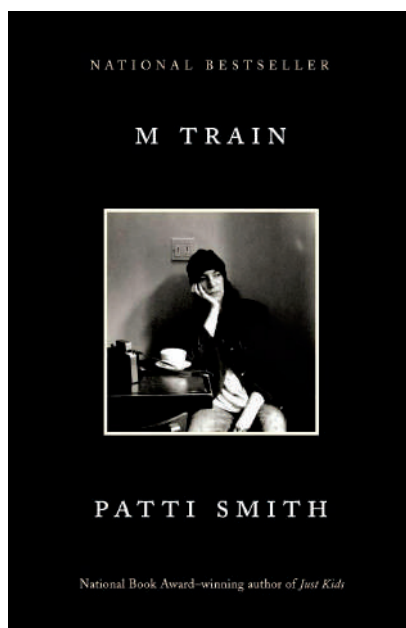
*Anik See is a Canadian writer and audio documentary maker living in the Netherlands. She is the author of four books and has contributed to many anthologies and magazines. Her documentary work can be heard on the CBC and BBC. Her latest book is Cabin Fever.*

# ENDNOTES

REVIEWS, COMMENTS, CURIOSA

## ON A TRAIN TO ANYWHERE

In 2007, while in Iceland to give a talk at a meeting of the Continental Drift Club, the musician and writer Patti Smith also monitored a junior chess tournament in return for being allowed to photograph the table that had been used for the 1972 chess match between Bobby Fischer and Boris Spassky. The next day Fischer sent Smith a note asking her to meet him at midnight in the dining room of her hotel where they sat at a corner table, and after a short stream of rants from Bobby—to which Patty did not react—they spent the next two hours singing rock 'n' roll songs. This is just one of the stories in Smith's book *M Train* (Knopf Canada), which she describes as “a roadmap to my life.” The world of Smith's imagination and the world that she walks around in seem to be separated by the thinnest of veils; her ideas and musings often turn into actions. In “Wheel of Fortune,” Smith travels to Veracruz, Mexico, because William Burroughs advised her that she would find the best coffee in the world there. She booked into a modest hotel and spent the next few days sitting at a table in a room filled with sacks of coffee beans, observing men sniffing beans and sipping coffee, and



writing in her notebook. Smith writes that she and the proprietor “shared not a word, but the coffee kept coming.” In “Clock with No Hands,” Smith ponders the nature of real time and remembers that, when they were young and living at the Westin Book Cadillac hotel in Detroit, she and her husband slept, ate and wandered around town at any time of the day or night, dreamed up a TV talk show, and realized that not all dreams need to be realized. Such is the magic of Smith's writing that when I got to the end of the book and flipped it over

to the back cover, the phrase “NEW MATERIAL WITHIN” jumped out at me, and for a moment I imagined that if I reopened the book, it would have filled itself with new stories. When this didn't happen, I consoled myself with reading Smith's other memoir *Just Kids* (Ecco), a collection of stories about living in New York in the 1960s with her lover and then friend, Robert Mapplethorpe, amidst a steady stream of famous or soon-to-be-famous artists and musicians.

—Patty Osborne

## ABOUT THE HOUSE

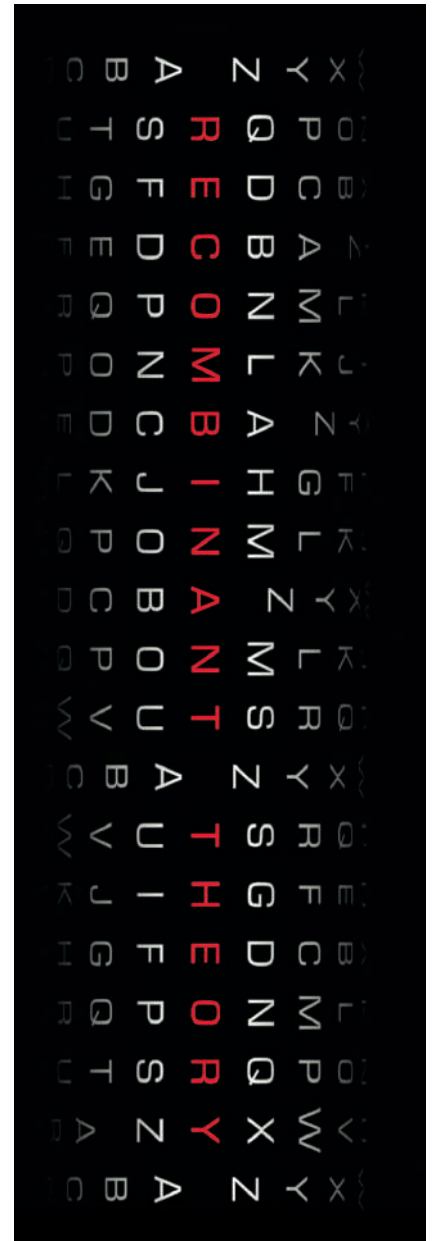
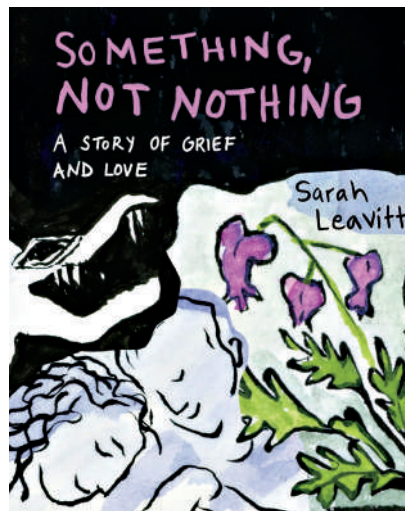
*House Work* was a Vancouver group show of works by women artists and designers, assembled by curators Caitlin Jones and Shiloh Sukkau, who created an informal exhibition space inside a large garage belonging to fine art shipper Thiessen Art Services. The show opened on a beautiful fall evening in September. There was wine and a display (by Claire Saksun) of bagels suspended from a clothesline over gorgeous jewelled dips, presented on top of plinths. Attendees were supposed to tear the bagels off the line, dip them into the dips and eat them. Mashed eggplant

nestled into delicately folded radicchio leaves and translucent green basil oil floated on hummus, creating a surface like stained glass. The dips were perfect; no one wanted to be the first to destroy them, but we also wanted snacks. This bagel and dip installation was the curators' welcome into the binary of amateur versus professional, private versus public, art versus craft versus design: binaries explored, challenged and used as a means for collaboration by the featured artists. A brightly coloured, large format collaborative painting by the artists Kiki BestWest and Charlotte Ruby Campbell took over one wall, the result of a homework assignment from their self-directed "Pretend MFA" program, where they follow their own interests and invite speakers and other participants to exchange ideas, joy and inspiration (unburdened by any institutional framework). Beside this was a group of rippled vases, platters and bowls created by Nathalee Paolinelli and decorated by her young daughter, Ayalen Munoz, who was offered the pottery as a canvas for finger-painting, this time with glaze. The crowd on opening night was mostly women and a few partners, some of whom held their small children up to the line to grab at the bagels. One child, after eating a bit of bagel, ran across an exquisitely dyed, pastelled and hair-sprayed rug, part of a sculpture entitled "Put Together 1/2" by Emily Hill. The rug lay beside a large oil stain, likely made by the moving truck which usually parked in the space. The artist spotted the footprint left behind, got out her can of hairspray and touched up pokey strands of orange, yellow and green wool. I left through a mist of hairspray, inspired to find conversations and collaborations in places I might not have thought to look before.

—Shyla Seller

## TAKEN TO A PLACE OF LIFE

In her moving graphic memoir, **Something, Not Nothing** (Arsenal Pulp Press), Sarah Leavitt expresses the grief that followed her partner Donimo's death. It's not often that we are shown the immense nuances of grief, but Leavitt leads the reader through a powerful melding of images, colours and words. After years of suffering and pain due to disease and injury, Donimo chooses to receive medical assistance in dying, or MAiD (a process available in Canada). Friends and family help the women organize a beautiful creekside ritual (chosen by Donimo)—and then she dies. And then there is nothing. Or is there something? And this is the "something, not nothing" of the book's title. The worst part of the death of a beloved partner is how to live without them. As Leavitt writes in her preface, "After her death I continued living, which surprised me." And then you're alive, but not quite, and they are dead, but also not quite. Now what? Now how? They are not here, of course. But are they somehow here? The book is sad, but it also brims with life. The images use handwriting, colour fields and drawings of flowers and animals (lots of animals, both real and imagined), plus the small objects that make up the narrative of lives lived together. Plus Donimo. Plus Sarah. For a book



## RECOMBINANT THEORY

Joel Katelnikoff



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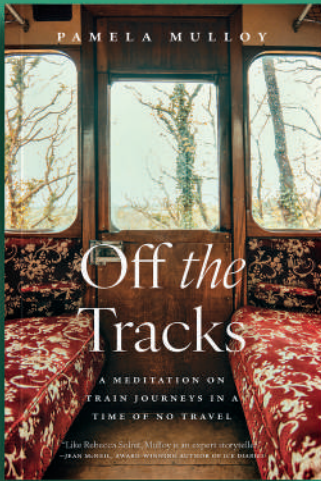
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about death, it takes us to a place of life. That’s the heart of the memoir. I read *Something, Not Nothing* with tears in my eyes. And I will read it again. —Peggy Thompson

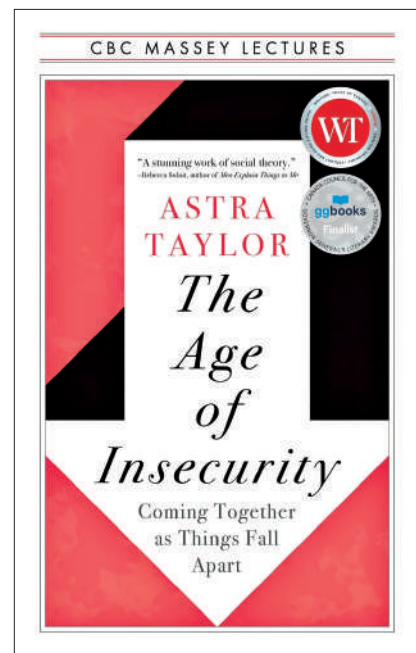
### BEACH READING

Patrick Chamoiseau, a Martiniquan writer, is known for using the island’s creole in his creative works, and for juxtaposing passages of magical realism with testimony-like accounts. Chamoiseau’s politics permeate his writing in a very intriguing way. Linda Coverdale, the translator for *Slave Old Man* (The New Press), writes that Chamoiseau often says that he is more at home with Spanish and English speakers who share his cultural and historic backdrop than with French speakers from elsewhere. Chamoiseau’s vision for Martinique—and Caribbean identity in general—confronts the legacy of the forces which built his tropical island nation. In *Slave Old Man*, Chamoiseau vividly paints the brutality of a hunt for a slave gone “marooning,” while at the same time investigating the complexity and innate beauty of the land. In this way he calls for the modern nation of Martinique “to claim [its] sense of both *place* and *collective memory*,” rather than choosing alienation from a history of social injustice. Appropriately, I read much of Chamoiseau’s novel *Texaco* (Vintage) on a near-deserted beach in a provincial park at the northern tip of Vancouver Island. *Texaco* offers readers a colonial, mirage-like version of that BC beach by flipping the idea of Martinique as an easy-living tourist haven. Chamoiseau builds a world that interleaves the indigenous Carib culture with the more recent history of Martinique, a history from which most of the island community draws their stories. It is wonderful to see such productive storytelling emerging from the mass violence of a plantation-based economy built on the transatlantic slave trade, and

later, on indentured servitude. The truths one gets from reading *Texaco*, even as an outsider reading an English translation, are the kind that are suspicious of easy answers; they are truths which challenge the clichéd convention of paradise as a sandy beach. —Anson Ching

### INSECURITY BLANKET

At last year’s Vancouver Writers Festival, I went to see Rebecca Solnit in conversation with Kathryn Gretsinger of the CBC. At one point Solnit spoke of Astra Taylor’s book, *The Age of Insecurity* (Anansi), with such enthusiasm that I decided I had to read it for myself. *The Age of Insecurity* is the book version of 2023’s CBC Massey Lecture series, which took place over five evenings in September of that year, in Winnipeg, Halifax, Whitehorse, Vancouver and Toronto. Taylor traces the word “security” to the Latin phrase *sine cura*—*sine* meaning “without,” and *cure* referencing the Roman goddess Cura, seen as “the embodiment of care, concern, anxiety and worry.” Insecurity, in other words, is to be weighted down with cares. Taylor



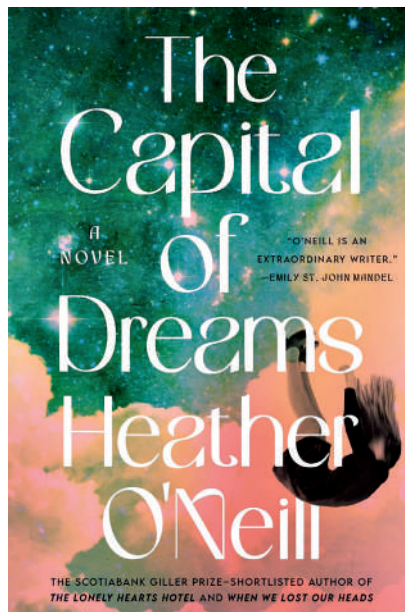


feels that “as long as we are alive, we are destined to exist in a condition of what I’ll call existential insecurity.” She sees capitalism as “a kind of insecurity-producing machine,” in that it deliberately seeks to create in us a sense of dissatisfaction with what we have, constantly in need of “new lifestyles, experiences, products, upgrades and apps with features we suddenly can’t live without.” She cites “Jack Welch, the former head of General Electric, who made his reputation advising companies to intentionally stoke the fear of job loss to keep employees on their toes.” If, as Taylor claims, the sense of insecurity is pervasive and takes so many forms—

—*Michael Hayward*

### ONCE UPON A TALKING GOOSE

In many ways, Heather O’Neill’s **The Capital of Dreams** (HarperCollins) is a fairy tale: once upon a time in a country far away, a wicked mother sent her daughter into the woods... And, as in any fairy tale, *The Capital of Dreams* uses familiar genre elements as vehicles for larger, more difficult subjects. When enemy forces take over the capital of Elysia, young Sofia and her emotionally distant mother,



Clara (“the Simone de Beauvoir of Elysia”), unexpectedly bond while struggling to salvage their country’s cultural heritage. Then a notice arrives ordering the evacuation of the children of the capital, and Sofia’s mother sees an opportunity to smuggle out her latest book. But things don’t go as planned, and from here Sofia’s story unfolds in parallel storylines; the past is revealed in flashbacks, woven into the main narrative of Sofia’s journey through occupied Elysia, as she wanders the woods with her animal companion, a talking goose, on her quest to find the Black Market. O’Neill is a master at maintaining tension, in part due to her use of a straightforward, irreverent voice to describe horrible events. The effect is unsettling and often haunting, like a song about heartbreak in a major chord. But it is a self-conscious narrative and O’Neill isn’t coy about unpacking her own fable: “All the things they teach young girls about being good people turn them into nervous wrecks.” This novel is as much an homage to fairy tales as a deconstruction of them. As the story progresses, the fantasy evaporates so seamlessly it is difficult to see the end coming. What’s surprising is the redemption offered after the dream has disappeared. —*Cornelia Mars*

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## THE QUIET HUNT

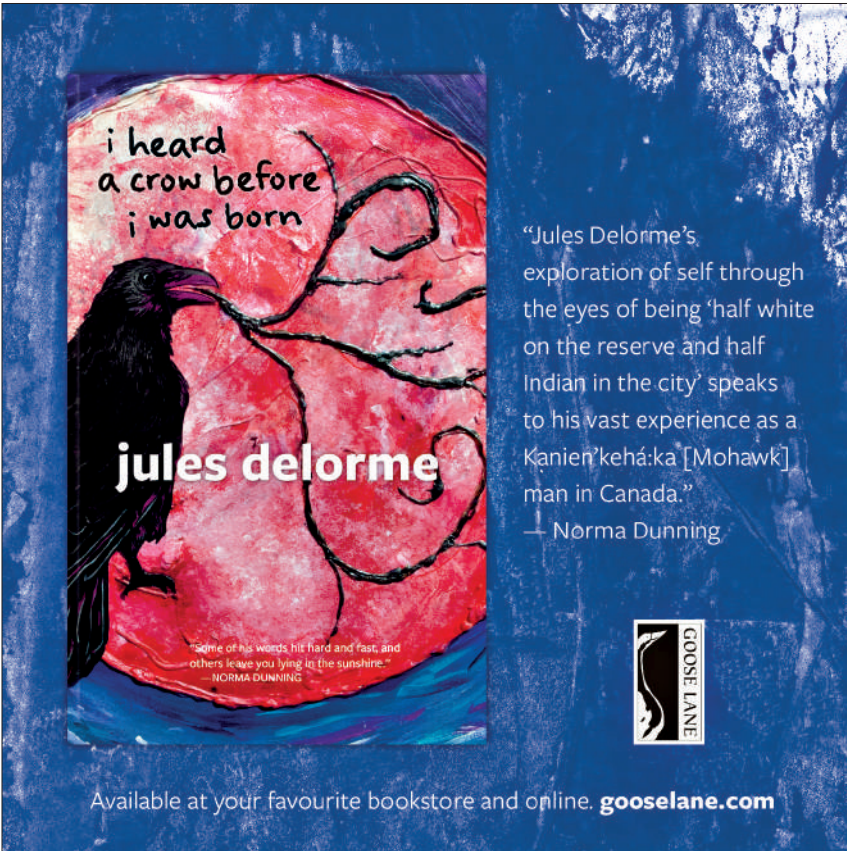
**Mushrooming: The Joy of the Quiet Hunt** (Douglas & McIntyre) by Diane Borsato, an educator and mycophile based in Toronto, ON, is a delightful stroll through “the fascinating, the delicious, the deadly and the strange” world of fungi in North America. This large-format book is beautifully illustrated by Kelsey Oseid with colourful depictions of specimens to accompany each entry, which include notes on the mushroom, identifying features and a section on edibility; this latter part often shares anecdotes about Borsato’s own experiences with the particular fungus and whether she felt it was worth eating. The mushrooms range from the striking (the large red lobster mushroom) to the mundane (like those yellow mushrooms that sometimes grow in my houseplants) to the weird (such as the deeply unpleasant bleeding tooth fungus) to the plain gross (dog vomit slime mould, anyone?). As an artist, Borsato has led urban foraging

forays into Toronto and New York’s Chinatowns to identify mushrooms on offer, and at the Met in NYC, where she attempted to find representations of fungi in the collection. These projects, along with other interesting fungi-adjacent art installations, are described in refreshing interludes between specimen entries. The book also suggests how to host your own mushroom foray in the local woods, and offers a mushroomer’s manifesto, which states that mushrooming can happen anywhere and does not necessarily involve actually finding mushrooms, an idea I found charming. This book is beautiful and offers an accessible entry point into everyday mycology. In *Mushrooming*, Borsato notes that while she hopes this book is inspiring and informative, it should not be relied upon to make accurate identifications of mushrooms in situ, since fungi species can vary widely in appearance and location and have deadly doppelgangers.

—Kelsea O’Connor

## GRAB YOUR FEATHER BOAS

**Stories from My Gay Grandparents** (YouTube) is my comedy show of the year. Here’s the premise: when their hidden shrine to Judy Garland (complete with candles) accidentally burns down their house, Russell and Barbara Butters (James Kall and Jane Moffat)—closeted, married, seventy-somethings living in small town Ontario—arrive unannounced at their grandkids’ condo door. Brother and sister Rebecca Michelle and Mason Butters are two out-and-proud Toronto millennial queers. The shock of Grandma and Grandpa moving into their one-bedroom condo is topped when the grandparents tell the youngsters that they’ve been closeted their whole lives but have always known they’re gay; the house fire was a sign from Judy to “grab their feather boas” and live life to the fullest. Russell and Barbara are determined to rise from the ashes, and they expect their grandkids to show them the ropes. But said grandkids are not without problems of their own. Rebecca Michelle (played by Perrie Voss, who also co-created and co-wrote the series with Scott Farley) owns a failing lesbian bar (The Beaver Hole) and has a big crush on her non-binary staff member, Dax (Tricia Black), but can’t seem to tell them. Mason (played by Scott Farley, series co-creator and co-writer) has money, but no significant other—though the delightful Gavin (Alexander Nunez) seems interested. Before long, Grandma and Grandpa are navigating dating apps (HUMPR), nude beaches, drag shows, the gay village and more. This is as fun a show as any I’ve seen this year. The series is currently making the rounds of the queer film festivals, and deservedly so. Coming out at any age isn’t easy, but at seventy, there’s a lot of guilt and regrets about wasted time and a lot of (understandable) confusion



i heard  
a crow before  
i was born

jules delorme

“Some of his words hit hard and fast, and others leave you lying in the sunshine.”  
—NORMA DUNNING

“Jules Delorme’s exploration of self through the eyes of being ‘half white on the reserve and half Indian in the city’ speaks to his vast experience as a Kanien’kehá:ka [Mohawk] man in Canada.”  
— Norma Dunning

GOOSE LANE

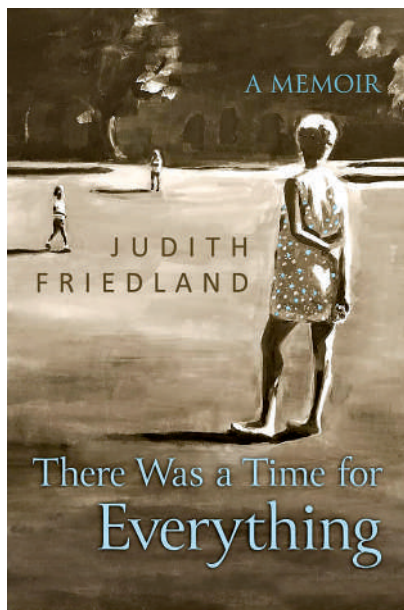
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about the new world. So, grab your feather boas and enjoy the ride.

—Peggy Thompson

### AN ORDINARY LIFE?

**There Was a Time for Everything** (University of Toronto Press) by Judith Friedland is the kind of memoir which is often written for personal satisfaction, or for the interest of extended family, but rarely published. What is fascinating about the book is not what makes Friedland notable, but rather the sections which portray the ordinary parts of life. Friedland was born in 1939 and grew up in the milieu of Toronto's Jewish middle class, with a father and maternal grandparents who had arrived as poor immigrants. She married a boy from a similar background. She was smart and went to university, but after marriage it was her husband, Marty, who called the shots. For decades, their life revolved around his legal career, which included several stints living abroad. Friedland's life was giving birth and looking after children. But this wasn't enough, and she found ways to restart her career in the caring professions (which were considered suitable for women). At the time Friedland trained, her field of occupational therapy was still focussed on the therapeutic advantages of crafts like basket-making, weaving and ceramics. She saw it transform into a modern profession with more emphasis on cognitive science and the practical needs of people with illness and disabilities. The nuances of occupational therapy and its history are a revelation—what an unusual discipline! Friedland, among others, managed to integrate her field into the Canadian medical system but often struggled to be taken seriously. Eventually, Friedland asked the question: why is it acceptable for



women to be considered adjuncts and second-class citizens at home and in the workplace? She did not find easy answers. But she did take action, and her ambition grew until she became a leading figure in occupational therapy, eventually becoming an esteemed academic, researcher and administrator. This

is her “noteworthy” accomplishment, but the many chapters about her professional life become dull. Each academic success is recorded in more detail than necessary, and though her resume is impressive, Friedland doesn't need to list her career accolades to deserve attention. Her descriptions of the ups and downs of her life are a prompt for all readers to ask questions about how we think about our own lives and how we will be remembered by others. —Kristina Rothstein

### OPIOIDS AND OTHER DEMONS

Barbara Kingsolver's **Demon Copperhead** (HarperCollins) is a reimagining of Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield*, set in Appalachia in the midst of the opioid epidemic, starting in the 1990s and moving into the 2000s. It weighs in at the Dickensian length of 560 pages (the audiobook is twenty one hours). After

First came **Modern Fables.**  
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“Mikka Jacobsen probes the darkness that lurks around the edges of childhood and young womanhood with a gaze as unflinching and unsettling as Heather O'Neill's.” – Lisa Alward



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feeling daunted by all this for the year plus since the book's release, I chose the audiobook, which is wonderfully read by Charlie Thurston. When Kingsolver was on a book tour in Britain in 2018, she saw an ad for the "Bleak House B&B," a house where Dickens had lived. Kingsolver had been searching for a way to channel her fury over the treatment of Appalachia, her birthplace and home, from the exploitative extraction industries of timber, coal, tobacco and finally opioids. And there, sitting at Dickens's own desk, she heard him say, "Let the child tell the novel." Hence *Demon*'s first line, harkening back to *David Copperfield*: "First, I got myself born." There are sixty-four characters in *Demon Copperhead*, so many that Kingsolver used a spreadsheet to plot their journeys. His mother is a teenage addict, and *Demon* is raised partly by the neighbouring Peggot clan who weave in and out of the story. After his mother's fatal overdose, he's exploited by a foster placement on a farm where the foster kids are used as labour for the tobacco harvest and then "returned" when the harvest is done. He goes on to become a high school football hero, but after an injury, the painkillers kick in and his downfall becomes

a certainty. How he climbs back out is the heart of this epic story. One of Kingsolver's daughters is a mental health worker for children (as one of the characters in her book is studying to become), and when Kingsolver writes about children in Appalachia who are orphans, caused by the opioid deaths of their parents, it rings true. The book is also beautiful; Kingsolver has a gift for descriptions of the natural world, and Appalachia comes alive through *Demon*'s eyes. I would happily listen to another twenty one hours. —Peggy Thompson

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### MEMORIES OF TWO BOYHOODS

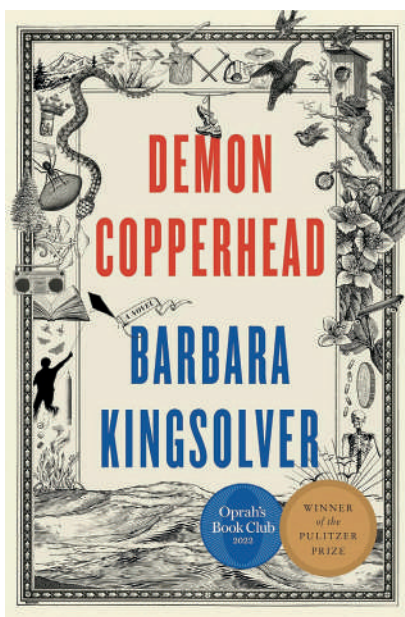
By my rough count there are just over eleven thousand words in **Memories Look at Me** (New Directions), a slim, shirt-pocket-sized volume described as a "lyrical autobiography about growing up in Sweden," written by the late Tomas Tranströmer, the Swedish poet and recipient of the 2011 Nobel Prize in Literature. A more accurate description might be "notes toward an autobiography," since the eight fragmentary chapters only take us up to 1946, when Tranströmer was fifteen years old. Chief among the boyhood fascinations that helped to inform his later life was a love for museums—the Natural History Museum in particular—and Tranströmer describes his own insect collection, inspired by the museum's displays and housed in the family's summerhouse: "jam jars with dead insects and a display board for butterflies. And lingering everywhere: the smell of ethyl acetate, a smell I carried with me since I always had a tin of this insect killer in my pocket." Not surprisingly, Tranströmer grew up a solitary boy, "acutely aware of the danger of being regarded as an outsider because at heart I suspected I was

one. I was absorbed in interests that no normal boy had." Perhaps this is the temperament, and these the conditions, that help to form a great poet. What we have here is lovely, but I wanted more; lyrical or not, eleven thousand words are insufficient to tell Tranströmer's life, or to properly illuminate his world view. The late Harry Crews also wrote a memoir of his boyhood, recently republished by Penguin Classics. **A Childhood** is Crews's vivid account of his family's hardscrabble life in rural Georgia during the Depression. It was a world so grim, so circumscribed, that "when something went wrong, it almost always brought something else down with it;" at times you wonder that Crews survived to adulthood. "It was a hard time in that land, and a lot of men did things for which they were ashamed and suffered for the rest of their lives." —Liam Macphail

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### A FAMILIAR GRIEF

Grief is a subject so universal it seems incredulous that there would be anything more to say about it that hasn't already been said, and yet Miranda Pearson's most recent collection, **Bridestones** (McGill-Queen's University Press), says the unsaid in a way that makes it completely familiar. In "The White Room," the poem that opens the collection, Pearson describes the moment after her mother takes her last breath, in a statement as obvious as it is profoundly resonant: "I was alone." In "Clearance," Pearson finds meaning in that excruciating, yet strangely mundane experience—the emptying of a dead parent's house. The gradual hollowing-out of her mother's house becomes a terrifying and accurate image of loss. The poem concludes with a series of meditations on the final absence of parents, a late-in-life orphaning that bewilders,





in a landscape fractured by grief and shadowed by scudding clouds, drenched with rain. The collection is grounded in closely observed places—England, Canada, the neighbourhoods of Vancouver (Trout Lake, Kitsilano)—and language that is clear and precise; simple sentences serve as a reminder that fewer words can sometimes make space for deeper emotional resonance. It’s been a pleasure to see Pearson’s growing mastery of craft displayed in her five previous volumes; *Bridestones* is a remarkable achievement. —*Geoff Inverarity*

### LIVING LA VIE FRANÇAISE

Before being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2022, Annie Ernaux had enjoyed considerable success in France for her slim volumes of what might now be called “autofiction,” works investigating key events and core relationships from her past and published over the past forty-plus years. Most are available in English translation from Seven Stories Press, including **Happening** (translated by Tanya Leslie), an unflinching account of an abortion Ernaux undertook in 1963 when she was a university student

in Rouen, France. Ernaux sifts through memories and revisits journal entries, framing her own specific circumstances within the broader context of France in 1963, when abortion was still punishable by fines or imprisonment, possibly even—for “those physicians, midwives, pharmacists and other individuals guilty of suggesting or encouraging such practices”—by temporary or permanent loss of “the right to exercise their profession.” Ernaux’s breakthrough to a wider readership in English came in 2017 with **The Years** (translated by Alison L. Strayer, a Canadian), a kind of collective, or generational (rather than personal), memoir of *la vie Française* between the 1940s and (almost) present day. In writing *The Years*, Ernaux deliberately avoided use of the first person, choosing instead what she refers to as a “*je collectif*.” Strayer describes the difficulties this caused her as a translator:

“The shifts [between pronouns in the original French] imply that ‘we’ and ‘one’ (that is, *nous* and *on*) contain an ‘I’ or a ‘them,’ a ‘her,’ ‘him’ and ‘you,’ a ‘someone’ or ‘some people’—truly *collectif*!” By means of this simple grammatical device, Ernaux’s deeply-considered recollections—of banalities such as the films “one” watched and the events which occupied “one’s” thoughts at particular points in time—transform an otherwise nondescript and anonymous citizen of France into an archetypal Frenchwoman. In **A Girl’s Story** (also translated by Strayer), Ernaux revisits the girl she was at eighteen, “her desire and madness, her idiocy and pride, her hunger and her blood that ceased to flow,” during a summer more than fifty years earlier, when “the girl of ’58” was “swept away inside the desire and the will of a single Other.” —*H.R. Straw*

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# The GEIST Cryptic Crossword

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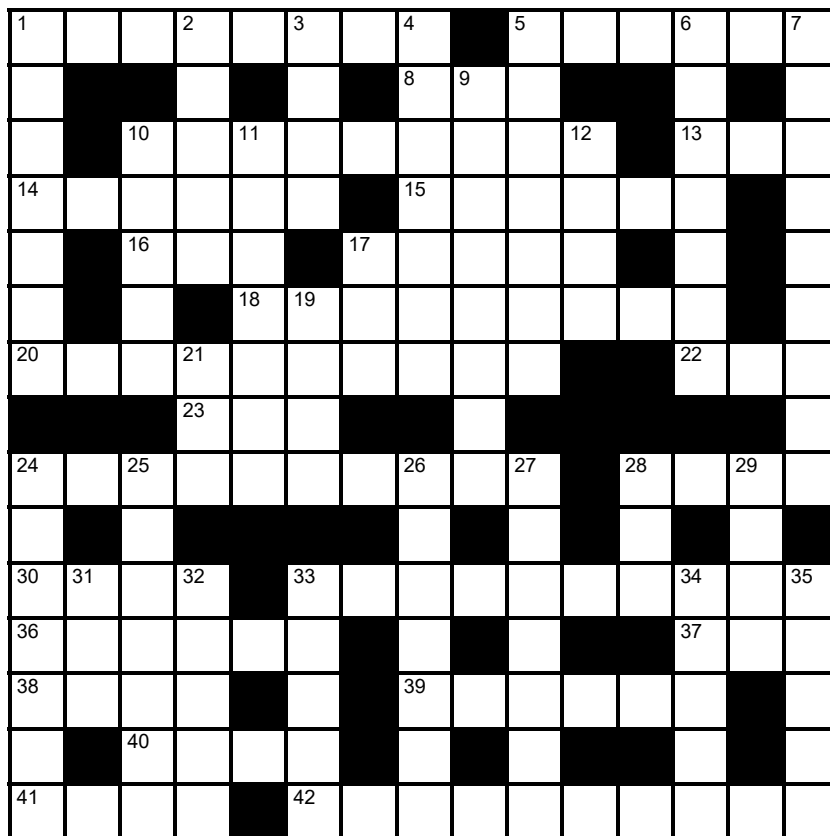
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## ACROSS

- 1 Let's pray that our votes keep us out of Hell
- 5 Let's get together to swear and then vote on the crows
- 8 The main key to the enterprise is the management of the group (abbrev)
- 10 Officially, she's lying down on the job
- 13 Of course that's to be expected, Jack
- 14 I'm dying to get decorated when she leaves
- 15 Ha ha! Things are pretty light around here!
- 16 Sounds like James should work out!
- 17 She's wild about cats and has a flare for dogs
- 18 The politicians say we'll get primroses
- 20 All dorks share a love of animals and surprise winners (2)
- 22 Awww, please don't tell me that! (abbrev)
- 23 Now isn't he just dandy?
- 24 Use cart six, Ted, and you'll get 7% back on your cards (2)
- 28 Let's dance in there before the storm!
- 30 Both Rays remember those '60s shags
- 33 We need to study the GOP ploys he asked about
- 36 Oh god, not that sweet stuff again!
- 37 Maybe we can get there through the dome
- 38 The person who drew that toon knew something
- 39 OMG, her twin was on a mission!
- 40 Usually the heat is on when you're below 32
- 41 Sounds like that truck ripped through the grass
- 42 So gross art is fine if it's made by commoners?



## DOWN

- 1 Where is this second-grade sandwich entitled to go?
- 2 That funny girl smokes a pack of butts a day
- 3 Saul eats southern potatoes
- 4 What's with all those beaver pictures?
- 5 Angus always asks questions, doesn't he?
- 6 That icy spot is identical to the one he wrote about
- 7 The short (paper) one is best when mixed in risotto
- 9 When you hang with your tribe, see if you can avoid being the most drunk
- 10 First I met the Finn but then he sounded pissed off
- 11 Heal a sore arm? Chop it but don't light it!
- 12 How much for the four-letter square one?
- 17 He's not against golf
- 19 Don't lure me into your twisted strands!
- 21 First, Harland's poultry was fast (abbrev)
- 24 Lots of people are good, but can they be good ballet dancers?
- 25 Simon tried out but he just doesn't have that "je ne sais quoi" (2)

- 26 Rearrange those Asian shoots so we can have a bake-in
- 27 We learned that some institutions are fishy
- 28 London gestures are expressive (abbrev)
- 29 Use your finger to stir the millet
- 31 I really want that Asian coin
- 32 She votes for an induction
- 33 Fork over that setting!
- 34 Is there a quarter around this mouldy area?
- 35 My favourite mode of transport in Syria

*Solution to Puzzle 127*

R	I	C	E	B	I	R	D	S		P	L	U	M	B
I	A	A	E	A	E	N	O							
M	A	R	O	C	B	U	T	T	E	R	F	L	Y	
I	P	K	B	E	S	O	A	P						
E	O	S	P	E	E	D	O	P	I	N	G			
S	O	T						O	V	E	R	O		
T	O	L	E	R	A	T	E	P	W	G				
			C	O	M	A	L	S	W	A	M	G		
F	R	O	G	K	I	C	K			Y	A	W	L	
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U	N	I	T			F	L	I	P	P	E	R	S	
F	G	A	S		A	L	O	E	V	E	R	A		
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E			O	I	I					R	S	I	T	
D	O	G	P	A	D	D	L	E		S	U	I	T	



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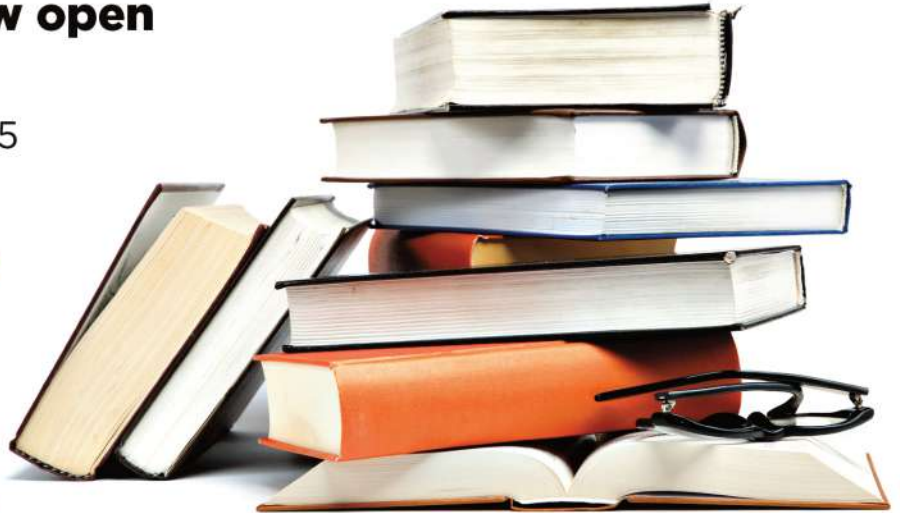
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