

GEIST

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GEIST

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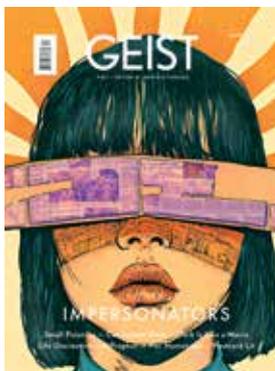
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COVER: *News*, 2025, digital illustration by Alena Webber. A note from Alena, October 2025: “*News* explores how external narratives and media influence our identities. It reminds us that we’re often shaped and reshaped by the information around us. I hope to create a space for viewers to consider what remains real in an era of constant influence.”

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MISCELLANY

GEIST IS 35

Geist magazine began as a 40-page newsprint publication in the living room of founders Stephen Osborne and Mary Schendlinger in 1990. That's the same year Sinéad O'Connor released her version of "Nothing Compares 2 U," A.S. Byatt won the Booker Prize for *Possession*, and *Twin Peaks* first aired its mix of small-town drama and surreal mystery. Global events included the launch of the Hubble Space Telescope, the reunification of East and West Germany, and the release of Nelson Mandela after twenty-seven years in prison—a historic moment in South Africa's fight to end apartheid. It was a year that hinted at the shape of the decade to come, one caught between analog and digital worlds, new-age optimism and millennial anxiety.

We're delighted to have published the work of so many emerging and established writers and artists from across the country during the last thirty-five years. When putting together this issue, we were curious about what survives from the '90s in our attention spans, dreams, aesthetics and modes of resistance. Many of the pieces within these pages grapple with that question, while others focus more closely on the present. All of them feel vital and alive, their words and images rippling into the future.

Time is weird—let's celebrate that.

—*The Editors*

NOTEWORTHY

Trivia gathered while compiling this issue: Pizza Hut's iconic red roof—its shape so distinctive it could easily be

spotted from the highway—was designed in 1969 by Richard D. Burke, an architect from Wichita, Kansas. In the 2024 documentary *Slice of Life*, filmmakers Matthew Salleh and Rose Tucker travel the US to explore the afterlives of former Pizza Hut buildings, now repurposed as an LGBTQ+ church, a karaoke bar, a cannabis dispensary, and other reincarnations. Pizza Hut also appears as an unlikely site of reinvention in Adèle Barclay's "Curriculum Vitae" on page 9.

A FRAME WITHIN A FRAME

Readers will find a reference to this photograph in Kasia Van Schaik's feature essay, "The Uncreative Life." It depicts the author inside an abandoned sugar factory in Berlin, where a piece of graffiti art implores her to *notice what you notice* (the perfect opening for a creative prompt). In the spirit of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, Van Schaik's essay blends memoir, literary essay, and dream imagery to ask what conditions are needed for women to create art. See page 44 for more rooms within rooms.



Image courtesy of Kasia Van Schaik.

GEIST IS THE WORD

Word Vancouver, a literary festival, started off weird: no rain, despite the atmospheric river forecast. The local writing community flocked downtown to Robson Square. The *Geist* team stacked still-warm copies of issue 130 next to our brand-new line of captioned hats. Crowds of

happy readers meandered through and browsed the literary delights at our table, re-energizing us like a bolt of sunlight. As the festival wrapped, a man crushed a *Geist* cap onto his head, grinned, and paid. His new hat read like an updated forecast: “Weird & Wonderful.”

OVERHEARD



June 2025, emergency room cubicle, Delta, BC. Overheard by Tara McGuire, comic by Jia 何家嘉. Find out more at geist.com/overheard

WRITE TO GEIST

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

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Allan Bealy is a Canadian art director, graphic designer and artist from Montréal, QC, living in Brooklyn, NY. He was a member of Véhicule Art in Montréal during the 1970s, a cooperative art space dedicated to exploring marginalized as well as internationally recognized contemporary artists and art forms. Allan edited the arts magazine *DaVinci* and co-published *Benzene* along with Benzene Editions. He now pursues an independent art practice focusing on mixed media and collage.

William Bessai-Saul is a cartoonist and filmmaker who lives in Regina, SK. Bessai-Saul began his daily comic “Bird People” in 2023, which has since appeared in newspapers, art galleries, animation, guerrilla publication, and interpretive dance. For more mayhem, visit Bessai-Saul’s web comic at bird-people.thecomicseries.com and his radio show, “Sunday Funnies” at accessnowradio.ca/radio/sunday-funnies.

Eva Dominelli is an illustrator, animator and painter living in Vancouver, BC. A graduate of Emily Carr University, her work blends personal myth, social commentary, and dreamlike

imagery, inviting reflection on belonging and the poetic spaces between. Find out more at evadominelli.com or @eva.avenue on Instagram.

Surya Govender is a queer artist living on Coast Salish territory in Vancouver, BC. Her work tends toward narrative, focusing on juxtapositions that disrupt the expected. She loves to play with paint, paper, textiles, and colour. She has published work in Canada, the US and the UK. Find her @textandtextile on Instagram.

Rawan Hassan روان حسن (she/her) is an interdisciplinary visual artist living on the unceded and unsundered land of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sk̓wxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səlilwətaʔ (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations. She hopes that her practice might open up conversations on Palestinian identity, grief, resilience, resistance against erasure, ongoing occupation, colonization and potential forms of Palestinian futurism.

Jia 何家嘉 (Michelle Ha, she/her) is a second-generation Chinese Canadian artist and editor living on the unceded territory of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm, Sk̓wxwú7mesh, and səlilwətaʔ Nations.

She’s a part-time artist and full-time raccoon (her grubby little hands will go for anything purple). Jia is self-taught and mainly works in digital. Find her art @justjaart on Cara.

Nora Kelly (she/her) is an illustrator, oil painter and muralist who lives in Montréal, QC. She currently works as a freelance editorial illustrator for online and print media outlets, designing book covers and illustrating children’s books. Her artwork can be found in Features and throughout this issue in a series of commissioned illustrations to celebrate the 35th anniversary of *Geist*. Nora lives with her partner and a Boston terrier named Squid. On the weekends, she sings and plays guitar with her alt-rock band, the Nora Kelly Band. Find her work at norakellyart.com.

Alena Webber (she/her) is an illustrator living in Vancouver, BC, who creates imagery rooted in the complexities of identity and resilience. As a queer and Indigenous Canadian artist, her work explores how people and the world evolve and transform over time. See more of her work at alenawebber.com or @alenawebber on Instagram.

A Prophet in Her Hometown

ANDREW UNGER

No Miriam Toews plaque unveiling would be complete without a baptism



There's a pile of rocks just outside of town that belongs to no one in particular, or so I was assured by my friend Bob, who volunteered his time and skid steer to transport a boulder a few kilometres to the Hawbakers' front yard. Each spring the farmers around here harvest all the rocks from their fields and move them over to the pile. "No one will miss this one," Bob said. "We can take it for free." It was perfect. Not too large. Not too small. Handsome, even. Kara, one of the homeowners, wanted to make sure we chose one that looked "natural" and not at all like a headstone. She didn't want anyone to think that one of Canada's foremost authors was buried in her front yard.

Miriam Toews, who lives in Toronto now, grew up in this house in Steinbach, Manitoba, a small Mennonite community south of Winnipeg. She mentions the house in several of her books, including in the opening lines of her 2004 novel *A Complicated Kindness*. "I live with my father, Ray Nickel, in that low brick bungalow out on highway number twelve. Blue shutters, brown door, one shattered window. Nothing great." The shattered window is fixed now, and it's the door that's blue, not the shutters. I've also been told that the Hawbakers, in contrast to Toews's description, actually think the house is pretty great. They bought it, after all, knowing that Miriam Toews once lived there.

The boulder sat in the front yard for a few weeks before the bronze plaque arrived. It was heavier than I had imagined and affixing it to the stone required skills and tools I did not possess. Bob helped out, but said we needed to find someone who could put caulking around the edge of the plaque. Or was it grout that was required? This is exactly why I needed a guy like Bob in the first place. I had trouble, however, finding someone who was willing and able to do the job. I would like to believe this was because it was summer and the contractors were busy working on multimillion-dollar cabins in Kenora. However, it also crossed my mind that this reluctance to caulk and/or grout the plaque might have something to do with the controversial author we were honouring. Eventually I found Sam, who like Bob was not at all worried that his reputation might be besmirched by association with a Miriam Toews plaque.

The scandal surrounding Toews's books here in Steinbach has waned, but it still exists. There was a time when many Steinbachers accused her of lying or claimed she was airing our dirty laundry in public. Some said she was portraying us as too traditional and conservative, as if, in other contexts, those weren't descriptors we willingly self-applied. I write satire about Mennonites, so I'm used to comments like this. I, too, am told that I'm making Mennonites look bad. I guess these reactions should be no surprise coming from the sort of folks who, just a couple of generations ago, believed that reading novels was a grave sin and that audible laughter was a temptation of Satan.

While Toews has won awards and accolades around the world, until recently she had received no significant recognition in her hometown. In 2016, I wrote a satirical news article with the headline “Massive Miriam Toews Statue to Be Erected in Steinbach.” I grabbed a picture of Joan of Arc astride a horse as the illustration for the piece. Some folks laughed at the absurdity of such an idea. Others, who mistook the article for real news, expressed outrage that Toews would be honoured in such a manner, especially at the expense of good hardworking taxpayers and all that. At the time, a woman from Québec, a big fan of Toews, emailed me to say she knew the article was satire, but wondered whether there was something, anything, in Steinbach that honoured Miriam Toews. She was visiting Winnipeg and was willing to drive out to see it. I had to report that, sadly, there was nothing.

Several years later, Steinbach city council introduced a plan to create honorary street signs to recognize significant Steinbachers, those half-circle signs that sit atop the real ones. This was the perfect opportunity to honour Toews, and I wrote a four-page proposal to the council, co-signed by a group of prominent locals, outlining why she should be recognized by the city. I even met with the mayor.

But the street sign never happened. The council hemmed and hawed, brushing aside my plan, not officially saying no and not officially saying yes. I had a few private conversations with council members. However, my sign proposal was never put to a vote. I wasn't even given a chance to formally present it at a council meeting. I imagine they figured it was a lose-lose situation. If they officially honoured Toews, they'd upset the people in town who don't like her books. If they officially turned it down, on the other hand, they'd look like fools and garner more bad press. So

Dark Is Like a Movie

OWEN TORREY

There isn't sometimes music, though there is always pattern parsed from noise, noise which turns us at least briefly back towards the part of the world we once considered to call ourselves alone from.

Yes certain songs from childhood, more like chants, persisted. Anthems in the morning for the new year of each night. Then a long rotation spun centuries apart at violence's distance, turning grooves deeper

into the dirt, grooves which when our eyes passed over them, like yours here, seemed to make some muffled sound in partial ridges, from tracks that tracks had left in leaving. And I could stand alone as I heard

myself in the fields of that place. And imagine each last shot dispatched into the head's back. Revolution happened swiftly, but never at once, needing more than one note to be remembered as a song. Our stories

came to us as if leaked at length from future jukeboxes. Our lives weren't long. Just the length to think ourselves different people from those whose first chants we once sang, saying things who we were now would never say.

Owen Torrey is a writer from Toronto, ON. His work has appeared in the Literary Review of Canada, A Public Space, Indiana Review, Gulf Coast, Best Canadian Poetry, and elsewhere. His debut collection, Unseasonal, is forthcoming from Véhicule Press.

far the only individual honoured with a sign is Jim Penner, a former MLA and beloved grocery store tycoon. They're clearly playing it safe.

In early 2024, I was sitting in the lounge of an old Winnipeg steakhouse when my friend, the journalist Josiah Neufeld, happened to mention that his cousin and her husband had just bought the old Miriam Toews house. “They're fans of hers. They're wondering if the city might put up a plaque.”

I chuckled. I knew that wasn't going to happen; Steinbach city council wouldn't even approve a street sign. As I relayed the story to Neufeld, I caught myself. “But it's private property, right?” I knew that if we did our measurements correctly and kept the plaque well away from the curb, there was nothing they could do to stop us, other than maybe drive by with the plow and cover it with snow in the winter. All it would take was a bit of

money. As traditional and conservative as us southern Manitobans are, I thought an online fundraiser might do the trick. I immediately contacted the Hawbakers.

The funds came in quickly, faster than I expected, much of it from local residents. Steinbachers, many of us at least, wanted to honour Toews right here in her hometown. As expected, there were a couple of angry messages on social media, but it was too late. We already had the funds.

I wrote the text for the plaque, mentioning Toews's time at the house, her family, and her literary contributions. I sent it to her for approval. Given her difficult relationship with Steinbach, I didn't want to put a permanent monument in that front yard if she wasn't comfortable with it. After all, weren't the prophets of old—if their message was rejected—told to leave town, shake the dust from their feet, and never return? I was happy to hear that Toews had no such dust-shaking inclinations toward Steinbach. Instead, she gave us her blessing.

So, there we were a few months later, the plaque well-caulked, standing on the sidewalk in front of the "low brick bungalow out on highway number twelve." We placed a quilt over the boulder, the sort our Mennonite grandmothers made, and then, after a few words, we unveiled the plaque. There was applause and a flurry of photographs. A car drove by and honked—teenagers on a joyride. There were no protests, just appreciation. It was raining by then. Earlier, I had joked with Toews via email that no "Miriam Toews plaque unveiling" would be complete without a baptism.

A few blocks away on Main Street, a standing-room-only crowd gathered at the Public Brewhouse and Gallery. I thought it fitting to meet

at a microbrewery in the same town that Toews once noted had banned dancing, smoking, and drinking, among other vices. I asked several authors to read their favourite sections of Toews's novels. We ate plautz and cheese curds and dill pickles, all Mennonite delicacies of a sort. We clinked beverages. Too often, folks in Steinbach misunderstand Toews's work. They see it only as an attack, only as critique. Here was a crowd who understood that when Toews writes about our town, there is a certain kindness, a complicated one, in her depiction. There's pain

and suffering, but also humour and community. On that evening there were some tears, but much laughter, too. Toews was not there—she was in Poland at the time—but it felt like she was present.

Later she told me, "I'm choosing to embrace this love and positivity . . . and ignore the other stuff, the negative stuff, and in this way I can just feel affection and love back for my home town, and

for everyone in it, and for my life there and my roots there."

Toews has many fans and supporters in Steinbach, including the folks who donated to pay for the plaque and showed up when it was unveiled. The Hawbakers say they often see people stopping at the rock in their front yard to read the inscription. This past winter, I drove by one evening and saw a couple standing there in a gentle snowfall, their figures illuminated by the street light. They reached out, brushing snow from the stone to read the words underneath. We may not have a Miriam Toews statue in town, but we have a bronze plaque. More importantly, we have her books, and even if the grout doesn't hold, her words can never be taken from us.

Andrew Unger is author of the novel Once Removed and the satirical news website The Unger Review. In 2021, a selection of his articles was published as The Best of the Bonnet. His latest book, Just Satire: Comedy and Commentary in an Age of Chaos, will be published in 2026.



Curriculum Vitae

ADÈLE BARCLAY

Where does life happen?

W elcome to Pizza Hat, muffin," Elissa says and plops a giant, plasticized menu in front of me on the wide, round table. When I was little, I called the chain restaurant Pizza Hat—mistaking the hut-like roof structure for a sunhat.

On this humid weeknight in early July, the restaurant is dead—who wants a stuffed crust pizza during a heatwave? The big red booths are empty, and the dingy carpet has

the aura of an abandoned dance floor. Scratchy speakers emit Creed's "Higher" on the alternative rock station. I'm not here because I have a particular fondness for the thick greasy pies, but because meals, especially free ones, taste better when they come from Elissa. I'm also grateful to be out of the house. I want to observe my sister at work and try to siphon a bit of the independence this job has granted her. I'll have to wait another

year until it's legal for me to have a job beyond babysitting.

With the magic of a wink, my sister slips me into her section to serve me free pizza and ice cream from the sundae bar—a treat for my thirteenth birthday. Her curls are pinned back with a big clip. She is dainty in her uniform of all black. As I scour the giant menu, she beams at me and sets down a big red glass with a bumpy texture, brimming with ice and tap water.

The cushioned bench deflates underneath me, and the table is comically large for a single diner. But I don't mind. Even if I'm a bit lonely, I like being here solo. I don't have to worry about Dad yelling at a server if the food is too dry or feel like dying when Mom accuses Dad of ogling a waitress.

Here in the booth, my eyes widen at the selections, announced with bold sans serif fonts and illuminated with images of gooey pan pizza, each slice dripping with cheese. While we sometimes order pizza at home, mostly for birthdays, Dad would never let us order these stuffed-crust monstrosities.

Working as a server unlocks new worlds for Elissa. She is constantly out of the house, earning money and partying with her co-workers. My sister works alongside a ragtag crew of punk boys who spray the pizzas with extra garlic oil and stuff their crusts with stringy cheese. She has moved on from her previous gig as a cook at the Beach House Bistro and in doing so, shifted from kitchen to front of house. After putting in her time as a busgirl, seating cranky families and cleaning spills, she has finally emerged as a server. Now that she's front of house, she dresses up and wears a full face of make-up—mascara, burgundy lipstick, shimmering baby blue eyeshadow. She dabs her zits with Cover Girl concealer, scrunches her curls with sticky mousse and pins them into cute half-updos. She sports a name

tag and wraps a black apron around her waist, its pockets brimming with loose change that spills with a clatter onto the floor of her bedroom. Server pay is five dollars an hour, plus tips.

I order a Caesar salad, soggy with creamy dressing, and a thick pepperoni pizza all to myself. Elissa arrives with the pizza, sizzling on a skillet. I have to dig it out with a triangular spatula, careful to not burn myself as the pizza and dish radiate heat. As I eat, I watch Elissa buzz around the dining room—its dark-hued décor and redbrick walls a sharp contrast to the summer sky outside—attending to the small handful of other diners and jotting down

In my sister's hands, I am a 13-year-old princess being served endless pizza at no charge. A tween has never dined so opulently as me, tucked into a round booth at a mostly empty Pizza Hut, where my sister works as a Queen Bee server with her crew of punk boy squires and jesters who are all definitely in love with her.

I marvel at how my sister deftly weaves through the restaurant, collecting tips from customers and joking with her pals in the kitchen. At home Dad screams at her for being a fuck-up—failing math, breaking curfew, smoking cigarettes. He even elbowed her in the face when he found her



their orders on a notepad. I notice how she greets her customers, especially the kids, with an exuberant smile, delighting in refilling their sodas and delivering pizzas bubbling with molten cheese.

Early evening sun trickles in, its light slicing parallelograms into the velvet benches and busily patterned maroon carpet. Elissa checks in on me between customers and, when it's extra slow, she joins me for a slice.

"Do you like serving?" I ask as Elissa picks a long string of cheese to drop into her mouth.

"Eh, the pay's garbage. And tips at chains aren't great. But the manager doesn't care what we do. I like the freedom."

booze stash. But here, Elissa is capable and in charge.

Her boyfriend, baby-faced Josh, who walks hours across town every day after school to knock on our door, works in the kitchen. He and his kitchen mates enjoy escalating the antics afforded by industrial vats of pizza ingredients and lax supervision. The boys toss and sculpt balls of pizza like Play-Doh. Dark-haired and acne-scarred McBain, who in a few years will fatally pass out on the train tracks, scrawls *help me* onto a piece of paper and folds it into the middle of a pizza destined for delivery.

The kitchen punks chase each other with cans of spray-on garlic oil, unleashing sticky clouds into the air.

The pizzas are doused with the oil spray way more times than they're supposed to be, and emerge from the ovens soaking and crisp, practically deep-fried. These boys may as well be the cast of *Jackass: Pizza Edition*, as they test the boundaries of what chain restaurant pizzas and their teenage bodies can endure. As a gag, Josh screams and smashes his face into the stretched-out dough, then tops the ridges of his facial imprint with sauce and cheese, baking the impression into the dough before sending the order out to a diner.

Sam, from Elissa's Beach House Bistro days, works here too as a delivery guy, slinging boxes of pizza around town in his car. My sister gets nauseously frustrated by his comments about one of the younger busgirls, who's only fourteen. He's always bragging about what he'd like to do to her. My sister is known in their gang for her crass, vulgar humour. Despite her hyper-feminine appearance, she's like one of the guys. But she draws a barbed-wire line at Sam's ogling of underage girls, and yells at him to *shut the fuck up!* whenever she hears him creeping. Obviously, Sam grows up to be a cop.

While I don't get to glimpse the kitchen shenanigans from my corner booth, I feel special and smug in the knowledge that my sister has commanded her punk boys to cook a pizza just for me—stuffing the crusts with extra cheese. Having heard the details of their legendary kitchen pranks, I ask her to make sure they don't spray my pizza with extra garlic oil. She laughs and reassures me that she'll double-check.

Entering teenhood in humid early summer, freshly released from school, is boring. Everyone's packed up and gone away for the long weekend, wisely skipping town and the oppressive Southern Ontario heatwaves. I'm grateful to my sister for conjuring this all-you-can-eat free pizza celebration for me. I sip my ginger ale, enjoy cool

gusts from the AC, and pretend I'm in one of those TV sitcoms where people hang out at a local bar and the customers and staff are all friends who crack jokes and date each other.

Where does life happen? I ask the menu illustrated with gargantuan pizzas.

Where do people go to live? I ask the flickering red-and-white Tiffany-style chandelier emblazoned with *Pizza Hut*.

TV suggests bars and coffee shops, and so as far as I can tell, sitting at a Pizza Hut run by a bunch of older teens is the closest I can get to this thing called life.

Elissa, as my Willy Wonka, encourages me to fill my cup at the sundae bar. A twitch of mischief lifts her tweezed brows and curls her glossy lips into a conspiratorial smirk. The sundae bar is only \$1.99 after 4:00 p.m., but, still, it's a thrill to have her sneak me in.

When I pull the lever to swirl vanilla soft serve into a clunky dessert dish, it dribbles over the side. I survey the wealth of toppings and syrups: chocolate and butterscotch chips, off-brand Smarties, sugary pellets of Nerdz candy, peanuts, rainbow bullets of sprinkles, chocolate, butterscotch, and strawberry sauces. It's probably better to be selective and decorate the ice cream with a few choice garnishes, but I get lost and dive into the sea of candy and liquid sugar. Something about becoming a teenager and Elissa's granting me access to the sundae bar makes me go wild. I dazzle the soft serve with every multicoloured garnish until it's a melting rainbow sculpture.

Admittedly, I'm a little too old for the sundae bar's charms, but this early dinner is a treat bestowed upon me by my sister. I dig into my sundae smothered in a noxious blend of sauces. The sweetness spikes my blood dizzy until I hear buzzing in my ears. I feel like I've taken a turn

on the teacups ride that comes to town every year for the agricultural fall fair. The sundae tastes like unicorn puke.

At the booth, I wait for my sister to return as I gaze across the near-empty room over the musty carpets and worn wood benches. Sixpence None the Richer's "Kiss Me" chimes softly in the background. Dust shimmers like galaxies of faraway stars in the golden light. I am inching closer to adulthood, practically fully grown at this point—dining at a restaurant on my own. I feel so

free—to order another refill of soda, to loiter and lean back against my cushioned seat. My sister, at nineteen, has woven me into her world of pizza, paycheques and pranks. She has heralded me into a mature landscape at a table where, though I hang out mostly alone while she works, I'm not beholden to the rules of our father's table, his fiefdom where he dispenses judgements and tirades. When we eat dinner, he holds court, re-enacting tiffs with coworkers, emulating accents from other cultures. He serves himself seconds and thirds and then, when his shame kicks in, he admonishes me for buttering my bread.

Pizza Hut, however, is Elissa's queendom.

I eye the shiny metal of the ice cream dispenser. My belly bursts full. I get up for more.



Adèle Barclay is the winner of the Fiddlehead's 2022 Fiction Contest, TNQ's 2025 Edna Staebler Personal Essay Contest, and a 2025 National Magazine Gold Award. They are the author of If I Were in a Cage I'd Reach Out for You, which won the Dorothy Livesay Poetry Prize, and Renaissance Normcore.

I Want to Believe

MORGAN LEATHEM VENTURA

for Fox Mulder, after the X-Files

My cousin claims she saw Bigfoot on a dirt road in Montana
but my family doesn't believe her. Once I saw a ghost drinking
orange juice in my kitchen late at night and told no one. I'd just returned
from Belfast, haunted by more than antique ruins. I cannot think of my family

without thinking of museums. The closest word in the English language to museum is
mausoleum. My brother says I'm obsessed with the dead and the weird. It's true—
I cannot stop searching. I moved to the desert in search of the unexplained before
I moved to Ireland in search of my D[e]ad. I thought it was lighthearted, this pursuit
of eccentric truth. I read somewhere that UFO sightings are symptoms of grief.

I've never seen aliens, but my gods, I want to believe.

What might this mean for my grief? If I do not believe in my grief, is this why
I'm haunted? I read somewhere that belief in ghosts comes by experience,
not the other way around. Belief is the end of experience, experience the means
to belief. I want to believe that my father loved us, that he'll come back.

My belief precedes experience. Is this why he does not come back?
My belief is the problem. Perhaps if I ignore the ghosts, I can exorcise my beliefs.
I can say it never happened. He never happened. Maybe even I never happened.

Absence is strange, always present but not.

One summer, I saw him in the crowds of Michigan Avenue. Tall and thin,
spectacled and snowy-haired. I pushed against gaggles of tourists, past overflowing
trash bins melting in Chicago's humid heat. To my right I saw petrified lions
flanking the hungry mouth to an art museum full of other lost souls. I begged.

I searched the street but to no avail. In Ireland, they say that ghosts are chained
to this world by their earthly affection. My father is alive, bound here by fear
instead of love. On strange nights, I hear a weeping that I know is not mine.
It gets closer so I count the years aloud as if someone might hear.

It will be 29 years this September.

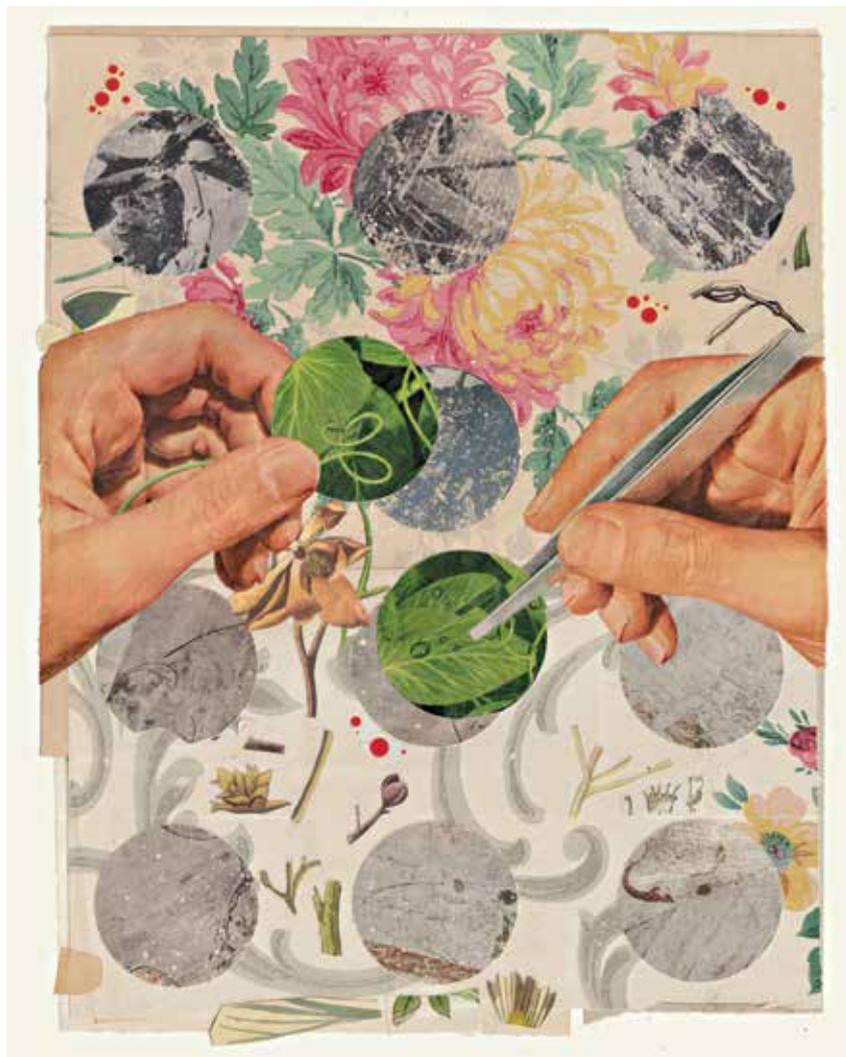
I do not want to believe.

Morgan Leathem Ventura is a writer, poet and curator. Their poetry and prose appear in Poetry Ireland Review, Banshee, Propel, Augur, Al Jazeera, and Best Canadian Essays 2021. Shortlisted for the 2023 Listowel Writers' Week Poetry Collection Award, Morgan holds an MA from the Seamus Heaney Centre. She lives in Ireland and Canada.

Small Potatoes

KATHERINE J BARRETT

The tubers, the hand-me-down lab, a solitary bid to engineer Canada's food



The door to my workplace was closed but neatly labelled “Fletcher.” Black letters etched in a strip of plastic. Who was Fletcher? I was not interviewed by anyone named Fletcher. I’d never heard the name in relation to my field of research. Never mind. Why would I expect a new nameplate on my first day, fresh from my degree? Besides, the anachronism felt in keeping with the building; its dark hallways and marble floors had a quaint 1940s feel. In fact, the place felt forgotten out on the edge of campus, a two-storey curio

among the high-rises and terraced residences that seemed to sprout by the week. Yet this curio housed a federal research station. I stood within a cluster of laboratories entrusted with advancing science for the public good. So I had *some* expectations for my first day: cabinets stocked with sterile flasks and cylinders, a bustling team of researchers, a project poised to soar.

I found a silent room, one stained lab coat on a hook. Half-empty reagent bottles littered a soapstone bench. Beakers, long dry, upside down

on the drain rack; stacks of corroding tins in the fume hood. I flicked on the fluorescent lights in a tiny office at the back of the lab. It held a clunky wooden desk and matching swivel chair. On the bookshelves, bound academic journals dated back, yes, to the 1940s. The metal wastepaper bin brimmed with yellowing paper towels, pencil shavings and, I looked closer, a nest of tiny eraser-pink mice wriggling together for warmth. My new job—but not my new lab. All of this belonged to Fletcher, or to the legend of Fletcher.

While I’d spend much of the next two years working alone in this lab, I was part of a slightly larger research team. My supervisor, Collin, and the technician, Gina, occupied the lab next door. Collin wielded giant coffee mugs like beer steins. He had a jovial irreverence and often blustered through on his way to meetings with the station admin, or “Buddy” as he called everyone in bureaucracy. Gina, petite and organized, divided her time between Collin’s lab and the greenhouse annexed to the main building. On that first day, Collin took an hour or so to show me around: the coffee room on the second floor; the supply store for pipettes and test tubes; the darkroom at the end of the hall—a room I would come to know well. When he steered me back to the lab, he made no excuse for Fletcher’s name on the door or the lab that still felt occupied. Collin assumed I knew of Fletcher and that his lingering presence was normal, even necessary.

“Best plant breeder the station ever had,” Collin said. “Old school, of course. Not the speediest or tidiest but, boy, he was good.” He glanced around as though Fletcher might reappear any moment. “Yep, a goddamn legend.”

Collin left me with a blank laboratory notebook and a small pile of photocopied research papers, offerings that looked stranded among the clutter on Fletcher’s desk. He seemed suddenly unprepared, almost

apologetic. “I’ll see if I can rustle up more information,” he said, like he was throwing together dinner for last-minute guests.

I settled into the wooden chair, its seat polished with use, and tested Fletcher’s weighty rotary phone for a dial tone. From the drawers of the desk, I gathered half-used pens and half-scrawled index cards and began to contemplate my project. I’d been hired for my experience in genetic engineering, for the work completed during the last year of my degree. That was made clear during my interview, the hiring committee eager for someone versed in the latest procedures. But the specifics of the job remained vague. What, exactly, had I been tasked to do? As I waited—the afternoon, the following day—for Collin’s return, I peeked at the baby mice, their pale skin greying with fur, and replayed my interview for clues to the project’s goals. But I could recall only two of the many questions posed, the final two.

“How would you respond to people who feel genetic engineering is . . . *unnatural*?” They had closed their folders, clasped their hands. “And how would you handle a public, er . . . protest?”

Perhaps these questions lingered in my mind because, unlike all the preceding ones, I hesitated and fumbled for an answer. Or maybe they eclipsed all others because part of me, still inchoate, found them striking. Part of me was drawn to the shimmer of bolder questions underneath. Why do people protest, after all? Even my interviewers appeared at a loss, vexed by these questions from beyond the realm of science. This committee of PhDs had, it seemed, turned to me, a twentysomething fledgling, for insight.

What did I finally say? Words about *objectivity* and *truth*. Words I thought they wanted to hear, words that would land me the job. It took that first week in Fletcher’s office to piece together everything we’d

discussed—and everything that had been omitted. The baby mice had opened their eyes by the time I understood that I’d committed to creating Canada’s first genetically modified potato. The realization made me cringe. It still makes me cringe.

Here in 2025, almost every processed food in North America contains genetically modified ingredients. We’ve grown accustomed to the idea that much of our corn, soy and canola has been altered through genetic engineering. Most of us have grown indifferent: Aren’t these trivial matters in the spiralling neo-fascist, tech-bro-takeover, sixth-extinction trainwreck of today? Isn’t GM food a done deal, any lingering concerns, well, small potatoes?

In 1993, the year I was hired at the research station, GM food was merely an experiment, albeit one fervently pursued. The first successful alteration of plants through recombinant DNA technology—combining genetic material from several organisms into one—was announced ten years earlier by competing university labs and Monsanto, then the major corporate proponent of GM technology. That feat sparked heightened competition around the world, as public and private labs—and now my lab of one—scrambled to splice new traits into a wide range of cash crops. GM food promised an era of ease and abundance. An end to toxic pesticides, a boost in flavour and nutrition. And because it was high-tech, went the reasoning, it was precise and predictable. Some advocates went so far as *elegant*. Though my interviewers’ final questions proved prescient, in 1993, GM food was the wave of the future. GM food was almost cool.

So it wasn’t the genetic engineering aspect of my job that made me cringe. At least not at first. It was the potatoes.

My father’s side of the family were among the first European settlers on what is now Prince Edward Island. Many emigrated from Ireland. Safe to say, that branch of the family knows potatoes. Potatoes are dirt and tillage and worms. Potatoes are labour. Inert and old-reliable, potatoes are anything but elegant, anything but high-tech. I couldn’t imagine telling friends that, having earned my degree, I spent my days with these tubers. I learned to keep things vague: “Crops,” I said. “I study the genetics of food crops.”

But, of course, potatoes have not always been reliable: they have brought both bounty and famine. And far from inert, we have moulded the potato to our liking for millennia, countless rounds of painstaking cross-pollination and selection of the tastiest varieties. This was Fletcher’s old-school strategy—noble, perhaps, but increasingly viewed as a plodding try-and-see approach. My project offered a clean break: introduce genes and traits in ways that eons of cross-pollination could not. The term *cut and paste* was standard in descriptions of this type of genetic engineering, often illustrated with neat line drawings showing segments of DNA floating from one species—or from one kingdom—to another. Indeed, it appeared elegantly orchestrated. Simple, almost inevitable. My goal was to transfer a gene from the virus that infects potatoes into the tissues of the plant. As Monsanto had already shown in a variety of virus-resistant tobacco, the resulting plant is immune to new infections. An elegant, no-fail potato of the future.

I still have a photo of myself from this time. Gina must have taken it two or three months into my job. I’m wearing a flowy mauve blouse and my hair is cut into ’90s baby bangs. I’m



reaching, with an easy smile, into the minus-seventy-degree freezer where we stored enzymes and cell lines. The woman in this photo looks confident and relaxed; she might be pulling two wine glasses from a kitchen shelf. She has absorbed the facts of her situation—the tubers, the hand-me-down lab, her solitary bid to engineer Canada’s food—and although she no longer expects a glistening lab, she does expect to succeed. Why not? She earned her degree; she passed the interview. Sure, the work will be challenging, but she’ll set her mind to it, achieve what has been asked. Besides, she has a heap of student loans and yearns to move from her basement bachelor.

Yet there is something less palpable, less prosaic, also captured in that photo. While I’m smiling at Gina, my body is angled away, not just from the chill of the freezer but from the colleague, the work itself. The tilt is slight but the gap is clear. I am relaxed—but not fully committed. I am leaving space for something or someone to step in.

Briefly, someone did step in. About eight months into my job, a painter appeared. Admin had decided that, corroding tins and rodent nests aside, my lab required colour. The painter put down tarps and began patching and priming. To continue my own work, I slid beakers from one end of the bench to the other. I moved test tubes to the drainboard. The PCR machine, about the size of a bread machine, was hauled into Fletcher’s office. I didn’t mind: the painter looked like Kurt Cobain and was not really a painter but a journalism student. Between coats of minty green, he asked what I was doing with my solutions and machines.

“The goal is to develop better food crops,” I told him, still reluctant to say *potato* out loud. But the painter

persisted and I divulged the subject of my experiments.

He looked amused and skeptical. “I don’t see any potatoes.”

“I’m not there yet,” I said. “I’m still cutting a gene out of the virus before I paste it into the plants.”

“But I don’t see you cutting or pasting either. How will you know when it’s working?”

It was true, my experiments were all but invisible. The test tubes smaller than my pinky, the colourless solutions measured in microlitres. I’d add one clear drop to another and place what appeared to be an empty tube in the centrifuge. For much of the day, I simply had to *believe* I was doing anything at all. The painter did not believe. While Collin remained distracted, Kurt held me to account. He wanted evidence of progress, if not purpose, and I knew only one way. Stained with ethidium bromide, DNA glows pink under UV light.



Every day, I trekked down the hall to the darkroom, tray of chopped-up DNA in one hand, face shield in the other. I’d lean over the UV light and squint. Mutter. Swear. Then I’d snap a Polaroid, trek back to my bench, and tape the photo into my lab book. Those Polaroids, like Gina’s photo of me, told the larger story.

“Why so many?” the painter asked as I flipped through the pages.

“Well, not every experiment has gone as planned,” I answered.

Several Polaroids looked textbook: lines of DNA stacked like rungs on a ladder. The rungs were not in the order I needed, but their neatness showed I’d completed the experiment; I could *see* that the rungs were out of order. In other photos, ladders seemed to vibrate as if an earthquake had rocked through the lab. There were no earthquakes; I’d likely bumped the tray mid-experiment while skirting Kurt Cobain. In yet others, the rungs

lay crumpled in a heap or had vanished altogether. So I had to admit to the painter, to myself, that very little had gone as planned. I could extract the viral gene and slice it up, but I couldn’t rearrange it in the proper sequence. I’d scoured the procedure manual, mixed new chemicals, sped up the centrifuge, cooled down the PCR. I remained mired in the microscopic “cut” stage. My experiments were failing. I was failing.

In 1995, a year and a half into my job, the first GM potato was approved for use as human food in both the US and Canada. Monsanto’s NewLeaf variety contained resistance to the potato beetle, not the potato virus I tackled, but it was developed through similar recombinant genetic engineering. Monsanto’s virus-resistant potatoes were approved a few years later, but in 1995 were already in field trials. While I had yet to lay eyes on a potato, their plants were fully grown, in the ground. Of course Monsanto had outpaced the lone young woman with baby bangs. Monsanto had a hundred bustling teams of researchers, endless sterile flasks and cylinders. Monsanto had supervision, troubleshooting and monthly targets, not to mention billions of dollars. And they needed it. Sure, genetic engineering was high-tech, potentially the wave of the future, but it was neither simple nor precise and far from elegantly orchestrated. These experiments were just as plodding as Fletcher-style breeding, just as try-and-see. I could not supply Kurt with proof that it would work, not here in the lab and certainly not out in the field. Neither could Monsanto’s scientists. There were just more of them. They had bigger stakes in the game.

I kept working. I produced a warehouse of DNA ladders while waiting for a reckoning. Someday, Collin would call me in. He’d shake his head, wave my CV, and ask when the hell he might see some results. But weeks went by and Collin only

Lizard Party

WILLIAM BESSAI-SAUL



Lizard Party is part of William Bessai-Saul's ongoing series Bird People, which began as a New Year's resolution to draw a new comic strip every day. The slice-of-life comic follows the mishaps of ordinary people in a world inhabited by human-crow

buzzed through the lab on his way to more meetings: "Buddy needs me again!" Kurt transformed the final wall to saccharine green, then packed up his ladders and drove off in his rusting VW, leaving me again with the ghost of Fletcher. Never mind. I soon found a new diversion. An IBM that filled much of a storage closet was upgraded to Windows 95. I got an email address. I sent instantaneous messages to classmates who'd relocated to far-flung graduate schools. When I told them about my project, they sent back links to the World Wide Web. A wealth of news and voices from both inside and outside the laboratory. Rumblings about "Frankenfood." Reports of farmers refusing to buy patented GM seed. Op-eds by scientists asking how genes pasted into plants will stay there—and what might happen if they don't. *Why do people protest?* Those shimmers of

bigger questions from my interview flashed clearer, brighter. And that space in Gina's photo, the gap between me and my experiments? The whole wide world had stepped in.

Collin finally called both me and Gina into his office. It was a Friday afternoon in spring, almost two years into my job. I braced myself for reproof. But no, that was not the reason for our meeting. Collin had bought a new piece of equipment and wanted to demonstrate its use. A faster centrifuge? A better PCR? Some sort of technical aid to compensate for my incompetence? He hauled a huge contraption onto his desk and beamed. Not a centrifuge, not a PCR, but a commercial-grade citrus press. It might have been lab equipment—the body polished steel, the levers matte black—but Collin produced a bag of limes and three glasses. Gina

poured salt into Petri dishes. Tequila appeared from behind a stack of files. We were celebrating—or at least observing—with margaritas.

At his many meetings, Collin had learned that our curio of a research station would soon be dismantled. Some of the labs would transfer to a larger, newer station in the centre of the province. Others, like ours, would dissolve, the work halted mid-experiment. While many aspects of my time in Fletcher's lab would remain a mystery, the closure of the station—a decision no doubt in the works for months—explained a great deal. Structures fail. Meetings fail. Projects fail. In true Collin fashion, we toasted our fumbles and our new chapters.

What about the potatoes? Did they succeed? Following regulatory approval in the mid '90s, Monsanto proclaimed that NewLeaf would



hybrids. With its spare linework, absurdist sensibility, and expressive storytelling, what started as a personal project has grown into a distinctive, evolving graphic narrative.

quickly take over the market. Every potato a GM potato! Thirty years later, many products of recombinant DNA technology *have* taken over the market—but there are no GM potatoes in Canadian grocery stores today. Monsanto ended production of NewLeaf varieties in 2001 because something powerfully unpredictable had intervened. Those early rumblings became louder and more unified. All sorts of people demanded to know how this technology might affect their health, their livelihood, the natural world around them. They felt they'd been given no choice, felt left in the dark—and so they spoke up. Major food processors like McCain read the room and refused to buy GM potatoes. Those business decisions, swayed by vocal public opinion, in turn swayed Monsanto. As my interviewees had feared, there were rallies, campaigns, boycotts and occupations. But as

neither my interviewees nor I had foreseen, I was there.

After the research station closed, I returned to university to study not only the science behind genetic engineering, but the politics driving the science and therefore driving the protests. I joined conversations around dinner tables replete with red wine and bowls of tabbouleh, wrote letters and op-eds of my own. The Raging Grannies invited me to their sing-ins and made me, then in my early thirties, an honorary Granny. I marched alongside protesters dressed in papier-mâché mashups of tomatoes and fish, corn and crossbones. I cheered on the theatrics and the outrage but stopped short of wearing costumes myself. There were no fish genes in tomatoes; those experiments had also failed. But crossbones? Maybe. I didn't know. No one knew. Those late '90s protests were less a demand for concrete answers than

asserting the need, the right, to ask questions—and be heard. What do we risk when quick-fix innovation ousts our “old-school” ways? Can technology aimed foremost at profit ever truly serve the public good—or the planet? How long can these tensions hold before the rumbling grows too loud to ignore? Not small questions. Planted in part by the humble potato, these big, vital questions continue to sustain us well into the new millennium.

Katherine J Barrett lives in rural Nova Scotia/Mi'kma'ki. Her work has appeared in the Malahat Review, TNQ, Humber Literary Review and many other publications. Her chapbook, “a disobedient gathering: poems for plants who can't stay put,” was published in 2024. Katherine is the founder of Understorey Magazine and is currently managing editor of Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture and Social Justice.

FINDINGS



Navigating Home, 2025, and Returning, We Are All Returning, 2024, honeycomb grain paper with charcoal and ink by Rawan Hassan روان حسن. Inspired by archival photographs of Palestine prior to the Nakba of 1948, Hassan's series bears witness to ongoing occupation, systemic apartheid, and the violent displacement of Palestinian communities. Her work explores an almost surrealist vision of home

Pop-Punk Bops

MATT BOBKIN AND ADAM FEIBEL

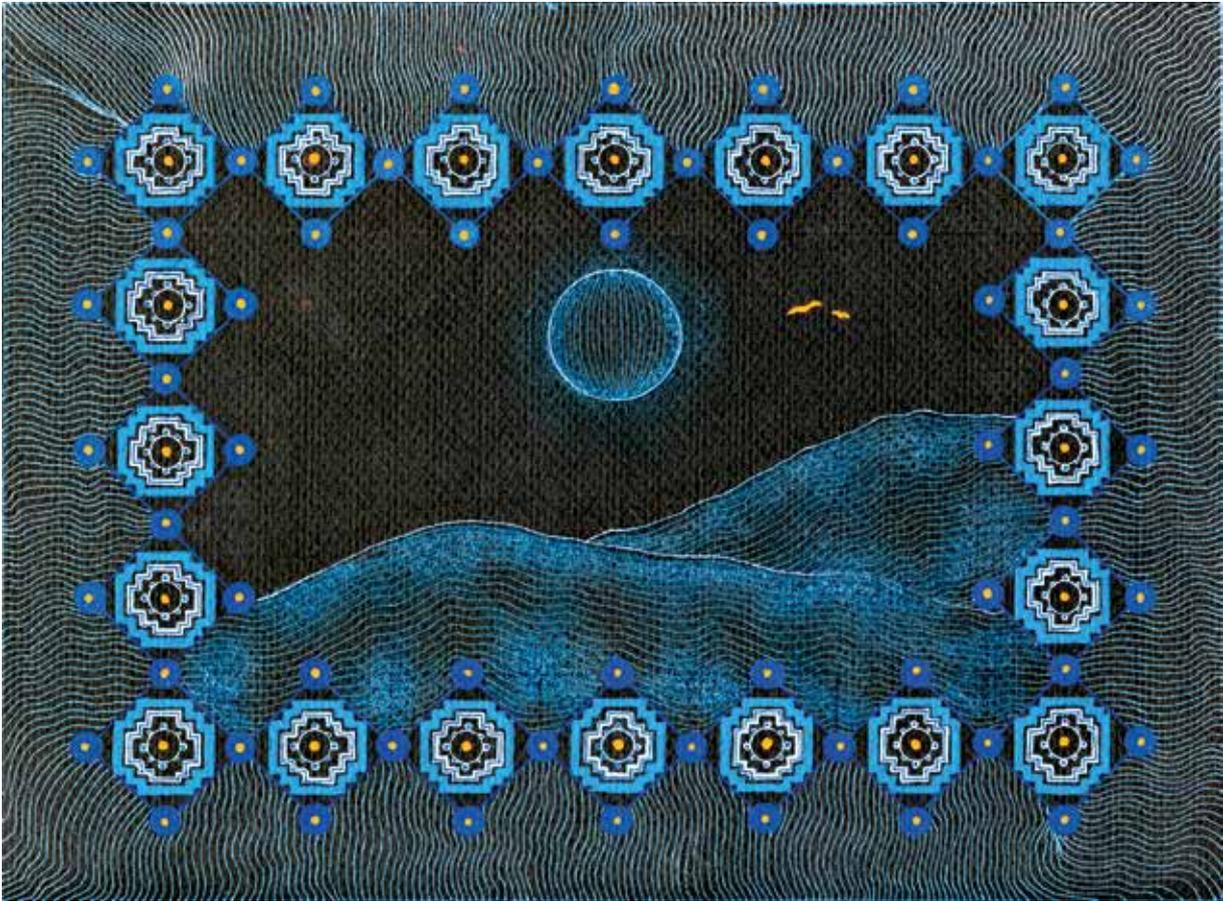
Excerpt from In Too Deep by Matt Bobkin and Adam Feibel. Published by House of Anansi Press in 2025. Matt Bobkin and Adam Feibel are music journalists from Toronto whose work has appeared in Exclaim!, Bandcamp, VICE, the National Post, and the Toronto Star. In Too Deep is their first book.

“My songwriting style is just too poppy to go on rock radio. I accepted that,” Ramsay says. “We either had to push it further in the rock direction, which seemed like it was losing popularity, or

push it further into a pop direction, which seemed like it was gaining popularity.”

In the cutthroat world of '90s and early-2000s punk rock, a band that made that kind of statement would have been crucified by their fans. It was bad enough for a punk band to sign to a major label, or to write a song that had even a faint whiff of pop aspirations. For a band to say outright that they were choosing to play a style of music that would make them more popular? Unimaginable.

But Marianas Trench hadn't claimed to be a punk band. They had grown up in a Vancouver music scene completely different from the ones that had produced Gob and D.O.A. Sure, Ramsay would occasionally cite Green Day as



through intricate geometric pattern work, mosaics, and tatreez—traditional Palestinian embroidery. These landscape ink and charcoal drawings reimagine home as a site of memory, longing, and resilience, reflecting the enduring relationship between land, culture, and the collective imagination of diasporic Palestinians.

an influence, but at that time Green Day was so ubiquitous that it was like a kid saying their favourite food is pizza. Ramsay's influences were all over the place, and Marianas Trench were a pop-punk band almost by accident. Theirs was a sound that fit in perfectly with groups like Fall Out Boy, All Time Low, and Paramore, but that didn't trace its origins back to California's formative '90s punk icons in the same way that other Canadian bands like Sum 41 and Simple Plan did.

"I'm not sure if there was a better way to describe us," Webb says. "We were popular at the same time as the rest of that stuff was popular, and maybe that's why we did well."

Marianas Trench never felt like they actually belonged to the punk scene—they were signed

to Chad Kroeger's label, after all—so they had no problem leaving it behind. They didn't want to be lumped into a phase of pop culture that was dying out. They wanted to chart their own path. So, when it came time to record their second album, Marianas Trench set out to detach themselves from the pop-punk scene entirely. "We made a choice: we're not a rock band anymore, we are a pop band," Ramsay says. "We're going to do pop songs, we are a pop band, period."

Marianas Trench's switch to pop music wasn't as much of a hard cut as it was a gradual transition, but the difference was certainly noticeable on their second album, *Masterpiece Theatre*. Ramsay and Webb dialled back the distortion on their

guitar amps and started adding more keyboards and string sections. Casselman took it easier on the crash cymbals and started to play more on the hi-hats and ride. Everything sounded tighter and cleaner, and the songs were far more diverse in their sonic palettes, textures, and arrangements. The recording sessions involved more than a dozen guest musicians, including six additional vocalists and a string section. *Masterpiece Theatre* was arguably just as full of catchy hooks and emo-pop earnestness as a Fall Out Boy or All-American Rejects record, but it was also the most theatrical pop-punk album this side of Panic! at the Disco. Several of the songs seemed like they were written specifically for the silver screen, including a three-part suite that threaded a miniature rock opera into an album full of pop-punk bops.

“It wasn’t trying to be a rock record anymore,” says Ramsay. “We were just trying to write good songs and let them be however they were going to be.”

While Marianas Trench had spent the years before and after the release of *Fix Me* trying to connect with a fan base, the response to *Masterpiece Theatre* in Canada was immediate. MuchMusic put a preview of the new record on its website before its release on February 24, 2009, and the album debuted at No. 4 on the Canadian albums chart. By the end of the year, Marianas Trench had their first gold record in Canada. The singles “Cross My Heart” and “All to Myself” became fixtures of MuchMusic and Canadian pop radio, each of them peaking in the top 15 of the Canadian Hot 100. Both of those songs went double platinum in Canada within a year, and the other three of the five singles from *Masterpiece Theatre*—“Beside You,” “Celebrity Status,” and “Good to You”—were certified at least gold by the end of the album cycle in mid-2011.

Still, Marianas Trench’s success was mostly limited to within Canada’s borders. Like many of the country’s artists, they had yet to figure out how to break out internationally. But that would happen soon, just as a new wave of decidedly unpunk music was taking over.

By the early 2010s, the changing landscape of mainstream music had validated Ramsay’s theory that pop-punk and emo were losing steam. Sure, established groups like Green Day, Sum 41, Fall Out Boy, and My Chemical Romance were able to squeeze out albums that landed in the top 10 of the Billboard charts during the twilight years of

the 2000s punk boom, but they were the too-big-to-fail exceptions in a scene where most of their peers had either disbanded or been discarded. Punk rock and its many offshoots had largely gone back underground, where you had to go looking in blogs, forums, social media, and local punk shows—all of those not-so-secret corners of the media-consuming public sphere—to find your new favourite band.

In the new decade, there was a particular cultural phenomenon that boded well for a band like Marianas Trench: the return of the boy band. In the wake of the Jonas Brothers becoming a chart-topping sensation, One Direction, Big Time Rush, and 5 Seconds of Summer subsequently sang and danced their way into the hearts of Gen Z kids in practically the same way that the Backstreet Boys and NSYNC had defined the childhoods of so many millennials. Marianas Trench met this audience at a moment when they had an appetite for exactly the type of big-league pop that Ramsay and the group had spent years perfecting. And they weren’t the only band that had followed that path: the All-American Rejects and Panic! at the Disco had made similar pivots (and Fall Out Boy were a couple of years out from doing the same). And then there was Simple Plan, the veteran Canadian pop-punk hitmakers who were themselves venturing further into the pop world than ever. And with Simple Plan’s help, Marianas Trench would finally realize their potential as an international act.

While Marianas Trench’s first five years of touring were almost entirely restricted to Canada, they had finally gotten a real crack at the U.S. market in early 2011 when they were brought along for part of the Glamour Kills Tour, an annual tour package—headlined that year by the electro-pop artist the Ready Set—that was put together by the namesake clothing company that was visibly prominent in the emo and pop-punk scene. Marianas Trench were only around for a handful of dates in the Midwest and upper East Coast, but it was a quality run: they played with bands that fit with their fan base—the Ready Set and Allstar Weekend were playing the sort of neon electropop that was gaining popularity among both Warped Tour attendees and Disney kids, while We Are the In Crowd was an easy sell among Paramore fans—and it was a high-profile, sponsored tour that had a cultural stronghold in exactly the kind of young and eager fan base that their band was looking to access.

Meanwhile, Marianas Trench were now big enough to justify a full-blown arena tour back home in Canada, but they still didn't feel ready for the pressure of being the headliner. So, they made a deal with Simple Plan to take them out as their supporting act as they promoted their fourth album *Get Your Heart On!* In many ways, Simple Plan became mentors who would show them how to take their live shows to the next level as they played to bigger crowds. It also meant that Marianas Trench were getting their first proper look at American audiences after years of touring almost solely in Canada. They were floored by what they saw.

"We really didn't know if people were going to come out," Ramsay says. "But somehow there were people coming out. They had found us through the internet. When we move outside of Canada, it's always in countries where we've never been officially promoted. We're still so indie. So when we do come to places, I think they're a little more excited because they have found us organically. They haven't had it rammed down their throats. And maybe they've been waiting for years for us to come. So all of a sudden we had gotten this great reaction in the United States that we didn't expect. People knew the fuckin' songs. We were like, *what?* On the Simple Plan tour, we were always asking people, 'How did you even find our band?' We didn't even understand how people knew of the band. Everybody knew the songs."

With 2011's *Ever After*, an elaborate concept album that completed their transformation into a narratively driven and extravagantly theatrical pop act, Marianas Trench fully rounded into form as mainstage entertainers wholly realizing their stadium-size ambitions. Four of the album's five singles have been certified three-times platinum in Canada, and "Haven't Had Enough" gave them their first top-10 hit. It was also their first album to chart in America, reaching No. 5 on the U.S. Heatseekers chart and No. 48 among independent albums. *Ever After* completed the band's transition to a pop band and solidified Marianas Trench as a group that could not only stay afloat in the changing tide of mainstream music but thrive as a globe-trotting act that was now headlining tours not just in Canada but in the U.S., Australia, and other parts of the world. Ramsay's pop gambit paid off further when he produced and co-wrote a smash hit for his 604 Records labelmate and fellow Vancouverite Carly Rae

SHIPPING FICTIONAL CHARACTERS

A selection of possible relationship statuses you can set on your TV Tropes profile. TV Tropes (tvtropes.org) is a wiki website that collects plot conventions and devices from television, books, movies and other media. Compiled by Kelsea O'Connor.

Above such petty unnecessarys
 And they were roommates
 Browsing the selection
 Buried in snow, waiting for spring
 Complex: I'm real, they are imaginary
 Dancing with myself
 Do you like me? (Yes Definitely Absolutely!!!
 Falling within your bell curve
 Giving love a bad name
 Gone fishin'
 Historians will say we were good friends
 Holding out for a hero
 Hoping Senpai notices me
 I made a point to burn all of the photographs
 I want you to want me
 I'd need a PowerPoint presentation
 I'm just a poor boy, nobody loves me
 It was only a kiss
 Less than three
 Married to the music
 My own grandpa
 Omelette du fromage~
 Pining for the fjords
 Saddled with unnecessary feelings
 Sharing a spaghetti noodle
 Shipping fictional characters
 Sinking with my ship
 They're my lobster
 [TOP SECRET]
 watch?v=dQw4w9WgXcQ
 We finish each other's sandwiches
 What's love got to do with it?
 With my statistically significant other
 You spin me right round, baby

Jepsen, "Call Me Maybe," which rocketed to No. 1 in eighteen countries and became the biggest song of 2012.

In 2015, Marianas Trench's fourth album, *Astoria*, was released in Canada by 604 Records and internationally by Cherrytree Records, the Interscope imprint that had helped to develop and break

Lady Gaga and LMFAO. That record peaked at No. 2 in Canada, making it their highest-charting album at home. It was also their first to appear on the Billboard 200 in the United States and their first to chart in Australia. Throughout the 2010s and beyond, the band went on to become a perennial headliner on numerous major tours of Canada, the U.S., Australia, the U.K., and Europe.

“Quietly, Marianas Trench have built a hell of a fan base internationally,” Simkin says. “We never had that moment where it’s like, ‘Oh my god, you have the No. 1 hit all over the world.’ We never had a ‘Call Me Maybe’ moment. But we had quite a few moments. And I mean, this is a band that can tour Asia, Europe, Australia—sold out, like, sold out.”

Marianas Trench didn’t need a No. 1 hit to earn their place in the zeitgeist. All they ever needed was a willingness to survive and adapt. Though they arrived too late for pop-punk’s golden age, they were around long enough to get the ball rolling before pivoting toward a new sound that would highlight their songwriting

strengths. Besides, change is inevitable, and Marianas Trench embraced that from day one.

“I think most artists that have long careers generally reinvent constantly,” says Ramsay. “Except for AC/DC, because they got it right the first time and they should never change. But other than AC/DC, artists that have a super long career generally have a lot of different stages of their sound.”

It’s an attitude that all of Canada’s punk-rock exports of the 2000s embraced at one point or another: a willingness to flip their middle fingers at tradition and do what they wanted to do when they wanted to do it. It was true when Gob decided to deviate from Vancouver’s hardcore punk scene in the early ’90s, and it was true over a decade later when Marianas Trench decided, in the very same city, to leave punk behind entirely. It was all done with the same goal in mind: to share their message with as many people as possible, no matter who they pissed off along the way. What could be more punk than that?



What Is a Zine?

ANDY BROWN

Excerpt from Why Fish Piss Matters by Andy Brown. Published by Véhicule Press in 2025. Andy Brown founded Conundrum Press in Montréal in 1996. He is the author of I Can See You Being Invisible (DC Books) and The Mole Chronicles (Insomniac) as well as many chapbooks and zines. He co-edited You and Your Bright Ideas: New Montréal Writing (Véhicule), and was a co-founder of Expozine, Canada’s largest small press fair. He currently lives in Wolfville, Nova Scotia.

In the 2000s, the internet, though still not the juggernaut of today, began to dominate, and many zinesters turned to ezines, or fansites, or MySpace pages. They found each other on Live Journal accounts instead of in the pages of *Factsheet Five*. Perhaps the internet sounded the death knell for zines. However, the way Rastelli saw it in 2010 he was “baffled at any notion that people should stop making zines. Expressing yourself on your own, when no other media around you is reflecting your reality, will always be pertinent. This isn’t being

replaced by Facebook or Twitter or blogs, because those are very fleeting, ephemeral expressions, and rarely involves the care one takes in deciding what to write down for posterity in a zine.” The fact that zines are printed and folded and stapled means there is an investment of labour in making a zine, as opposed to typing directly into the ether, which means different decisions are made as to content. Zines are not simply portals for information, they are art objects in themselves, they are cultural artifacts made carefully by human hands and will “convey today’s styles and sensibilities to the future long after the hosting plans for today’s websites have expired.” Rastelli makes the claim that zines aren’t dead—they’ve just become art.

The effect on readers of this tactile medium is provided by the students in Allison Piepmeier’s class. In her article “Why Zines Matter: Materiality and the Creation of Embodied Community,” she points to the success of zines as a product of their materiality.

Every time I teach a class about zines, a significant percentage of the students begin making their own. Many of them have never heard of zines, but when I



bring in a pile for them to flip through and take home, they become inspired. This doesn't happen if I require them to read a published anthology of zines such as *A Girl's Guide to Taking Over the World*; getting their hands on actual zines is necessary to ignite this creative urge. My students have been inspired to become part of the zine community because of physical encounters with actual zines, not by reading anthologized zines.

But what about the temporality of physical zines? They are not the same as a daily newspaper whose news is outdated the morning after, or the blog that is unreadable when the link expires. One method of collecting these zines for posterity is to give them a spine and an ISBN (International Standard Book Number) and allow them space on the bookstore shelf. This is what I began to do with Conundrum Press. I discovered zines by Canadian artists reviewed in *Broken Pencil*—such as those by Emily Holton, Ian Sullivan Cant, Elisabeth Belliveau or cover star Shary Boyle—collected them into books, and called them “graphic novels,” which was a new category for libraries and bookstores and was still a very

loose and amorphous term at the time. This was a very conscious mandate and one that morphed with the development of the definition of the graphic novel field. I had some interesting discussions with readers I met at the New York Art Book Fair in 2009. I met a rare book dealer who encouraged me to hold onto my zines because they would be worth a lot of money someday as rare books. But I also had a librarian tell me to sell my zine collection now because they were the hot *objets du jour* and libraries were just starting their zine collections.

Fish Piss did not play by the traditional rules of publishing fields, as outlined in John B. Thompson's *Books in the Digital Age* and based on Bourdieu's fields of cultural production. Thompson outlines four sources for capital available to a publisher: economic capital (access to funds), human capital (access to staff), intellectual capital (access to rights), and symbolic capital (the status or brand recognition of a publishing house). Success in small press publishing and zines cannot be measured in economic terms. Thompson places the small press within the social structure of publishing fields. Larger publishers deal in economic and human capital whereas smaller presses and zines privilege the intangible asset of symbolic capital. “Symbolic capital is best

understood as the accumulated prestige, recognition and respect accorded to certain individuals or institutions . . . For publishers are not just employers and financial risk-takers: they are also cultural mediators . . . their imprint is a ‘brand,’ a marker of distinction in a highly competitive field.” Although *Fish Piss* in its later issues would trade on its symbolic capital, it operated totally outside this paradigm. The idea of a publishing “industry” was totally anathema to its values. In fact, it could be argued the DIY aesthetic forms its own publishing field: valuing community engagement over distribution, valuing openness and diversity over sales figures.

But did it sell? Well, before a Tower Records distribution deal, *Fish Piss* was building its symbolic capital but also making sales. In a 1998 interview, Rastelli talks about “selling out” by leaving copies of issue #3 at the chain bookstore Chapters: “It was insane! They sold forty-seven of

them there alone, just in that one store. I asked them, ‘Is that more or less normal for a magazine?’ They said, ‘No way! No other magazine has ever sold that much at Chapters.’ I said, ‘Now come on, *Time*, I’m sure you sell more *Time* magazines.’ They said, ‘Oh no, maybe ten.’ That’s a lot of people looking at all that stuff and picking something local. Which is great. That’s partly why I put *Fish Piss* together.”

On Rastelli, in the anniversary issue (#50) of *Broken Pencil*, the editors wrote: “*Fish Piss* was Canada’s most important zine of the late 1990s. It not only gave voice to the country’s most interesting indie scene, it also gave a home to emerging, unforgettable talent.” It is safe to say the *Fish Piss* brand had enormous symbolic capital.



An Affinity for Rhinestones

JASMINE RUFF

From “Which Rom-Com Heroine Are You?” in the newsletter froth & gar by Jasmine Ruff. Published on Substack, January 29, 2024. Jasmine Ruff (she/her) is a queer writer living on the unceded traditional territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwx_wú7mesh (Squamish), and səliwətaʔ (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations (colonially known as Vancouver). She holds an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of British Columbia. Her writing has been published in CRAFT Literary, the Ex-Puritan, Split Lip Magazine, and elsewhere. Her chapbook, 24 Hours in the Lost House, is forthcoming with Gordon Hill Press and the Porcupine’s Quill. Read more of Jasmine’s work at jasmineruff.substack.com.

Which Rom-Com Heroine Are You?

1. Your dreams most often feature . . .
 - a. Sidewalks, sewer grates, long-stemmed roses
 - b. Bracelets falling from the sky
 - c. The smell of popcorn, neon lights, distant laughter

2. If you were a natural disaster, you would be . . .
 - a. A red moon, rough water
 - b. Eternal winter
 - c. A plague of locusts
3. It’s sunset and you’re biking home—what are you most likely to notice?
 - a. The silhouette of someone dancing next to their window through gauzy curtains
 - b. A parked car that looks like the one the woman who broke your heart used to drive
 - c. The wildflowers that have sprung up around the train tracks
4. In moments of quiet, you hear . . .
 - a. The ringing of church bells
 - b. Water in the pipes of your childhood home
 - c. A half-remembered jingle from a commercial that was popular years ago
5. Which remnants of your last life do you still carry with you?
 - a. The smell of lavender
 - b. An affinity for rhinestones
 - c. A phantom pain from a long-healed broken arm

Mostly As: The Career Woman Rom-Com Heroine

Think Jane Nichols from *27 Dresses* (2007), Mary Fiore from *The Wedding Planner* (2001), and Julianne Potter from *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997).

You're guarded, but when you love, you love big. There is probably something in your past that has made you this way—a parent died young or the love that you thought would last forever didn't work out. Despite that hurt, your love is hot and bright, and when you want to, you venture boldly forward.

Mostly Bs: The Lesbian Rom-Com Heroine

Think Amy Bradshaw from *D.E.B.S.* (2004), Wilhelmina Pang from *Saving Face* (2004), and Camille “Max” West from *Go Fish* (1994).

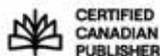
Whether or not you're queer IRL, you have experienced the transformational power of

love—romantic, platonic, or otherwise. You're thoughtful. Though it may take you a while to figure out what you want, once you've made up your mind there's no stopping you. Your friends probably describe you as sensitive, considerate, and the type of person who takes too much on. This is your movie, live a little!

Mostly Cs: The Teen Rom-Com Heroine

Think Ellie Chu from *The Half of It* (2020), Jenna Rink from *13 Going on 30* (2004), and Kat Stratford from *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999).

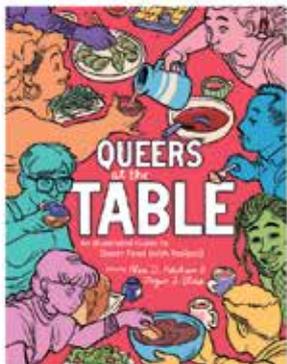
Even if you're a “grown-up” you probably feel a little different or weird. Maybe you're an artist or a dreamer. There's something inside of you that believes in the goodness of this world. You're not afraid to be yourself, but you're also not afraid of letting yourself change. You're invested in justice and goodness. Don't let the world change that.



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QUEERS AT THE TABLE

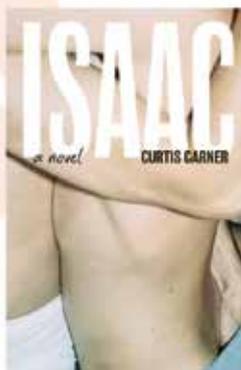
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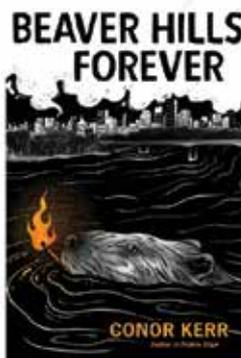


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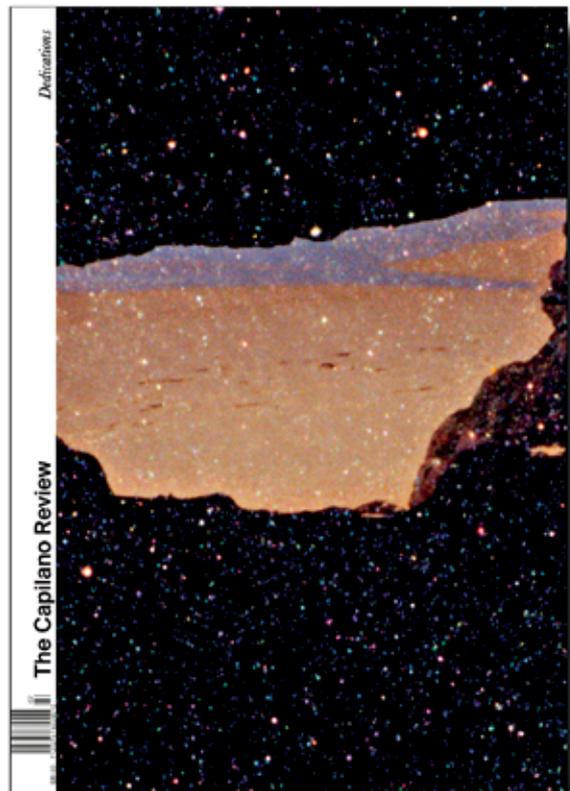
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Image: Cover of Issue 4.5: *Dedications* (Fall 2025), featuring Malena Szlam, detail of still from "Archipelago of Earthen Bones," 2024, 16mm. Three-channel video and sound installation, colour, 20 min/19 min/18 min. Sound by Lawrence English. Edition 1/5.



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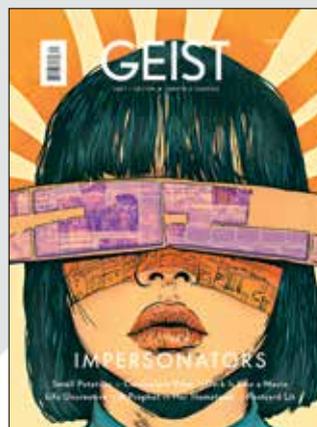
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The Lesson

JENNIFER MANUEL

“Turn the wheel clockwise,” I said, because that’s what you say. Judith was taking notes. In a diary. The orange cones stood like accident markers. “Now straighten out.” But then—nothing. My hands quit.

I tried to show her. Left hand over right. No, right hand pulling down. The wheel spun wrong in my demonstration, a clock running backwards. Sweat pooled at my collar. “It’s like typing,” I said, though I hunt and peck. “Like cursive.” Nobody writes cursive. Judith’s pen hovered. Beautiful cuticles. Pink. Half-moons. My husband had loved his cuticles. Pushed them back with the car key. “Imagine the car is a fitted sheet,” I tried. “You’re tucking the corners.” Fitted sheets defeat me too. The seatbelt had trapped my elbow.

“It’s philosophical. Or physical. One of those.” The wheel wants to go home. The car wants to leave. Nothing moves. Judith wrote. Something. “Or consider the parking space a kind of mouth.” Worse. My husband used to say parking was like swimming. You never forget. Except when you do. “It’s like explaining colour to someone who’s always been blind.” But what *was* it like? Nothing. A car going backwards. Into a space. Between the cones. My husband—when he disappeared, or was still here, the timeline



wobbles—used to say parking was just geometry. But geometry assumes things stay where you put them.

I drew diagrams in the air. Judith drew—diagrams, something. We didn’t understand any of it. The car clicked into park. The sun visor was down. Neither of us had touched it. A fly landed on the windshield and cleaned its legs, methodical. The car smelled like his cologne. From yesterday. Or last year. “The thing is,” I said, “you have to feel it.” But I couldn’t feel it. My hands were someone else’s hands. My feet worked pedals. Sixteen years. Same car. Her learner’s permit expired next Tuesday.

“Maybe you should try,” I said.

She failed seven times. Scraped the left cone. Mounted the curb. Backed into imaginary traffic. Or was it nine times? The counting went wrong. His voice on the phone that morning: “Watch for rabbits.” On some attempt, she slid between the cones like someone getting into bed. No, not that. Perfect. The car clicked into park.

“How?” I asked.

“I stopped listening.”

The fly from before. Still on the windshield.

I marked PASS on her form. She was picking at her cuticle again.

She signed something else. Wrong form.

A jogger went by. Backwards for some reason.

We sat there perfectly parked. There was crying. Neither of us sure how we'd gotten there.

Jennifer Manuel is the author of two literary novels, The Morning Bell Brings the Broken Hearted and The Heaviness of Things That Float, which won the Ethel Wilson Fiction Prize in 2017. She teaches literature at Shawnigan Lake School on Vancouver Island, BC.

SECOND PRIZE

Bird Lady

NANCY JO CULLEN

Caroline lifts her arms to take metaphorical flight when Tiny hits that rich low note; she swoons and swings her tarnished hair, she shudders. Caroline has a stupid, stupid heart. Tiny has a heart that loves the whole world, every girl and boy, every morsel of food and every drop of whiskey. Tiny loves cigarettes and grass and, if it comes his way, coke, and he loves his own hurt feelings and the memory of his mother sipping coffee and dipping her toast in pancake syrup. Tonight, after the show, while the staff clean up the place, Caroline will wait around until Tiny is ready to fuck her.

The girls know this. The girls are women, but it is 1986 and they are twenty years younger than Caroline, and they make good tips on Sunday nights when the bars in this town are closed and the jazz ensemble is here and Tiny has travelled down to sing with the band. One of the girls will go home with the sax player and one of the girls is a closet case, but both girls pity Caroline and her skinny bird arms and her public displays of ecstasy. The girls know everything; they know who is unfaithful, they know the bartender is skimming, and they know the cook pulls his hungover ass into work and pops a pink heart for the boost of energy it brings.

The girls don't know anything. They don't know that in six months Tiny's big heart will stop, and Caroline's stupid heart will wake her up every day, and she will drive into work to document company debits and credits, and her stupid heart will continue to beat and beat and beat. They haven't the smallest clue about lift, drag, and thrust; they have no clue about rapturous delight. Caroline will slip from their minds, her unrestraint, her winged arms, her quivering. The girls will marry poorly, they will pay their taxes, and they will marry poorly again. Caroline will lie along her sofa. She will call to mind Tiny's deep voice,



that even the girls could feel resonate through their solar plexus, through their sex, and let the rapture lift her.

Nancy Jo Cullen's fourth poetry collection is Nothing Will Save Your Life (Wolsak and Wynn). Her first novel, The Western Alienation Merit Badge (Wolsak and Wynn), was shortlisted for the 2020 Amazon Canada First Novel Award.



Image credit: Christer Waara, 2023. Born in Kiruna, Sweden, Waara travelled widely as a news videographer with SVT Luleå and CBC Vancouver. He had a lifelong passion for motorcycling, stills photography, and telling stories that matter. Waara died of pancreatic cancer on November 14, 2023, and will be remembered for his kindness, stoicism, quiet humour, and love for the world. His photography can be viewed on Instagram @cpixphoto.

THIRD PRIZE

Performance Review

MELISSA EDWARDS

“I didn’t think it bothered you.” My father’s sudden death, she meant, then ten years past. “You never seemed too bothered.”

Did I not? I thought. Did I need to?

Of course I was bothered. It had bothered me. It bothers me still. It would bother anyone.

Now, it’s my husband who’s dead. Less sudden. Still shocking. Life pushes forward, relentless. Work, family, car repairs. Dinners. Hikes. Haircuts. With each tendril of engagement, a thought: Do I seem bothered? Do I need to?

I mean, wouldn’t it bother you? The ER doctors who didn’t want to say the words. The GP who was annoyed that he must. Then: everything you’ve imagined already. The long wait for treatment that might buy weeks. Fear, pain, shit, puke. Bags of puke, litres of puke. My ear on his stomach (is food moving through? the doctors dangling MAID if it stops). A gurney rattling hard down the uneven floor of a hospital tunnel; jog alongside with a tube of sufentanil at the ready. Next: home, and a promise of support that sporadically arrives. A medical bed, a quiet living room, some time to pull out messages and memories (too late, really; he’s already drifting away). An EDITH form—*expected death in the home*—no 911, no one to call when he goes; a slippery trapeze with no net. Soon: meds

sent by cab, hands growing skilled with the snap of a glass ampoule. A daily inventory—two types of needles for three types of syringes for four types of drugs, a dozen injections a day (do I have enough sharps? enough caps? enough vials?). A broken hydromorphone port at 1:00 a.m., no nurse on call; crush a pill between spoons and paint it over his tongue. Study his face—is it working? for how long?

Did I seem bothered? It did bother me. It bothers me still.

But. Other moments. Apple wedges, a soft conversation, the ward at rest. A city sparkling in the night. (“Even just this forever, that would be enough,” he said.) Food brought wordlessly by friends. A wheelchair in the park, crisp early autumn; his amazement at how people move through the world so easily, not knowing. Why should they, yet? Short weeks later: bedbound. He wants to go camping, wants one more ride on his bike. He wants to take a photo of the yellow fluid they tap from his chest—two full pitchers, the nurse like a German waitress.

The vials and caps and needles are long gone now. I inventory my face instead. Do I seem bothered? Do I need to? Let me keep my bother for myself.

A wish for return: to armbands, black-bordered dresses. A lace veil, a little ash for the hair. See this? I’m not quite myself. I’m here, it’s fine. But yes. I’m bothered. Of course I’m bothered. It would bother anyone.

Melissa Edwards is a writer and editor who lives in Vancouver, BC. In previous lives, she managed the 3-Day Novel Contest, coordinated projects for the Writers’ Exchange, and made themed maps for Geist.

A Girl Needs a Mech Suit

ERIKA THORKELSON

*Girls were unusual in these nerd spaces—
either seen as interlopers or easy prey for boys with outsized romantic fantasies*

BUBBLEGUM CRISIS

A girl pulls on a towering blond wig, then steps into calf-length high-heeled boots and slips a miniskirt over her perfectly round butt. On stage, she grabs the microphone in front of a crowd of fist-pumping punks. The music is eighties hair metal—a bit old fashioned, but catchy. In a mix of Japanese and English, she sings about rock 'n' roll and hurricanes. Shots of the gig poster reveal the band name in lightning font—Priss and the Replicants.

The *Blade Runner* reference gave me a satisfying pop of recognition. I was taking a film class at school and had begun to consider myself a connoisseur of the form. Nick was right—this show was more grown up than *Sailor Moon*. I felt weird about all the leering shots of women with impossible proportions, but I also felt the charge of finding this secret universe full of ass-kicking girls. By the time that same singer donned her form-fitting metal suit to fight an Arnold-Schwarzenegger-sized robot through the streets of Tokyo, I was hooked.

I wasn't sure about Nick, however. He was a skater who wore his hair long on top and shaved underneath, Vans covered in graffiti, and wide-legged jeans torn at the hems from dragging around on the ground. His collection of baggy T-shirts all featured band logos—Nirvana, Red Hot Chili Peppers, Dead Kennedys. Not a single band with a girl in it. I didn't bring up my own taste in music—Tori Amos, Björk, Sarah McLachlan—but I was

sure he'd roll his eyes at them like most boys did. At another school, this might have meant our worlds never collided, but we went to Victoria Composite, which was, despite its growing reputation as a school for the performing arts, really a catch-all for kids who were too weird to survive at Edmonton's normal public schools. Cliques were permeable. I'd hung out with the dancers, even smoked with the greasers once or twice, although I preferred long, thin Benson & Hedges Super Lights to their blunt Dunhills.

Nick was a year younger than me, the little brother of a boy in my math class who I'd harboured a brief crush on. I had a lot of crushes in those days, some fleeting, others enduring and torturous, but Nick was not terribly interesting in that way. Still, we kept running into each other. Almost every day he'd be standing out front in the sculpture garden when I left band practice, and we'd walk to the bus stop talking about *Sailor Moon*. One day, he pulled a VHS tape from the Sharpie-decorated canvas backpack he always wore over one shoulder. "You'll like this one," he said. "It's about girls who fight crime in these mech suits."

Bubblegum Crisis, the label read in handwritten block letters. "Weird name," I said.

He shrugged, a picture of cool. "That's, like, a thing. The names are always weird." I was grateful for the education, but I couldn't understand what he was getting out of the deal.



LEGEND OF THE OVERFIEND

“It’s not called ‘Japanimation,’” Nick explained as he passed me his latest VHS recommendation. “It’s called ‘anime.’ It’s from French.” He was not Japanese, but he did seem to have a lot of knowledge about the place.

That was how these things travelled before everyone had internet at home. It was a game of telephone, knowledge handed from one nerd to another, and it came with all the (sometimes deeply problematic) gaps and errors you might expect from white kids in the middle of the Canadian prairies imagining the cultural output of an exoticized distant country.

The internet was still the stuff of legend. I had only encountered it a couple of times at Dawn’s house. Her family had a subscription to America Online that they used to connect to multi-user dungeons—online platforms that hosted complex text-based role-playing games. The gameplay felt like my brother’s Choose Your Own Adventure novels, and I didn’t really see the draw. But Dawn’s family was so addicted to it they accidentally ran up thousands of dollars in long-distance charges dialling into the AOL servers in the US.

This extraordinary cost was why we didn’t have the internet at home. Our computer was a refurbished word processor from Mom’s work. We used it for school essays and games of Tetris. There was also a typing drill program that Mom insisted I practice with until I could type at least 60 words per minute with a high level of accuracy. She was preparing me for a career as a secretary—just like her—whether I wanted it or not.

Nick was my only source of information about this mind-blowing new art form I’d discovered. He brought me tape after tape. His hookup could get him any genre, he said, but he tried to choose things he thought I’d enjoy—*Vampire Princess Miyu*, *Oh My Goddess!* or *Ghost in the Shell*, which was a brand-new release. I learned there were words to differentiate the genres: shonen for boys, shojo for girls, hentai for the ones with lots of kinky sex. Superfans were called “otaku.”

Some shows pushed the boundaries of the amount of violence I could stomach. At the end of a tape I watched with my friends Dawn and Siobhan, a movie called *Urotsukidōji: Legend of the Overfiend* appeared. The thin plot

strung together a series of demonic rape scenes that were clearly meant to turn the viewer on. At first, it was tantalizing. Then it made us queasy.

When I returned the videos, Nick usually asked me what I thought, which shows were most interesting. This was the first time I had to tell him I didn’t like something. His eyes grew wide, and his cheeks turned bright pink as I explained. “Oh god, I’m so sorry,” he said. “Uh, wrong tape.”

I wanted to seem worldly to him—I was a year older after all. “It’s fine, man,” I said. “Tentacle rape’s just not my thing.” I’d meant to shock him with my candour, but saying it aloud, I felt myself blushing back.

“You’ll like this one better, I swear,” he said, passing over a tape labelled *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. It was a show about a group of kids given the awesome responsibility of piloting giant mechs to fight an invasion of city-crushing kaiju called Angels.

“We’ll see,” I said, regaining my cool.

It turned out there was already a whole subculture in town dedicated to this stuff. There were even shops that sold posters, figurines and manga alongside the more familiar American comic books. Nick brought me to the anime club at a nearby college, where boys sat in a dark room and watched shows together on a projector screen. They called it BAKA, an acronym chosen to fit the Japanese word for “idiot.” When I walked in the first time, I felt the eyes of the room turn toward me. Girls were unusual in these nerd spaces. We were either seen as interlopers or easy prey for boys with outsized romantic fantasies.

I’d learned that lesson a few years earlier on the bus, when I’d fallen into a conversation about *Doctor Who* with a boy who was considered untouchable at my junior high. It felt nice to be able to talk about my childhood favourite without worrying about judgement. Then, as I stood to disembark, I felt a hand grip my butt cheek, hard. I turned around and he was looking at me like he owned me.

Some boys, I was learning, didn’t like to share the things they loved with girls. They thought they deserved something extra in exchange. The *Overfiend* incident aside, Nick seemed different, and I felt grateful for his company.

OH MY GODDESS!

Nick's older brother kept giving me this wide grin, like he was seeing me for the first time. We'd been paired up to discuss quadratic equations in math class, but I wondered if he was about to ask me out. I felt a stir of excitement. This was how it happened in the movies, right? A boy could be completely uninterested one day, then something ineffable would change and bam: true love.

Finally, he leaned over and said in a low voice, "It's cute, you and Nick."

"What?" I said, loud enough to attract the teacher's attention. We pretended we were looking deep into a calculator screen.

"He waits for you after school every day for like half an hour."

I fumbled for a reply. It had seemed strange that Nick was always there so late, but I'd assumed he'd been hanging out with his real friends, the kids in his own grade. Older brother grinned and raised his shoulders, but the teacher brought the class back before I could ask him for more information.

Nick seemed skittish that afternoon. I felt shy. I'd been chewing on his brother's words for hours. I'd thought we were friends with a mutual interest in anime. I'd thought he was different from that boy on the bus. Had I misread things after all?

"I have a present for you," he said, holding out a cardboard box that was the wrong shape for a VHS.

It was winter, but he wasn't wearing a proper jacket or gloves—only a big hoodie with his bare thumbs stuck through holes torn in the cuffs. He was taller than me—most boys were—but his oversized clothing made him seem small and young. Maybe this was why I hadn't thought of him at all like the boys in my grade. He reminded me of my own little brother.

"It's not my birthday," I said.

"I know. Your birthday's in November."

How did he know that? Had I told him? I looked down the street to see if the bus was coming. I needed a way out.

"Wait till you get home to open it," he said with a crooked smile. "Can I have your number?"

"My phone number?" I'd given boys my number before, but there had always been a reason—a party or a school project. I rarely chatted with them like friends. So far, Nick and I had managed fine without knowing

how to contact each other, but I was only now beginning to understand that he had been working to make that happen.

He looked uncertain, like he was following someone else's script. "Yeah, I want to call you later."

Could I say no? Could I tell him I liked his brother? No, that would make me sound like a soap opera villain, like one of those girls in movies who brushed off perfectly good boys for silly reasons. "Okay," I said.

He gave me a Sharpie and I wrote my number on his bony arm. He looked down at it, elated. I felt ill.

When the phone rang that evening, I lunged for my extension, but Mom was faster. "It's for you," she yelled from the living room. "It's a boy."

I felt a stab of embarrassment. "Got it," I said into the receiver. "You can hang up now." I waited for the click to make sure no one was listening before I said hello.

"Hey, it's Nick." Was he putting on a deeper voice?

"Hi," I said. Did I sound happy to hear from him? Was I?

"Did you like the present?"

His gift had been a full collection of *Sailor Moon* figurines—all the Sailor Scouts, Chibi Moon and Tuxedo Mask. I'd never been that interested in collectables. There was no reliable place to display them in my basement room, which had become a storage space for old furniture from the rest of the house. I had three mattresses—handy for sleepovers but awkward for decorating—and the rest was clutter. Besides, I'd grown out of dolls years ago. But I'd never gotten a random gift from a boy before. I tried to be happy. "Yeah, they're cool," I said. "Thank you."

He started talking before I'd gotten all the words out. "I'm glad you like them. Sailor Jupiter is my favourite. She reminds me of you."

I didn't think I was anything like Sailor Jupiter, a tomboy who dreamed of getting married and owning a cake shop, but I thanked him again anyway. There was a long pause, and a whispering voice in the background. Nick cleared his throat. "I was wondering," he said. "I really like you. Do you want to be my girlfriend?"

In anime, people always have tremendous trouble saying what they're feeling. It builds up into an intolerable mess of emotion until it

explodes in a whole speech, delivered in a single breath. This too was something that spoke to me. I could talk about pop culture or politics, but I could rarely articulate my feelings, not the real ones I kept deep inside. Maybe Nick felt this way too—maybe that was why all this was coming out so strangely. Still, this was the wrong way around. Weren't people supposed to have chemistry before they made a commitment?

I thought of Belldandy, the female lead of *Ob My Goddess!* who moves in with a shy young nerd after he calls a hotline out of desperation to find a girlfriend. She was based on Verðandi—one of the three Norns in Norse mythology who are responsible for determining fate. I liked the art from that show a lot, but I felt uncomfortable with the way it seemed to play out a prototypical nerd boy fantasy: a tremendously powerful and beautiful woman who ends up in magical service to a total loser. It was supposed to be funny and romantic, but I found it icky.

I thought of my first kiss. It had happened at a birthday party when I was fourteen. I'd been debating with this college boy over the relative superiority of *Star Trek* versus *Star Wars*. I was squarely in the former camp while he was in the latter.

I said something like, "Everyone knows *Star Wars* is a rip-off of spaghetti westerns and Japanese samurai movies. There's not a single original idea in the series."

And he'd said something like, "At least it's not a bunch of long boring philosophical speeches."

This, I believed, was high quality flirting.

The host put a movie on, and we all settled into comfortable positions. I laid my head on his lap and felt his whole body tense up, which made me feel strangely powerful. After a while, I noticed him looking down at me with something like confusion or awe in his face, so I leaned up and kissed him on the lips. Only for a moment. I felt no more pleasure or excitement than if I'd given him a high five, certainly nothing approaching the tingles I'd felt watching my VHS copy of Franco Zeffirelli's 1968 *Romeo and Juliet*. We'd gone on a date after that, but it had been clear we didn't have much going beyond bickering about sci-fi.

That was how dating should happen, I thought. You like somebody, then you go on a few dates, then, if it works, you become

boyfriend and girlfriend. Nick and I had never even touched before I wrote my number on his arm. But wait—did he think those visits to BAKA and that trip to the comic shop had been dates? Were those VHS tapes meant to woo me? Had I been leading him on all these months without realizing it? Suddenly, his brother's grin made sense. He had been saying "Welcome to the family."

I felt like I was piloting a mech in freefall, land fast approaching. I could eject and trust the parachute would open, or crash and lose everything. I wasn't sure which option was which. "Sure," I said, hoping I hadn't paused too long to think about it. I'd come this far, I reasoned, I might as well give it a try. "I'll be your girlfriend."

"Cool," Nick said in a tone I couldn't read. I heard another whisper in the background, muffled laughter. How many people were listening?

The whole next day, it felt like people at school were watching me. Somehow, they all knew I was Nick's girlfriend now. One of the Nelson twins—friends of his older brother—confirmed it in English class when she caught my eye across the room and gave me a thumbs up. Even in jazz band, people seemed to know. The second trumpet, a dedicated grunge kid who played in a slouch with his bell toward the ground, no matter how many times the teacher begged him to sit straight, gave me a friendly shoulder punch. "He's a good guy," he said.

As we ran through "Desolation Blues," I wondered whether this romance between us had been going on before an audience this whole time without my knowledge. I had become a character in someone else's movie, and I didn't like it. A pressure descended on me, making it difficult to breathe. Yesterday, I had thought I was giving this a chance. Today, as far as everyone else was concerned, we were hitched. This was not the fate that had called to me when I discovered anime.

AKIRA

A cityscape appears, filmed from high above. Across the screen, a date: 1988.7.16 TOKYO. Then a mushroom cloud grows to consume the city, and the title card appears. *AKIRA*. Suddenly, it's thirty-one years later in New

Tokyo, a city built around the bomb crater. Boys on electrified motorcycles move so quickly they seem to bend light. They taunt motorists waiting patiently in traffic.

The dates meant nothing to me, but I recognized the lights and storefronts of the city from other anime I'd seen. So many people had spent so much time imagining a future for Tokyo. I wondered if I'd get to travel there before the dystopia took hold.

My new boyfriend, whose basement couch I was sitting on, had been late for our planned rendezvous at the sculpture garden. For the first time, he'd left me waiting. There had been a power shift between us—he no longer had to work quite so hard now I belonged to him. When he finally appeared, he was the same weird kid in too-big clothes, but I couldn't think of anything to say to him. We'd never talked about anything other than anime before.

His house was, like mine, on the working-class Northside. It was small and showed signs of overcrowding—a single mother with two oversized kids. That, at least, we had in common. In his kitchen, he gathered a 2-litre bottle of generic grape soda and two glasses.

"Is this supposed to be, like, wine?" I joked, but he didn't get it.

From the fridge, he pulled a plate of prepared ants on a log—pieces of celery filled with peanut butter and decorated with raisins. The kind of snack you made for a little kid. Those, along with a bag of Oreos and a big bowl of Cheezies, came with us into the basement. He arranged everything on a coffee table before a grubby old couch.

I sat beside him, but leaned away, careful not to let my body get too close to his. In all the time we'd hung out, we'd never touched—not our hands, not even a bump of elbows. Other boys I felt drawn toward, like my fingers had magnets in them that connected to their skin. I even felt that way sometimes when I hugged girls, though I couldn't yet grasp what that meant. Dawn's hard breasts against me made a little shock of electricity. None of that was happening here.

"You're going to love this," he'd said, and slid a tape into the VCR.

I could feel Nick watching me as I watched the movie. He was eager for me to share his excitement, but I struggled to follow the action. Who were these boys? Where did that one boy's

power come from? I was normally pretty good at deciphering complex plots. I'd written an essay for my film class comparing Sally Bowles from *Cabaret* to Kathy Selden from *Singin' in the Rain* and the teacher had given it a rare 100%. *Akira* eluded me at every turn.

"Wasn't it great," he said as soon as the end credits started to roll.

I tried to talk, but my throat felt dry, clogged with an acrid mix of peanut butter and Cheezie dust. He took my shoulders in his hands as if to hold me up to the light. Then he leaned forward, and I realized we were going to kiss.

His breath smelled like grape soda. His eyes closed, the softness of his face reminded me again of my brother, turning the moment so absurd I forgot to close my own eyes. I watched his features blur as they got near, which made me giggle.

"Shhh, it's okay," he whispered, as though I was whimpering like one of those anime virgins and he was some kind of Tuxedo Knight.

The kiss happened and all I wanted was for it to end. Then it was over. He pulled away and gazed at me with emotion in his eyes.

"Well," I said, my mind groping for an excuse to get out of there. "I should go home for dinner."

"Of course," he said. "I'll walk you to the bus stop."

MACROSS PLUS

Sharon Apple has taken over the mainframe. Myung spatters the control room with bullets from her stolen machine gun, but it does nothing. The virtual pop star has hijacked its systems and spread her mind control program throughout the city. The only hope now is Isamu, the young fighter pilot who has managed to resist Sharon Apple's influence.

Jets zip through the skies of an alien planet in a desperate firefight with the city's defences. Isamu has nearly succumbed to the hypnotic power of Sharon Apple's voice when Myung begins to sing that song, the one from their childhood when they were in love. Somehow, Isamu hears her and regains consciousness long enough to ram his plane right into the room where a black box holds the synthetic pop star's consciousness. With a look of deep sorrow on her holographic face, Sharon Apple dies.

Macross had started in the early eighties as a TV series called *Super Dimension Fortress Macross*, later adapted for American audiences under the name *Robotech*. The hugely popular show spawned a long list of sequels—shows, movies and miniseries—all set in the Macross world. The throughline between each installment is humanity’s relationship to giant spacecraft, some of which can transform into human-shaped fighting robots called Valkyries. Music is also central to every story, making for a strange *mélange* of violence and beauty. One sequel even includes a Valkyrie that fights by playing guitar—it’s surprisingly entertaining.

Of all the hours I spent watching giant robots fight aliens at the anime club, nothing hit me quite like the *Macross Plus* movie. The soundtrack by Yoko Kanno mixed live orchestral recordings with pounding electro and Akino Arai’s acrobatic vocals. The film had a level of visual spectacle that rivalled contemporary classics like *Ghost in the Shell* and *Evangelion*. I’d never been to a rave, but I supposed this was what it would be like.

After the lights in the college classroom had come up and I had taken the long bus ride home to my basement room, I tried to find words for the feeling I’d had watching the ecstatic closing scenes of *Macross Plus* for the first time. A glimpse beyond this drab prairie life. A choking sensation. Like beauty was sitting on my chest, the pressure telling me I too was a machine that could transform herself into anything. But the spell had broken, and I was only me again.

For two days, I ignored the boy who was supposed to be my first boyfriend. I didn’t take his phone calls, avoided him in the hallways. It wasn’t hard—our schedules were different, and we didn’t travel in the same social circles. I gave our old meeting place, the sculpture garden, a wide berth and walked all the way downtown to catch a different bus home.

The kiss had made me see what a mistake I’d made. Now I had to fix it, but how? I hadn’t seen any anime that could prepare me for this. Instead, I thought about Rosaline who had broken Romeo’s heart, or Rachel running away from her wedding in the first episode of *Friends*. Girls who broke up with boys in books and movies never seemed like good people. I considered changing schools,

faking my own death, anything to get out of what came next.

By the third day, people had begun to talk. I could hear it all around me from those near strangers who had nudged and grinned a few days earlier. Dawn and Siobhan kept needling—they found the whole thing hilarious. “What are you going to do?”

In the end, it wasn’t Nick who confronted me, but a grade 10 girl who was a skater like me. She came to my locker all punchy and expectant. Why didn’t he date her? I wondered. It was clear that she liked him. “What’s going on with you guys?” she barked.

“I don’t think I like him that way,” I said, surprised at how certain I sounded. I knew this was insensitive, cowardly. I should have told him to his face—but shouldn’t he have been upfront with me from the beginning, given me more of a choice? Why was it so hard for boys to be honest?

She screwed up her face, and for a moment I thought there would be a fight. Could I take this girl? I’d never taken anyone before. No, this was Vic. Things could get complicated at a school for the performing arts, but they didn’t usually get violent. “You’ve broken his heart,” the girl spat, and stalked away.

I could hear Dawn and Siobhan cackling behind me. “You broke his little heart,” Siobhan squealed.

“Harlot,” Dawn said in a tone of admiration.

I turned and gave a bow. It was easier to pretend it didn’t matter than to admit I felt terrible about losing my friend. Who would talk with me about anime now? Who would go to the anime club at the college with me and ward off the creeps? Were there any boys at all I could trust? I vowed to be more vigilant with them, to love the nerdy things I loved on my own. Like Priss in *Bubblegum Crisis*, I’d need stronger armour if I was going to survive this battle.

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The Impersonators

SHERI DOYLE

Knock twice to tell me you're still somewhere in this galaxy

Within a deep crowd of Elvis impersonators, sequins shimmering like crests of waves, I searched for cotton candy. I bobbed above the rippling surface, taking in air between wafts of hair gel, Brut cologne, and the grease rising from booths where festival-goers lined up for funnel cakes and fries. Some of the impersonators were accompanied by partners or families dressed in everyday clothes, but one Elvis had with him the likeness of Priscilla Presley. She stood in line at a concession stand called Sweets, the late-afternoon sun glossing her voluminous black hair with a red sheen.

There were three options at the Sweets stand: candy apples, candy floss, and candy corn. The candy corn wasn't candy—it was a cob of corn soaked in maple syrup and rolled in bacon bits. Mothers and children didn't seem to go for it, but an occasional Elvis would lean over a garbage can and wolf one down as the syrup dripped and the pink bits fell into the can below.

Priscilla was three spots ahead of me. She was even more aloof than her Elvis, whose eyes were hidden behind dark sunglasses, his back straight but angled slightly away from her, his gem-studded collar upturned to his sideburns. The couple were tall, of about equal height, though Priscilla's bouffant made her seem even taller. They towered over everyone around them in line. "Oh, look! It's Priscilla!" someone gasped, lifting a camera to snap a photo. One woman turned to her Elvis, sighing, "If only I could pull that off." Priscilla stood unhearing in her white, daisy-embroidered dress, like a wax sculpture with a blank expression, her eyes half-concealed behind her own lightly tinted, white-framed shades. Her long eyelashes fluttered in shadow, her only observable movement.

Men in flip-flops and dress shoes alike craned their necks to look twice, three times even, their eyes sweeping the length of her body. Some of the other impersonators performed a gesture of honour. Dressed in a variety of bedazzled jumpsuits, they pulled their sunglasses down their noses with exaggerated flourish, raised their eyebrows, took two steps back, bowing to Priscilla—their queen—who didn't seem to notice. She lifted a small mirror and reapplied pale pink lipstick. Just as she dropped these items back into her shiny black purse, she arrived at the front of the line and stepped up to the counter.

Priscilla ordered the corn. While she stood eating it, taking quick, precise bites over the garbage can, her Elvis bit into a hard candy apple. He looked off into the distance toward the bandstand, where more and more Elvises crowded the water fountains like figurines. Like the tiny toy soldiers my older brother, when we were little, would line



up around the edge of the bathroom sink, then flick off one by one until they were all floating in the water below.

He, not I, should have been at this event. He was the one with the record collection, the tubes of hair gel lined up on his dresser, the triptych mirror that framed his performances as he lip-synced to “Heartbreak Hotel.” This is the image of my brother I hold most clearly: aged thirteen, his reflection in the glass, the back of his stiff-gelled hair, and the mirrored panels angled so that several duplicates of him moved all at once, as if in separate glass rooms.

Everyone else had stayed back at the one-bedroom cottage rental where somehow my two cousins, my aunt and uncle, my parents and I all slept. It was a familiar arrangement—each year when we came to Georgian Bay, Dad would set up cots along the wall beneath the windows for us kids. At night, as I tried to sleep, I felt the gap where a fourth cot should be. Even in the cramped cottage, my brother’s absence was an abyss so wide our whispering voices fell into it. Our ghost stories echoed in the dark, my ears straining for any sign from him. *Knock twice to tell me you’re still somewhere in this galaxy. Three times to say you’re okay.*

My cousins were probably jumping over waves while I stood in the hot glittering lineup, my mother watching me from the umbrella shade at a souvenir stand, her frizzy curls pushed back with a wide fabric headband. I hadn’t been interested in jumping over waves, or much of anything else, that summer. It was the first time my mother had taken me to the annual Elvis festival, though it was only a short drive from the shores of Georgian Bay. It was their special thing. The two of them had always gone together, and I’d been happy to stay back at the cottage with everyone else.

A few weeks before summer vacation, I'd begged my mother to take me to the festival, but the clipped way she'd said *no* told me to never ask again. Whenever an Elvis song came on the radio at home, she'd switch stations, once almost slipping on the freshly mopped floor as she rushed for the dial. And I knew not to knock on my parents' bedroom door when it was closed. Instead, I pressed my ear to the grainy wood and listened to their soft voices; I could never make out what they were saying, except, over and over again, sometimes in a low sob, the word *gone*.

On our third morning at the cottage, I was sketching a seagull at the wobbly card table when my mother came up behind me, her hand resting lightly on my shoulder as my pencil shaded the tip of a wing. Her hand cupped around her mouth, she whispered the invitation into my ear, as if she couldn't quite bear to say the words aloud—or maybe she didn't want my cousins to hear as they bundled through the door with wet hair, sandy feet, and towels slung damp around their shoulders. For her to form her mouth around the name *Elvis* could only mean she was worried about me. Still, her question lit something inside me for the first time in a long while. "You really want to go with me?" I asked, the pencil falling from my grasp onto the pine plank floor. She nodded, setting a platter of sandwiches on the card table, and turned away to usher my cousins into their seats. But I'd seen the knot between her eyes, like a rope at the marina where the sailboats would slip away if they could.

Now it was my turn at the front of the line. The woman at the counter asked me what I wanted. "Candy floss," I murmured as if underwater, but the woman called out "Candy corn!" Two teenagers behind her set to work before I'd even poured my coins into her outstretched hand. "Candy floss," I tried again, the consonants lifting like sparkling sea bubbles, but she presented me with a dripping candy corn on a stick, holding it a few inches from my face.

"Corn?" My mother laughed, browsing a keychain display back at the souvenir stand, her purse tucked under her arm. A multitude of Elvises stared back at me from trinkets and posters, their faces locked in identical fixed smiles. I held the stick in the shade beside her, maple syrup dripping down my hand and onto my forearm, pink bits falling like bacon rain into my sandals and between my toes.

I eyed the garbage can where those impersonators and Priscilla had eaten the candy corn. My mother handed me the extra paper napkins she'd been saving in her purse for a moment like this. "Let's take it over to the bandstand," she said, adjusting the snagged silk scarf around her neck. "The seats are filling up." She steered me toward the bleachers by my elbow, the cob outstretched like a shining torch as we weaved through the shadowed corridors between pop-up tents. Speakers blasted hits from the vendor booths, a cacophony of overlapping choruses, the electric snap of "Jailhouse Rock" spilling into the gentle croon of "Love Me Tender."

When we took our seats—two spots at the end of a row near the back—my mother laughed again, her elbow jostling mine so that a few crumbs of bacon fell into my lap. "You haven't taken even one bite!" As she flipped through the pages of the program, I wondered if these were the seats they always chose.

I imagined what my brother would look like if he were here now, reading the list of performers, leaning against our mother. They'd always been close. Over family dinners, she would ask him questions about Graceland or the Acropolis, places he planned to visit when he was older. My mother was the only person permitted to get close to his intricate LEGO designs in the basement rec room. He would explain the complex architecture to her, and she would set down a laundry basket to kneel beside him on the carpet, their faces turned to each other, radiant under the hanging task light. I pictured him filling my seat on the bleachers, his legs longer than mine and more gangly. Would he have hints of facial hair by now, maybe a shadow above his lip?

I tried to read my mother's face for signs she was glad to be here. Around us, the crowd buzzed with anticipation. For an instant, we were the impersonators—my real

mother anywhere but here, the real me back in our pink-tiled bathroom at home: tiny and tractable, a toy soldier flicked off the rim of the sink, floating in the porcelain pool.

Maybe she wished we hadn't come. We would miss the bonfire, holding our long sticks and marshmallows over it, staring into the flames but never talking about fire. A couple of years earlier, in the first of a series of disasters, my brother had set an entire LEGO city alight. He'd taken such care building it over several days in the rec room, where he'd sectioned off an area with netting to keep me and the cat away from it. Through the mesh, I caught glimpses of its construction, more intricate each day, on a wooden board that flattened the brown shag carpet. Did he know in advance he would need to carry it up the stairs and out to the backyard?

Through my bedroom window, I gazed at the miniature city up in flames on the lawn. Standing beside the small blaze, he observed the scene with an unnerving stillness, the side of his face visible through a billow of smoke. He watched with horror, yes, but also fascination as the flames leapt to the wooden panels of the shed and then to the fence.

I wanted to call out, to run, but I couldn't move, my hands gripping the window ledge as my father ran outside, yelling at my mother to call 911.

The sound of our father's voice snapped my brother out of his trance—he looked suddenly startled, raising one arm to cover his eyes with the sleeve of his flannel shirt. Dad yanked him by the other arm, pulling him inside, away from the blaze. Within minutes, it seemed, sirens were blaring down the street until red lights flashed across the asphalt of our driveway. I remember the way the water arced from the firehoses over the burning shed and fence, how it pooled in pavement potholes along the side of the house. For days afterward the tiny ponds remained, half-charred LEGO pieces floating in them like strange goldfish.

My brother wouldn't touch his beloved bricks after that. He wouldn't even collect their charred remains from the backyard. I gathered all the pieces, tossing the ones so burnt they were no longer LEGO, keeping the bricks that still retained some remnant of their colour and shape. I hid them in a drawer beside my bed and, when I couldn't sleep, pulled them out to try to find any warped pieces that would fit together. Occasionally, two bricks would snap together, and it gave me such a sense of satisfaction, a kind of rush I'd never experienced before, and I'd feel guilty for taking this small pleasure from it.

I couldn't forget the way the firefighters talked to my brother afterward. The way he nodded but looked down at the scorched lawn. One of them tried to place a helmet on my brother's head, but he flinched and knocked it away, too old for the gesture. I saw him later that night through the crack of his bedroom door, dusting his records in slow, circular motions.

Sometimes I'd wake in the quiet hours after midnight, the red glow of his lava lamp lighting the hallway between our bedrooms. I'd hear the soft brush circling the vinyl like the sound of a tide coming in, gently rolling over our dark suburban neighbourhood, helping me fall back to sleep. Even away from home, on the shores of Georgian Bay with the windows open at night, the sound of water splashing on the docks couldn't cover the phantom white noise.

Those records, which I was never allowed to touch, really did have an exquisite shine to them. Sometimes, I'd stand in his doorway, my fingers tapping a beat against the frame, as if I understood the music the same way he did. Occasionally, instead of

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shooing me away, he'd give in with a nod of his head and a faint grin. I'd rush in without a sound and take my seat on the braided rug under the window—the one place I was allowed, at the farthest distance from his record player. I'd watch as he pulled the vinyl from its sleeve with gentle care and hold it up, tilting it toward the light before placing it with precision onto the turntable. Not a fleck of dust on its gleaming surface where the grooves captured each song, rings encircling a tiny hole in the centre, a hole on which the record relied for its revolution, for its ability to turn out music. A hole, too, that marked the beginning—or was it the end?—of each dusting cycle. My brother would lower the needle and, like a gift, there it was, my favourite song, “Hound Dog,” electrifying the air between us. I'd laugh as he curled his upper lip and danced for me, rubber-legged, swivelling his hips.

Now in my possession, these records would stay safely sealed in their cardboard jackets for as long as I lived, their surfaces forever untarnished. To pull them out of their sleeves, to listen to them—no. It was shameful even to think of. But sometimes I wondered whether I should continue to dust them. And if I dared to do such a thing, pulling the soft brush around, would I, in that slow spin, finally understand not only the pleasure and sorrow of this action, but catch one tiny glimpse into his universe?

I spotted Priscilla standing alone off to the side, below the stage, the white of her dress glowing against the dark velvet backdrop. She lit a cigarette, holding it between her long fingers, the flame from her lighter illuminating her face before her features blurred in a cloud of smoke. Dozens of Elvis impersonators assembled in three long lines across the stage. My hand was soaked in maple syrup, and a few pink bits clung to my T-shirt and shorts, my bare thighs covered in drips. Just as the announcer began to speak, my mother grabbed the uneaten candy corn from my hand and began to eat it like the men had, like Priscilla had, taking big, ravenous bites. The announcer spoke about the death of the King, and the Elvises bowed their heads, the light of the sun bouncing off the sequins of a hundred jackets. For a moment, the Elvises stood so still, like an unmoving sea, an impossible thing. It was beyond comprehension, all of it—Georgian Bay, this festival, the candy corn.

The band struck up their first notes, and the impersonators raised their hands to their hearts. All at once they began to sing in unison, “I've Been Blue” pouring out of the speakers, softly at first, all those baritones repeating the word *where, where*. My mother ate faster, methodically devouring row upon row of kernels, looking down intently and watching them disappear as if she were somewhere else, not here at this festival but at the picnic table in our backyard at home. Anywhere but here. The pop of each taut kernel seemed to please her as she worked the cob with a ferocity I'd never seen in her, once or twice spraying my cheek. But the voices lifted unceasingly, gaining momentum as they broke into harmony, and the song with its question rose as if to form a bright crest high over the bleachers. It peaked and curled above us with an impossible force, rushing over me, carrying me back, then knocking the candy corn right out of my mother's hand. *Where, where*, the impersonators sang. *Where*

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Sheri Doyle is a writer and poet whose work has appeared in Existere, the Antigoni Review, the Ekphrastic Review, untethered magazine, and other publications, including the anthology Bring Me Gold: 50 Poems for Palestine. Her debut poetry chapbook “A Dress Made from Light” was published by Vocamus Press in 2022.

The Uncreative Life

KASIA VAN SCHAIK

*Hers is the figure in the lighted window, or the face in profile,
gazing out from the bedroom into the open city*



Some years ago, a journalist I knew in Berlin was conducting a series on artists' working spaces. Writers and artists were asked to send her an image of their writing desk, whatever that looked like, and she would post it on her blog. Her request was clearly inspired by Virginia Woolf's thesis that in order to write fiction a woman needs financial security and a room of her own. The project wondered: how was this measuring up?

I sent the journalist a picture of my kitchen table, which I shared with two roommates. It was small and square, painted blue, flanked by a radiator and a hanging spider plant, the centre of our tight communal space. I didn't tell her that shopping lists were the only things I actually composed on this table.

At the time, I was renting a room intended for storage or laundry. It was large enough for a single bed, in my case a mattress on the floor, and the chipped, full-length mirror I'd found languishing on the street upon my arrival in Berlin. I also rolled in a clothing rack, on which I hung the four dresses and single coat I'd brought with me from Canada. A window, tall and narrow, let in a rectangle of light in the late afternoon. No room for a chair or a desk, hence the need to photograph the kitchen table. I thought of Woolf's line about a young woman in a bedroom with a pen: "The room is your own, but it is still bare . . ."

One of my flatmates was an actress who had, for the past few years, been struggling to find work. She complained that as she was aging (she had just turned twenty-seven), the struggle was only going to grow harder. When I moved into her flat, she'd just returned from Peru, where she'd spent twelve days at a wellness retreat under the influence of a large amount of the plant-based psychedelic, ayahuasca. In between excruciating stomach cramps and spontaneous defecation, she had undergone a life-altering experience. She was lying helpless on the floor, vomit bucket beside her head, when she'd felt another presence in the room. Above her in the darkness hovered several tiny glowing lights. As they grew closer, they multiplied, but even amidst all the discomfort, she understood that she was not in danger. These glimmering beings, my flatmate realized, bore a striking resemblance to the fairies in her childhood picture books, with their webbed wings and arched ballerina toes. They now hovered over her body, clutching tiny surgical instruments. Before she knew it, the fairies were operating on her. They sliced open her stomach with their miniature scalpels and began shifting organs around; upon finishing up their business, they sutured the wound and disappeared through the ceiling.

When she awoke the next day, she felt an immense sense of well-being. For the first time in her life, she knew who she was. She'd also found her vocation, she explained. She would leave her precarious acting career and become an alternative medicine practitioner.

My flatmate turned to me, blowing the smoke from her cigarette out the window in a distinctly German fashion. "And what about you?" she asked bluntly, pointing her chin in my direction. "You're a writer, but I never see you write."

She wasn't wrong.

Sometimes, between work shifts, which involved carting babies around the wealthy districts of the city or teaching English grammar to sullen art students at the Technische Kunsthochschule, I'd sit in a city park and fill a few pages of my notebook, but those sentences weren't leading to anything. They lay fragmented before me, imperfect.

Why did they have to be perfect?

"If nothing else is perfect," the poet Bernadette Mayer once said, "why should a poem be perfect?"

She was right. What use was perfection if it barred creation?

My roommate's observation—*I never see you write*—paralleled the questions the journalist was asking by requesting images of artists' workspaces for her blog. Is there such a thing as a perfect space of creation—a room for artmaking? If not bound by a dedicated desk, if not housed in a studio, does the creative life cease to exist? Does it just melt into the "uncreative life," which is to say, into ordinariness?

To answer these questions, I turned, as I usually do, to books. I found, in a small used bookstore in Berlin, a strange and beautiful 1970s novel by Laguna Pueblo writer Leslie Marmon Silko. I picked up *Ceremony* because I'd read Silko's short stories in an American literary anthology and had been haunted by her textual landscapes composed of drifting shadows and windy grasslands interfused, in one reviewer's words, with "a sharp sense of the way in which the profound and the mundane often run together." A woman standing alone in a desert, her face turned away from the reader, was the image I took away from Silko's atmospheric prose. But I knew nothing of the author herself.

In the book's preface, Silko describes the importance of space in allowing her to write *Ceremony*, her first novel. After moving with her young family from Arizona to Alaska in the early 1970s, Silko found herself sinking into a depression and in desperate need of a place to write. With her sons in daycare and in school, Silko explains, "I tried to write at home but I found it difficult to concentrate: the dirty dishes and dirty laundry seemed to cry out for attention." Her creative drive was consumed by housekeeping. What she was seeking was not just a physical space but the mental space—away from tasks that somehow consume the mind, forcing the mundane over the creative—to write.

Luckily, a friend invited her to use the table and chair in his closet-sized law library in a building overlooking Ketchikan Creek. There Silko had a view of the great

Chief Johnson totem pole with Raven and Fog Woman, one of the most famous totem poles in the world, and a monument to women's power. For the next six months, she worked on her Hermes portable typewriter, an unofficial writer-in-residence to the law office. When law services moved to another building downtown, Silko moved with them, but when her friend couldn't find new tenants, she was allowed back to the office beside Ketchikan Creek, now all her own. "Rent free," Silko writes; she was given "exclusive use of the space complete with heat and lights and, best of all, no telephone."

But it was not just the space that afforded her the permission to write her novel. It was a ritual as well. Silko notes of her process:

My rule for myself was this: I had to stay in that room whether I wrote or not . . . I'd walk over to the window to look up at the big black raven carved above me on the top of the pole. A long way down the pole came Raven's two raven helpers, Gitsanuk and Gitsaqeq, their raven beaks oddly hooked, melted from the fire's heat the time they carried Raven's gift of fire to human beings. Then came the figures of Raven and his wife, Fog Woman, who held two salmon by the tails. The beauty of the carved figures lifted my spirits and I'd finally break down my resistance, and start work on the novel.

Being in this liminal space opened up a new possibility for Silko: a space to dream, to commune with past storytellers and what she calls "old time stories" from different Indigenous Peoples. The title of the novel, *Ceremony*, refers to the healing ceremonies based on the ancient stories of the Diné and Pueblo people. It created the space for a writing ritual, wherein the profound and the mundane could cohabit rather than compete.

Ceremony garnered Silko a MacArthur Fellowship (commonly known as the "Genius Grant"), which would support her through the years she spent working on her epic, *Almanac of the Dead* (1991). She acknowledged the effect of her cash prize (\$800,000 USD over five years) to *Time*, admitting that she was now "a little less beholden to the everyday world."

I appreciated that Silko had included this transcript on the material conditions behind writing her novel, those that temporarily released her from the responsibilities of the everyday. The work of genius I'd found in a used bookstore in Berlin had not sprung from the air, but had been born out of ritual and strategy, a Hermes portable typewriter and a view of Ketchikan Creek. And, something all writers wish they had, a generous friend in a law firm.

Toni Morrison notes a similar need for ritual to unlock her writing practice. Her ideal writing routine—a fantasy

routine because she never actually experienced it—is nine uninterrupted days in a room with huge tables. "I am reminded," Morrison muses in an interview, "of that tiny desk that Emily Dickinson wrote on and I chuckle when I think, Sweet thing, there she was. But that is all any of us have: just this small space and no matter what the filing system or how often you clear it out—life, documents, letters, requests, invitations, invoices just keep going back in." Life—ordinary, imperfect—keeps interrupting.

When asked about her actual writing routine—not the imaginary one—Morrison talked about the importance for her to get up at the crack of dawn.

I always get up and make a cup of coffee while it is still dark—it must be dark—and then I drink the coffee and watch the light come . . . Writers all devise ways to approach that place where they expect to make the contact, where they become the conduit, or where they engage in this mysterious process. For me, light is the signal in the transition. It's not being *in* the light, it's being there *before it arrives*.

One must create a ritual in order to make contact. To receive the "gift of fire."

With *Ceremony* under my arm, I hurried out of the bookstore to my nanny job. I recalled Morrison's dawn ritual, Woolf's utopian city of rooms, and the journalist's request for the evidence of a desk as I pushed my charge, baby Elio, around his affluent but still trendy neighbourhood of East Berlin. I thought of Elio's mother hiding in her office when I brought Elio and his brother back home, feeling guilty about claiming the space and time, but loath to give up the room. As I navigated cobblestoned avenues with his industrial-sized stroller, I looked in through people's windows, into vast rooms of Scandinavian teak and white linen, rooms that were mostly unoccupied.

I fantasized about spending afternoons in those rooms, free of any responsibility. I came up with a plan wherein the wealthy invite writers to occupy their rooms during the day. What was in it for them? They could become patrons of the arts at no real cost to themselves—perhaps only the cost of electricity to keep the lights on while the writer worked. Who could I sell this idea to?

I considered telling Elio's mother about my plan, but perhaps she would see this as a criticism of her relative financial security. Recently she'd complained about her lack of productivity—that she'd spend the first hour of her precious study time writing and the next two deleting, word by word, everything she had just set down.

I had, for a long time, been a habitual window watcher—a voyeur into the indoor worlds of the leisure class. Most people watch reality TV to glimpse the interior lives and rooms of the super wealthy, but I was more interested in the windows I could peer into at street level. Families swimming back and forth across their aquarium-like kitchens. A fellow *au pair* stooping to pick up a plate tossed on the floor by a yellow-haired child in an artisanal highchair. A figure hunched over a phone, absentmindedly stroking

face, and grew startled, as if I were standing not outside, behind glass, but inside the room, sharing their air, their uncluttered, settled wealth.

They were wrong though. I wasn't hungry for their lives as much as their rooms, the expanse of clean, liberatory space—though not actually private because I was looking in—in which, it seemed to me, one would be rescued from the “uncreative life”: one could do anything, be anything.

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the velvet ears of a sprawling Siamese cat. In the evening when the lights came on, many of these rooms resembled the American artist Edward Hopper's paintings. He was one of my favourite artists at the time; his palette, like Paul Gauguin's, was luminous with neon yellows and dark river greens. But I'd later learn that Hopper's genius, like Gauguin's or Picasso's, came at a cost to his wife, Josephine “Jo” Nivison Hopper.

Josephine Nivison was a successful artist when she met Edward. Her work had been shown alongside that of Modigliani, Picasso, Maurice Prendergast and Man Ray. *The New York Times* had singled out her work for praise over that of her contemporary, Georgia O'Keeffe. Yet, Jo gave up her studio when she married Edward. As his career soared, hers dwindled. This was partly because Jo devoted herself to tending to her husband's career, handling the loan requests, booking his exhibitions, and other tasks of the uncreative life, to clear the space and time for him to paint. She was also his only model: hers is the figure in the lighted window, or the face in profile, gazing out from the bedroom into the open city.

“Of course,” Jo Nivison wrote in one of her diaries, “if there can be room for only one of us, it must undoubtedly be he. I can be glad and grateful for that.” This was not because Jo was not talented, but because the couple had determined that there was “room for only one of us.” It came back to the question of room. The private room or studio, yes, but also the room in a relationship, the sharing of space.

Something else I noticed: in the arcade of Hopper-like rooms I passed, there was a notable absence of books. It was an era of minimalism, of pale furniture and tall windows. Sometimes the occupants of these rooms would glance up at me from their curated solitude and their expressions would grow suspicious. They recognized a hunger in my

It wasn't just the rooms of the wealthy I was interested in. It was all kinds of buildings. When I first moved to Berlin, I would spend every weekend exploring abandoned factories and hospitals. There were sanatoriums on the outskirts of the city that had fallen to ruin. There was a spy tower to the west. In a forest to the east, a large, deserted amusement park with a miniature village and a Ferris wheel that groaned in the wind. There were beautiful cloud-bleached buildings standing along the canal, long ago factories waiting to be torn down.

I remember one building in particular—an abandoned sugar refinery not far from the city centre. *Notice what you notice*, read the graffiti on one of the exterior walls. A group of us had climbed up four storeys onto the roof. The stairs were still intact but some of the floors had fallen away to join the open pit of rubble at the building's core. We were now sitting in the sun, unzipping our jackets to cool off from the effort of the climb.

Notice what you notice. At first the direction seemed redundant. Of course you notice what you notice. But later that week, while I was standing in front of a class of German art students, trying to instruct them on English grammar, the line returned to me. It was about the act of noticing. By tracking *how* we observe and not just *what* we observe, we learn more about who we are as observers, but also, what kind of artists we could be.

What I'd noticed that day in the abandoned refinery was a mattress in one of the still-intact rooms, bare and pushed up against a wall. But the room itself was clean, not filled with dust and rubble like the other spaces in the building. Someone had been living there or was living there still.

There is a photograph of me in the sugar factory, one of the few from this period of my life. Someone must have taken it once we'd climbed down from the factory roof. I'm standing in a room in which three of the walls are missing.

So is the roof. All that remains is the square frame of the door, and part of the wall. Can this still be called a room?

Framing this room with a large rectangular window is another structure, also half demolished, but nevertheless standing. I am standing in a room within a room, a girl-woman, looking out of this window-door, out of the double ruins of history. I am grinning hugely, on the brink of laughing, as if to say, *Look, I finally found a room of my own.*

I, PEDESTRIAN, WINDOW-WATCHER, WAS NOT A VICTIM OF THE EVERYDAY BUT A REFORMER. I CHOSE MY OWN PATH THROUGH THE CITY, EVEN IF I WAS PUSHING A STROLLER.

There is a long history of everyday life—particularly the reproductive labour of maintaining daily life, like care work and housework—engulfing a female artist’s time and attention. Historically, while men were composing poetry, women were raising children. This predicament endures.

The experimental Canadian novelist Gail Scott has written about how interrupted time often shapes women’s artistic output in an essay collection, *Spaces Like Stairs*. “First, in terms of time, a woman’s life is never simple,” Scott argues. “She must put aside her writing to do a million other things. Indeed, her socialization has taught her to keep her mind so cluttered with details that it is often difficult for her to concentrate for whole days at a time in order to deal with a longer work like a novel.”

In *Silences*, a study of the writing of women and working-class subjects, the American writer Tillie Olson makes a similar observation, describing motherhood as being “instantly interruptible, responsive, responsible”:

Children need one *now* . . . The very fact that these are real needs, that one feels them as one’s own (love, not duty); *that there is no one else responsible for these needs*, gives them primacy. It is distraction, not meditation, that becomes habitual; interruption, not continuity; spasmodic, not constant toil.

Feminized labour, reproductive labour—compulsory multitasking, interrupted time, and maternal guilt—shapes not only one’s writing practice but one’s thinking practice. As Silko reminds us, writers need a space free from the demands of the dirty dishes in the kitchen sink.

I’m wary of the binary that pits the everyday against the life of the mind, because I’m often drawn to poetry, stories, images that arise from an engagement with the personal and the domestic. Historically, yes, most women have lived

in the shadows of great monuments, trimming the weeds that grow about the statues of prodigious men. They have been more tied to the rhythms of domestic work, but this does not mean that they have not created art within the constraints of the quotidian. In fact, many women writers have spent much of their writing careers interrogating the everyday as a subject and a formal constraint.

Like the great theorist of the everyday, Michel de Certeau, I’d like to believe practices of daily life can be infused with acts of resistance and creativity. In his study of twentieth-

century urban life, De Certeau argued that individuals navigate and negotiate power within the everyday practices of consumption, reading, commuting, and walking in the city—or, in my case, window watching. Even the limited freedoms pedestrians have in shaping the city could be powerful. “The long poem of walking manipulates spatial organizations, no matter how panoptic they may be,” he wrote. “It creates shadows and ambiguities within them.” In these shadows, beyond the censoring eye, flickered ingenuity and imagination.

I, pedestrian, window-watcher, was not a victim of the everyday but a reformer. I chose my own path through the city, even if I was pushing a stroller and had to stop every few moments when Baby Elio spotted a bird or a truck.

As Elio and I roamed around east Berlin, I recalled how Alice Munro would prop up a novel over the sink so she could read Dostoevsky while doing the dishes. I thought of Emily Dickinson, who wrote in the pantry while skimming the milk. She wrote at her bedroom desk, the one that Toni Morrison spoke of, the size of a hotplate, watching over her plants on nights when the temperatures dropped below zero. This room she called Freedom.

I imagine her now, warming the plants with her hands, blowing on their leaves. Penning in her looping, slanted scrawl: *the brain is wider than the sky.*

My Rilke moment—the moment when I realized I “must change my life”—came to me a few weeks after my conversation with my flatmate about the fairies. I was at a corporate fundraising event for Transparency International, where I’d been hired as sole caretaker and entertainer for the guests’ thirty children. Crouched down in the grass behind the champagne tent, far from the stage, I painted butterflies and spiderwebs onto the kids’ small, upturned, incorruptible faces. A young

American woman, about my age, dressed in a tailored grey suit and silk blouse, gripping a binder to her chest, came up to me and asked me if I knew where she could find a bathroom (she said “restroom”). She had a futuristic haircut, the sides shaven close to the contours of her skull, her nails and lips painted the same liquid brown. She told me she was the keynote speaker and needed to prep before her speech. I was almost mute with jealousy. What had I done with my life? The keynote’s Americanness made her feel overly familiar in this European city. I felt I was looking into an uncanny mirror. But I showed her the bathroom.

As I watched her prepare for her speech, I felt I was disappearing. I did not have the room of my own or the “habit of freedom” that Woolf advises the woman writer to obtain. Or, it appeared, any good habits at all. I’d put myself through university, but even after I’d graduated as valedictorian of my class, I was still drawing butterflies on children’s faces. A little girl tugged my hand, reminding me that I still needed to finish hers. She crinkled up her nose as I drew two antennae above her eyebrows and a little black and red hindwing across her right cheek.

What had I done wrong? I looked down at the child’s half-painted face. This was not the life I had envisioned for myself. I decided that I needed to make a change—but what should that change look like?

For the rest of the event, I sat in the sandpit and allowed the children to paint my face and pour sand in my hair. Across the lawn someone was raising a flute of champagne to democracy. Eventually, as it grew dark, the guests came to collect their children, leading them away one by one to their suppers and bath times. Someone brought me a plate of food from the barbecue. I glimpsed the keynote leaving with her colleagues, blazer now folded over an arm, directing her easy laughter into the night.

Over the next few years, I did change my life. I moved back to Canada, enrolled in a PhD program, and began building a writing community. But even when dedicating my time to the study of literature, my days felt provisional and sporadic, but also repetitive. I was still a child of the gig economy. As I moved between teaching contracts and editing jobs, writing was something I squeezed between lesson preparation, laundry, and answering emails. But something had shifted.

Instead of waiting for the perfect room or the perfect desk to welcome inspiration’s lightning strike, I focussed on granting myself the permission to claim the space and time in my day to write. I worked to make creativity part of my daily routine—even if it meant staying up until 3:00 a.m. or carving out twenty minutes in the morning or on the train to work. Even if it meant showing up late or unprepared, or falling behind on my taxes. Or if it meant being viewed as odd, neglectful, or selfish with my time.

For me, making creativity habitual meant reconceptualizing the idea of artmaking. It meant upending the separation between the creative and uncreative life.

Sometimes writing is standing in the shower and dreaming of incredible things: a humpback whale off the coast of South Africa, the red weather on Jupiter, a subterranean termite kingdom that runs the length of Brazil. It’s bolting out of the shower, dripping, and reaching for a notebook that immediately grows damp. It’s scribbling, frantically, naked and cross-legged on a towel for the next hour and, returning to those pages weeks later, finding the text has dissolved into the paper. All that remains is an inky illustration of a whale’s mouth, a hundred straight lines to indicate its baleen plate.

Sometimes writing is being unemployed and lying under a tree in August. Or it’s reading a good book and, while absorbed in the sensuous atmosphere of another author’s mind, thinking, *How can I stay in this place?*

Sometimes writing is window watching. It’s lying on the roof of an abandoned sugar factory in Berlin, dropping out of your life for ten days, a phone call with a friend. Sometimes writing is not writing.

Sometimes writing is sitting in the section of the library dedicated to mystery novels beneath a poster of Agatha Christie surrounded by floating umbrellas. It’s choosing a floor with no children, only skylights. It’s beginning what promises to be a long and nimble, multi-clausal sentence, when the phone light ups with a message from someone who hasn’t texted in six months. Since the spring. *I need affection.*

Sometimes writing is not writing back.

Sometimes writing is inventing a small glass room on the apartment roof. It’s furnishing this room with a school desk, a straight-backed chair, and a teacup-sized cactus, nothing else. It’s sitting under this room’s prismatic ceiling and making a list of ordinary things: Portuguese custard tarts, a pair of miniature wool gloves found under a bar stool one night, a conversation with my sister in which she didn’t ask me any questions except for “What time is it where you are?”

Suddenly, the whole city is vibrating. Even the cactus, the only unimagined object in this room, communicates with its tiny spikes.

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Listening with Loghan

DAYNA MAHANNAH

A return to the chickadees

The day I plan to meet with Loghan Paylor—whose debut novel *The Cure for Drowning* made the 2024 Giller Prize longlist—I awake to a wet fog that smudges the view from my window. Whatever birding weather looks like, I assume it isn't *this*. Paylor's words from our email exchange surface in my mind: *If the weather doesn't cooperate, we could meet at a board game café in the city . . .*

It's early September in Vancouver. While the fall equinox is eleven days away, this week has knocked the hot chip off summer's shoulder, so Paylor suggesting a wet-weather alternative is logical, but also thoughtful. They even sent a birdwatching app to download in advance of our trip, and map coordinates indicating a good spot for us to meet in Pacific Spirit Park on the Point Grey peninsula.

A bolt of sunlight late morning shatters the board game idea, and I'm relieved; this will be my first birdwatching experience, and I get to do it with Loghan Paylor.

When the author enters the tunnel of trees mid-afternoon, they look, well, cool. Short, silvery hair swept back, they're wearing jeans, boots and a collared button-up, a silver pendant hanging above the neckline. If I hadn't met Paylor in person before today (once, at a literary event), I might feel more intimidated. But the brushstroke of sang-froid I initially sense in their demeanour vanishes after we greet each other, and I remember: They are magnanimous. Maybe a tad shy.

"This morning I was wearing my other hat," Paylor says of their vocation as co-owner of Bookwyrn, a tabletop and role-playing game company. They just drove nearly two hours from Chilliwack and already navigated the warehouse district to drop off a wholesale shipment. "It's all these big



transport trucks, and then me in my little Altima being like, 'Don't squish me!'"

Later that evening, they will host a cross-cultural storytelling event with the writer Nathalie De Los Santos at a bookstore in East Vancouver. This kind of schedule seems par for the course; it's literary festival season (author territory), but also comic convention season (Bookwyrn territory). Still, Paylor has made time to walk in the park with me for a couple hours, looking for birds.

Somewhere along Clinton Trail, after describing the bingo card they play in their head to keep track of the cutest kid costumes at comic conventions—"I have to find the smallest Elsa, the smallest Superman"—Paylor's eyes lift toward the sweep of treetops. "It's

really nice in here."

Their observation nudges my attention from the image of a preverbal Spiderman to our surroundings. We're enclosed by an edifice of fir, red cedar, hemlock and spruce. Suddenly, "I hear birds."

We stop in the middle of the path and open the birding app on our phones, which identifies nearby species through audio recordings. Shazam for birds.

"My mom actually sent it to me during lockdown and I resisted it for a long time." They recall the nature hikes of their childhood, full of stops and starts. Paylor's mom carried binoculars on the trail and halted the family at every cheep of birdsong in her ongoing pursuit of feathered vertebrates. "When you're a kid, anything your parents do is horribly boring. As a nine-year-old, it was torture," they say, voice playfully irked. "Then the pandemic came, and I was spending a lot of time hiking with my dog. Something flipped. I hit a milestone in my thirties and suddenly birds were cool. It was very embarrassing."

Our laughter quickly recedes to a hush; the birds are calling. We hit the record button on our phones and lift them skyward. It's not, perhaps, the picture I first conjured when imagining our birding adventure: ankle-deep in tick territory after a light bushwhack, elbows cracked at forty-five degrees, binocular rings raccooning our eyes.

"Not getting much," I say. It's been seven seconds. After twenty-three seconds, a mark materializes at the top of the spectrogram on my screen, like a pencil stroke—a visual translation of the birdsong. The associated bird pops up below: a chestnut-backed chickadee! More sound shapes stutter across the white background as a high-pitched thrum trills through the woods. Pacific wren joins the chorus, brown creeper . . .

The forest seems chaotic now, like a flock just landed, but it's been so all along—we just started listening. Paylor and I remain still. When we do communicate, our words are so quiet they come out as entirely unintelligible murmurs and peeps, as if we're hoping the app will report back the type of birds we are beneath our human costumes.

Ninety seconds later, with the distinct feeling I'm breaking from meditation, Paylor and I compare notes.

"I didn't catch that wren."

I point out the kinglet that showed up in their list, but not my own.

"Some of them sound pretty similar," they say. The app is not flawless.

The forest canopy glows, and though sunlight can't reach us here, it's humid, warmer now. The crunch of our footsteps muffles the birdsong until a sharp, squeaky alliteration interrupts our conversation. As it fades out, I stare longingly into the mossy woods. "No—come back," I say, like some kind of romantic.

"Yep, it's a pileated woodpecker." Instead of pining after it, Paylor identified the call and then confirmed it through a recording before it vanished.

I'm impressed. To me, the various tunes that rise from the forest converge into a mashup track. What I distinguish as "birdsong, general," Paylor can name from memory. They do not claim to be an expert, but already they've widened my ornithological knowledge by at least one hundred percent.

"So, black-capped chickadees—that's actually them, right here . . ." Pointing at a tree just off the path, Paylor slows to the sound of a bright, fast chirping. "They're little black-and-white birds. They're really social and they travel around in little flocks—oh, that's them."

That high, fast chirp rings against the din of forest noise. "That one?"

Paylor shakes their head, and their finger, poised in the air, waits for a lower, slower song to conduct. They sing along. "That one: *chicka-dee-dee-dee-dee*." Chickadees let other birds know about local dangers or food sources—they are good communicators. "That's the reason they've

flourished so well, even with urbanization. They're very adaptable."

Perspiration gathers on Paylor's hairline as we huff up the trail and I notice, for the first time, the small, black binoculars they've been carrying for the last half hour.

"Oh, I'm the most annoying person to go hiking with because I . . . I've become my mother."

We split into laughter.

"It's inescapable."

The whirr of rushing vehicles tells us we're nearing a road. We turn back, heading deeper into the park. I want to know what parallels Paylor has found between birding and writing.

"If you're trying to get a good photograph of a particular bird, you still have to go out in all weathers to look for it. Otherwise, there's zero chance of finding it." They explain that sitting down to write never guarantees it will lead anywhere good. "But you have to show up to get there."

A golden retriever wiggles over to us on the path. Paylor's voice slides up a note. "Do you have a person?" The dog's entire backside responds like a metronome. The two are speaking a language of body, attention and sound. The retriever's person soon follows, cellphone glued to her ear, but she peels it away as a look of concern crosses her face, one that dog owners recognize: the split-second panic when your dog greets strangers before you can read whether they're dog-lovers or not. "He's very friendly," she offers. But the retriever has already told us.

We've come to a point in the park where the canopy blots out the sky almost completely. For the past five years, Paylor has spent a lot of time hiking in forests like this one, leading to the "percolating stage" of a new novel that they describe as pseudo-historical fiction with fantasy elements. "It's not a sequel to *The Cure for Drowning*," they add quickly. As they observed the birds on their walks, Paylor began to notice patterns and behaviours that fell outside the parameters of the guidebook they carried. "What struck me all over again is that sometimes we have such an idea of what nature is or how it behaves or what it looks like."

It was the chickadee that first signalled a snag in the pattern. Seven officially recognized species exist in North America, and yet. "There are so many hybrid forms of chickadees that I just started *finding* in the Fraser Valley." The chickadee who looked like a chestnut-backed but sang like a black-capped, for example. At that, the guidebook's authority fell apart. Even from a broader zoological perspective, the reliability of taxonomic classification methods regularly fail. "We're constantly updating our rules and our guidelines for science because the nature we find defies all of that. New species are evolving faster than we can categorize them."

I can't stop thinking about the slipperiness of categorization, especially when Paylor shares the process of

workshopping early drafts of *The Cure for Drowning* and the mixed feedback it received. A couple suggestions: Remove the trans elements; nix a character's gender pronoun shift.

"I can understand where they were coming from," Paylor says. "Because I was trying to do something that I'm not sure many people had tried before. People were just telling me what advice worked for them." This proved the hardest part of writing the book: "Drilling down and saying, 'Okay. Who am I listening to? What does this story actually need to be?' And giving myself permission to politely disregard what wasn't going to work."

My hands churn the air. I have a big feeling about employing polite disregard—a fine idea, but how does one *do* that? Journalling? Venting to a friend?

We reach another junction. After consulting the map posted at the intersection, Paylor leads us down a long, unbroken trail that will take us back to the beginning. "Spending a lot of time alone in nature was very helpful because there was literally no one in my face."

A return to the chickadees.

"There were times when someone would give me well-intentioned advice, and I'd be like, maybe I *do* need to

change this whole thing!" The panic in Paylor's retelling injects the perfect amount of dramatic irony. "But then, if I was able to get quiet and find some privacy away from other opinions . . . it sounds a little insane, but I'd put it to my characters. I'd be like, 'Does that sound like a thing that you would do?' And a lot of the times my characters were like, 'What?'"

This *what* holds the tonal exasperation of a character unwilling to dignify such a question—nay, insult—with anything but a self-scrutinizing question.

"In a weird way the story kind of told me what it wanted to be." Paylor takes a big breath; they've been talking fast. "I know that's a crazy way of explaining it."

An author talking to their characters just sounds like good communication. And if I've learned anything from the chickadees, that's grounds for adaptation. For flourishing.

Dayna Mahannah is a writer who lives in Vancouver, BC, with her uncategoryzable mutt. Her work appears in subTerrain, Geist, Electric Literature, and TRUE Africa. She received her MFA in Creative Writing from the University of British Columbia.



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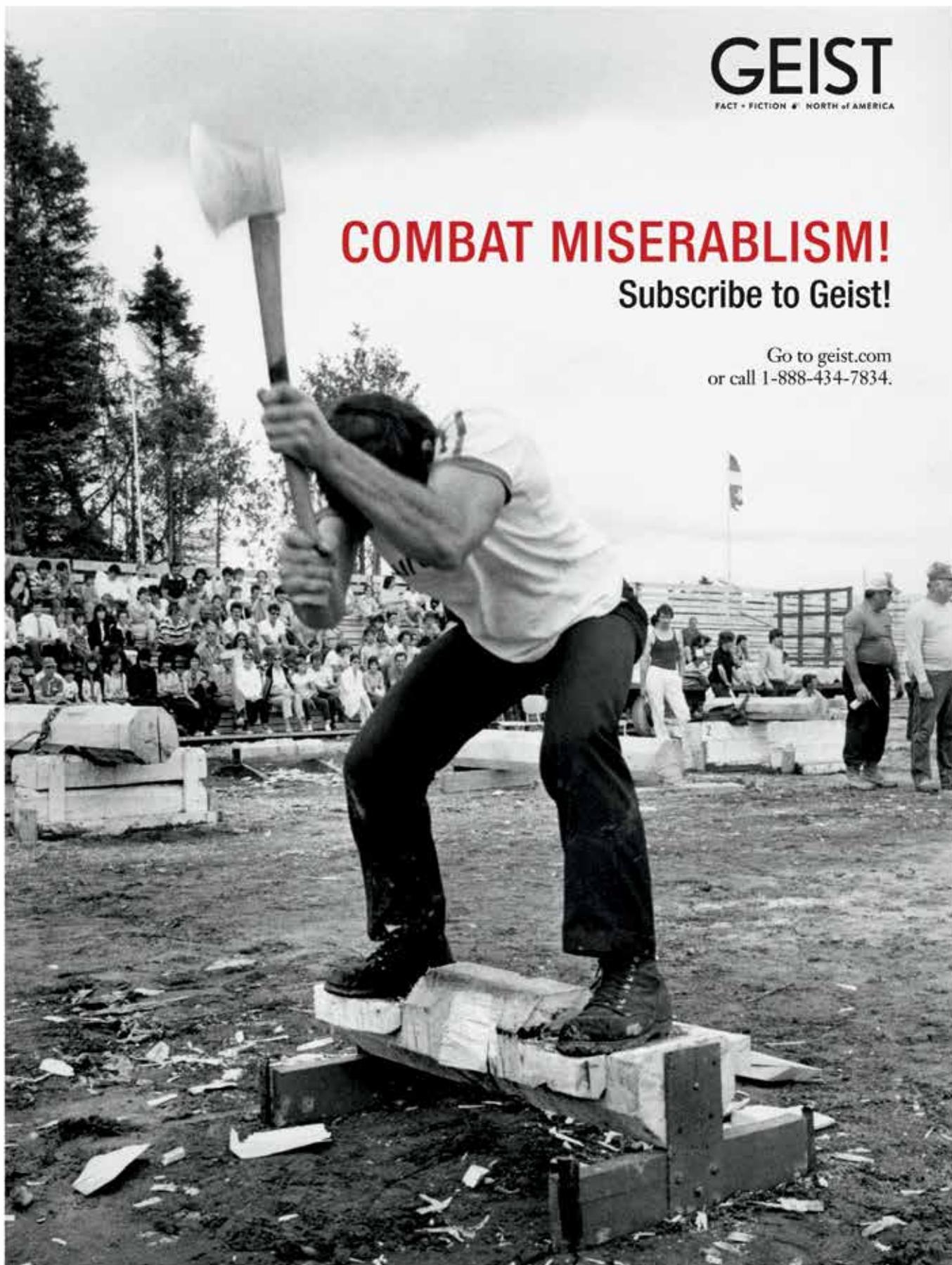
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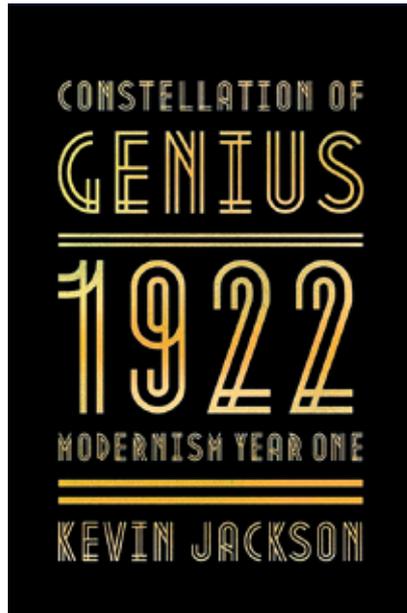


ENDNOTES

REVIEWS, COMMENTS, CURIOSA

THE YEAR IT ALL BEGAN

When did Modernism begin? Was it 1910, as Virginia Woolf famously declared? (“On or about December 1910 human character changed.”) Was it 1915, the year D.H. Lawrence claimed “the old world ended”? Was it the outbreak of the First World War (1914), the formulation of Einstein’s Special Theory of Relativity (1905), the publication of Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams* (1899), the outbreak of the Russian Revolution (1917)? None of the above, is the answer offered by the English writer and pataphysician Kevin Jackson in his book **Constellation of Genius: 1922, Modernism Year One** (Windmill Books). Instead, Jackson makes a strong case for 1922 as the year that ushered in modernity, a claim that he bases on two literary milestones: the publication of James Joyce’s novel *Ulysses* in February of that year and in mid-October the appearance of T.S. Eliot’s poem *The Waste Land*. “These two works remain the twin towers at the beginning of modern literature,” Jackson writes, “some would say of modernity itself.” As Jackson reveals, there was much else going on in 1922. Charlie Chaplin was “the most famous man in the world”; *Nanook of the North*, considered to be the first documentary film, premiered in New York; Louis Armstrong made his famous move from



New Orleans to Chicago, and jazz was never the same; Howard Carter uncovered King Tut’s tomb, setting off a craze for all things Egyptian; and the list goes on. Instead of a coherent narrative, Jackson arranges his material chronologically from the first day of January (when Marcel Proust is in bed with a hangover) to the last day of December (when the film adaptation of Oscar Wilde’s play *Salomé* opens in New York). In between? A year’s worth of incidents and accidents that are obsessively interesting. A great bathroom book. —Daniel Francis

DEFENDING THE FOREST

Blockade (Caitlin Press) is Christine Lowther’s account of what it was like to be one of the activists protesting against the clearcutting of old growth forests on Vancouver Island back in the 1990s. Many of us will remember reading newspaper coverage of those blockades—in Clayoquot Sound, the

Walbran and Carmanah valleys, and more recently, at Fairy Creek—but unless you were an active member of Friends of Clayoquot Sound back in the ’90s, unless you actually made your way into those contested forests while they were being logged, the only information you had was second-hand. Lowther was right there in the thick of it (along with many others), often face to face with angry forestry workers concerned about losing their livelihoods, and *Blockade* offers a chance for you to see what it was actually like to be a forest defender. In the early 1990s there was no internet; Lowther first learned of the anti-clearcut protests in the Walbran valley from posters on urban utility poles. “I had been signing petitions, writing letters and attending rallies for years, yet clearcutting was still the norm. Joining a blockade was the logical next step. [. . .] I hoped we could protect the entire west coast of the island against clearcutting.” The writing in *Blockade* is lively and full of details, which give the text a vivid sense of place, and a better understanding of the sacrifices made by those who participated in the blockades. “Life was for living. A new experience every day. I failed to spend my youth building towards a lucrative career.” In her introduction Lowther describes BC’s coastal rainforests as

“miraculous,” with “trees [that] grow sometimes for two thousand years—if left in peace.” If only they *could* be left in peace. —*Michael Hayward*

SCOOTING ALONG

You certainly can't say that **RIP Scoot** (Nightwood Editions), the second novel from Toronto author Sara Flemington, is lacking in imagination. Nor is its protagonist, Austin, who is also full of naïveté, stubbornness, desperation, persistence, and no small number of peculiarities. Austin's life is unstable: he has no job or other reliable income, his housing situation is precarious, his possessions are dwindling, and he has failed in an attempt to complete his post-secondary education. Yet Austin is not daunted by his troubles, preferring instead to focus on a mystery that has been sprung upon him, the solution of which promises “much reward.” Austin is convinced that the three-pawed, blind, and louse-infested cat that suddenly appeared at his door is an omen, one somehow connected to an obscure Japanese painting depicting the cat's doppelganger. *RIP Scoot* details how Austin uses all of his limited (but colourful) resources in an attempt to solve this puzzle, drawing upon a cast of characters that includes Gear, a neighbourhood hardware-store owner and television series addict; Matilda, a chance encounter at a bubble tea shop; and Karly, Austin's eldest brother's pregnant and sympathetic wife. As Austin is being thwarted, guilt-tripped and gaslit by former friends and family members, his door key keeps breaking, the Ontario winter weather is predictably hostile, and an eviction notice has thrown him for a loop. Considering these circumstances, Austin could be either the most reliable narrator you've ever met, or the least; you won't be able to decide until the end of *RIP Scoot*. Austin's haphazard stumblings

through social media, his awkward social interactions, and his tendency to draw far-fetched connections between seemingly unrelated people and places, reveal as much about our times as it does about the way that Austin is wired. —*Thalia Stopa*

WORDS TO LIVE BY

“Ultracrepidarian, from the Ancient Greek. One who loves to give their opinion, at length, on matters they know nothing about.” “Snaccident, 21st Century. The inadvertent eating of an entire box of cookies.” “Whiffing, 17th Century. Fickle, inconstant and making it up as you go along.” Susie Dent is an English lexicographer, etymologist and media personality. She has a radio show on BBC Four, “Unspeakable,” with comedian Phil Wang, in which celebrity guests make up words, and she appears regularly on various quiz shows. She also posts on social media about once a week, sharing words that often subtly reflect the state of the world. I follow her on Bluesky for the sole purpose of discovering these obscure and delightful words. Dent is also an author. **Word Perfect: Etymological Entertainment for Every Day of the Year** (John Murray Press) is just what its title promises and a lot of fun to dip into. Dent has written children's books, numerous books about the English language and its quirks, and even a mystery novel, *Guilty By Definition*, which I've yet to read. She has a new book out, *Words for Life*, which features a positive word for every day of the year. I'm waiting for my copy to arrive, in which we might find words such as: “Respair, 15th Century, fresh hope and a recovery from despair.” “Copemate, 16th Century, the friend in life who gets you through.” “Catchfart, 17th Century. An obsequious individual who will always follow the political wind.” Enjoy. —*Peggy Thompson*



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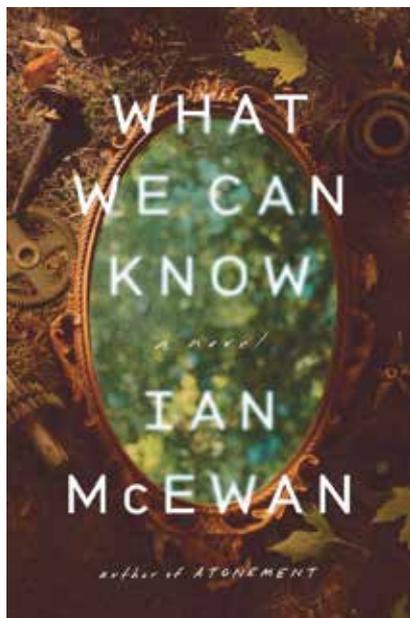
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THE MYSTERY OF THE MISSING CORONA

Ian McEwan's latest novel, **What We Can Know** (Knopf), is set in the year 2119. Tom Metcalfe, a professor of literature, has learned of a dinner party held back in 2014, at which poet Francis Blundy read a poem—"A Corona for Vivien"—to his circle of friends. That poem, which existed then in just a single, hand-written copy, subsequently went missing, and Metcalfe becomes obsessed with finding it. A corona is a complex poetic form of linked sonnets: the last line of each sonnet is also the first line of the next. What accounts for a poet's desire to add this level of technical complexity when composing a poem? I suppose there is the challenge involved, and the pleasure taken in meeting that challenge, while at the same time creating a lyrical and meaningful literary work. At one point McEwan cites a supposed André Gide quotation about the effects of constraint on art in general: "Art lives by constraint and dies by freedom." In interviews, McEwan has said that he was inspired by poet John Fuller's 2021 poem "Marston Meadows: A Corona for Prue," written to celebrate Fuller's wife on the occasion of their diamond wedding anniversary. Fuller's corona to his wife has fifteen linked sonnets, with the



last line of each of the first fourteen sonnets making up the final sonnet. McEwan describes it as "magnificent, tender and technically brilliant." So, is the lost corona in McEwan's novel—Vivien's corona—comparably brilliant? Sensibly, perhaps, McEwan skirts the issue by having his characters only speak and write about the lost poem; at no point does Vivien's corona appear on the page. In *What We Can Know*, Ian McEwan's focus is on literary people and the challenges—sometimes self-imposed—that motivate them. The novel is philosophical and futuristic; it shows our inevitably differing recollections of events; it offers one vision of what our lives might be post climate disaster: of *course* you should read it.

—Angela Runnals

A TAILOR AND HIS SCRABBLE TILES

Sometimes, Always, Never (Photon Films, directed by Carl Hunter) is a sweet little movie filled with synonyms and definitions. Bill Nighy plays Alan, a lonely, retired tailor whose teenaged son walked out of the house after an argument about the admissibility of the word "zo" on the Scrabble board. He was never seen again. Now that he's not working, Alan spends all his time looking for his missing son and getting better and better at Scrabble, while his remaining son, Peter (now an adult) lives quietly with his wife and son and stays away from his father. After Peter reluctantly accompanies Alan on a resentment-filled road trip in his dad's tiny red car, Alan spends the night on the bottom bunk in his grandson Jack's room—and then just doesn't leave. Jack is a typical indifferent teenager who hides himself inside his hoodie, but his grandfather gently nudges his way into Jack's life, and eventually we see them both in Alan's tailor



shop where Jack is trying on a three-piece suit. This outfit gives Jack the courage to talk to a girl he sees at the bus stop every day but is too shy to approach, and it turns out that she likes Scrabble! Thanks to Alan's presence in the house, other relationships also start to shift. Alan is still obsessed with finding his missing son, but now he's not as lonely. When he realizes that one of his online Scrabble opponents uses several of his missing son's favourite words (including "zo"), he heads off on a new quest. *Sometimes, Always, Never* is a quiet and quirky love story, complete with wordplay—which is not restricted to Scrabble—and a nice bit of tailor jargon. I watched it on Kanopy. —Meandricus

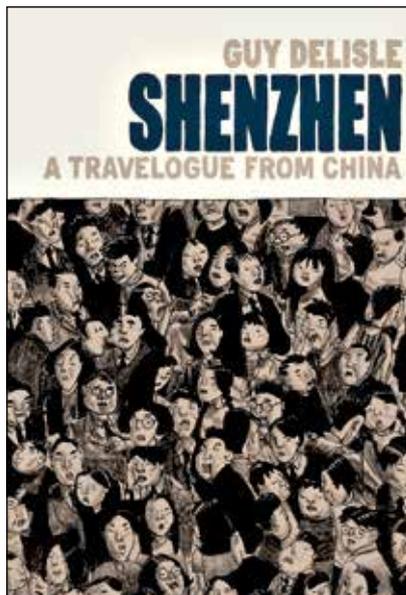
THE PURSUIT OF CHECKMATE

I was interested in reading Stefan Zweig's novella, **Chess Story** (*Schachnovelle* in German, and also published as *The Royal Game* in some English editions), because it seemed to pursue similar themes to Yasunari Kawabata's *The Master of Go*: the obsessive pursuit of the perfect move, the perfect game, and an exploration of a life lived with a singular purpose. At a surface level, I got what I expected. Zweig's novella explores

such themes through the characters of a socially inept chess prodigy, Mirko Czentovic, and a reluctant chess virtuoso, Dr. B, a mysterious asylum seeker whose chess virtuosity was self-taught under extreme circumstances. Zweig's novella, however, also explores mental illness. What I found even more intriguing was the backdrop of the story, and how it factored into the character development of Dr. B. *Chess Story* is set on a transatlantic ocean liner, en route from New York to Argentina. We learn that the Anschluss—the occupation and annexation of Austria into Nazi Germany—has occurred some months prior to the voyage taking place. I may be projecting the present day onto Zweig's storytelling, but there is a point where reality blurs, compresses, and separates for Dr. B, and I couldn't help but read it as a commentary on how the experience of fascism and authoritarianism might parallel the lived experience of schizophrenia. Dr. B, we learn, is much less a man interested in the pursuit of a brilliant chess game, but is rather a person who is haunted, and kept in check by a recent experience with the new fascist regime. Zweig was himself a political refugee from the same homeland and time period as Dr. B, and his novella is much more than simply a succinct and compelling tale. —*Anson Ching*

A FRANCOPHONE ANIMATOR IN ASIA

Shenzen, A Travelogue from China (2000) and **Pyongyang: A Journey in North Korea** (2003) are two graphic memoirs by Canadian Québécois author Guy Delisle, set in the late 1990s and early 2000s, respectively. Both books are published by Drawn & Quarterly, and chronicle Delisle's experiences working as a liaison for European animation studios (Delisle now lives in the south of France). The



context of his work lends a framework to both books, making these travelogues more than simply the accounts of a tourist. Both books offer an intimate view of the awkwardness of being a foreigner in a faraway land, and not without humour. Delisle illustrates the location of Shenzen, a fenced-off industrial region, by comparing it to Dante's layers of hell, placing Shenzen somewhere between purgatory and limbo. Delisle's black and white drawings document his increasing boredom and isolation just as superbly as they underscore his wry observations on capital punishment and public latrines. *Pyongyang*, published a few years after *Shenzen*, is more starkly drawn, with higher contrasts and cleaner lines, highlighting the dissonance (and absurdity) of life in a totalitarian regime. I was lucky enough to discover *Pyongyang* on the "recommended" shelf at my local library, and Delisle's work has turned out to be the best discovery of the season for me. Next on my reading list is his *Burma Chronicles*.

—*Cornelia Mars*

ON BECOMING A SEWIST

Like many others, I've been inspired by *The Great British Sewing Bee*, a

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ANANSI

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BBC reality show, and by the abysmal quality of fast fashion, deciding to take a swing at learning to sew my own clothes. Not having sewn anything since high school, I tried several books from the library, until I hit upon **How to Sew Clothes** by Amelia Greenhall and Amy Bornman (Abrams). Greenhall and Bornman have an encouraging and practical approach that shows you how to set up and stock a sewing workspace, helps you to understand fabric and garment construction, and instructs you in the basic skills needed to complete your project. They provide a selection of patterns for simple tops, jackets and bags that can be adapted by “hacking” (customizing a pattern beyond the designer’s original intent), with pattern pieces included in an envelope in the back of the book. Each section is illustrated, and there are other useful tips on things such as: finding sustainable sources of fabric, saving a failing project, and how to find a sewing community. Of all the sewing books I’ve read, this one feels the most honest about the challenges you’re likely to encounter as a beginner sewist, and how you might resolve them, reassuring you that it’s valid to sew at the kitchen table, for example, and to cut your fabric on the floor, and that it’s okay not to like everything that

you make. Aside from the hard skills taught in this book, I especially liked the authors’ considered approach to sewing as a practice for cultivating abundance in your life, and their insight that sewing can be a source of fun, excitement, creativity and friendship. That was more inspiring to me, as a person who enjoys making things, than the many project ideas offered by this book. I sewed the basic box top from start to finish in less than one day, and have worn it many times with particular relish. I have plans for a dress in green linen up next. —*Kelsea O’Connor*

UNDERWORLDS AND UPPERWORLDS

Gallery curator Charo Neville reports that her son, a member of a local Dungeons & Dragons group, counted at least 180 wild horses depicted within the exhibition **Staircases Leading to Nowhere**, featuring the work of artist Keith Langergraber, which was mounted this past summer at the Kamloops Art Gallery (photos can be seen at kag.bc.ca/all-exhibitions/staircases). While Langergraber hasn’t counted the horses himself, he appreciates the special connection that a Dungeons & Dragons group would feel for his show, with its use of crystals and model kit pieces, and the hyper-detailed drawings of fossils and far-flung abandoned sites. Included in *Staircases Leading to Nowhere* are two digital videos, *In the Darkness of Stairways Leading Nowhere* and *In Hell Everyone Needs a Glass of Water*, both of which feature Langergraber as a haunted, solitary character confronted with the unknown. He explores the connections and divergences of these two works in drawings, photographs, surround-sound sculptures, and a large-scale installation in the main exhibition space. That installation floats in the room, an ascending

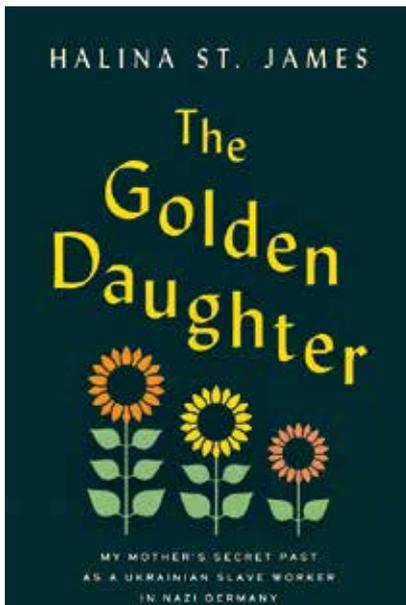
spiral assembled from model horses, maquettes, mining equipment and blobby ruins, some with a pop of bright California blue—which could be a backyard swimming pool or a tailings pond from a massive copper mine. In one of the videos the character talks about looking through the eyes of birds, and also, through the eyes of yourself thirty years ago. This is a good way to think about Langergraber’s art; its layers of time, perspective and scale encourage the viewer to question their own perceptions and their understanding of the world. When I’m looking at something, is it with a direct or an oblique gaze? How does this world relate to the one outside the gallery walls? How will the wild horses survive? The viewer is left with an unsettling feeling of dissonance; it’s as if you have been temporarily suspended inside the bright, glowing beam of a Star Trek transporter, caught between worlds that you don’t quite understand, wondering if they will change you forever.

—*Shyla Seller*

THE SECRET MOTHER

Halina St. James never knew the story of her mother’s experiences during World War II. A secret cache of letters and documents, discovered after her mother’s death, led her to write **The Golden Daughter** (House of Anansi), a remarkable, complicated and nuanced story. Maria was the beloved only daughter of ethnically Polish parents, who lived in Ukraine. In February 1943, seventeen-year-old Maria was kidnapped from school by the occupying Nazi SS soldiers and taken to Germany as a slave labourer, like many other young Ukrainians and Poles. Letters give hints and insight into her time in forced labour (as a maid to a German doctor and later in a ball-bearings factory), and how she





survived the war. After the war, she claimed to be Polish to obtain residency in Canada. By the time she left Europe she was married with a young daughter, but after arriving in Timmins, Ontario, she soon left her husband for another Pole. Frank and Maria never managed to achieve their dreams: short of money, failing at ambitious schemes, with their relationship always on the rocks. St. James employs an unconventional narrative technique: the first half of the book tells her mother's life story as an omniscient, novelistic narrative, while in the second half, she enters the story as a subjective researcher, piecing together her personal history and grappling with gaps in the facts. She tracks down members of her birth father's family, and composes letters to the now-dead relatives she never met. Often Maria's story is retold with this new information and perspective, and while that means there is some repetition, it brings extra gravitas to the story. Slavery and forced labour in Nazi Germany is still little known, and is an important piece of history to spotlight; so many similar stories have disappeared without a trace. This rocky mother-daughter relationship takes on an entirely different meaning as the author begins to understand

the forces that shaped her mother's youth. Though there is redemption, this is a family tragedy, but one that St. James tells with energy, dignity and insight. —*Kristina Rothstein*

BEWARE THE BUNNY BENEATH THE BED

Contrary to its name, *Dust Bunny* the movie (Lionsgate) is not remotely drab or fuzzy, but a sharp-focus panorama filled with jewel-toned rooms, fight scenes (some sparkling, some bloody), and an eight-year old girl, Aurora, hiding under a patchwork quilt. *Dust Bunny* is about a child's fears, but it's also about family and loss, bravery, trust, and making unexpected friends. Aurora is sure that the monstrous dust bunny hiding under her bed has eaten her parents and is waiting to eat her too, so she seeks the help of a neighbour—who may be a hitman, or a dragon-slayer,

or both. Director Bryan Fuller uses the camera to full effect, from the saturated colours to the ultra-wide 3:1 aspect ratio that magnifies the expanse of dangerous floor around Aurora's bed. Neither cutesy nor horror, *Dust Bunny* is beautiful—Aurora's rabbit mask, the green velvet banquette where she meets with her neighbour and his boss (played by Mads Mikkelsen and Sigourney Weaver respectively), a mouthwatering dim sum meal—and unpredictable: Is it fantasy? Is it real? Is the fantasy real? (Hint: Fuller doesn't like the ending of *The Wizard of Oz*, and the guns are *definitely* real). I saw the world premiere of *Dust Bunny* from the dress circle at the Royal Alexandra Theatre in Toronto during TIFF, but this entrancing film doesn't need such fancy surroundings. It will be in theatres in early December, so do see it on the big screen if you can.

—*Helen Godolphin*

“A much overdue and deserved celebration of a group that was misunderstood and mocked viciously by established artists, until we took the world by storm.”

—Heather O'Neill, author of *The Capital of Dreams*

Called Canada's most influential zine, *Fish Piss* ran for 11 issues, from 1996 to 2006. Some of its early contributors who went on to illustrious careers include Kid Koala, Geneviève Castrée, Catherine Kidd, Heather O'Neill, and Jonathan Goldstein.

Why Fish Piss Matters
On the Last Authentic Bohemia
ANDY BROWN

 Véhicule Press

The GEIST Cryptic Crossword

Prepared by Meandricus

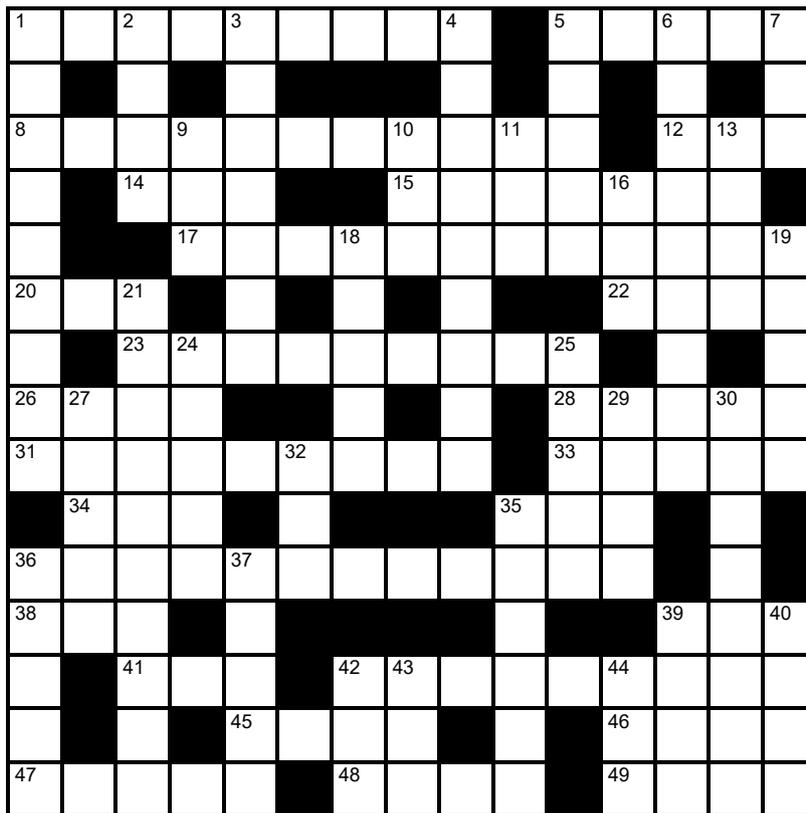
Send a copy of your completed puzzle, along with your name and address, to:

Puzzle #131 GEIST
#210-111 West Hastings St.
Vancouver BC V6B 1H4
or geist@geist.com

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

ACROSS

- 1 Oh expert, thy excited scribbles are replete with connections!
- 5 Hey Scotty, can you figure out what these pictures mean?
- 8 With a long bra pin, I was able to grill bread in Mexico
- 12 Sounds like there isn't any void at all
- 14 It's sad that little Theodore Tugboat sank as well
- 15 First the photo is snapped haphazardly, then she adds to it
- 17 Reb wowed wild Bill with his global spider's trap (3)
- 20 He was a monster but in the workshop he made a great mashup
- 22 In Spain and Portugal she will say this
- 23 From early days, it sounds like this array devotes itself to its users
- 26 At number 10, the lights are a sign of the times
- 28 A singular computer game was coined in Georgia
- 31 I heard she stopped the drugs, then took up skiing and changed direction a couple of times
- 33 I etch when I need to make a moral decision
- 34 The tech wizard has all the facts about my modern home address (abbrev)
- 35 According to Morse, when Dot was too long, the other one was necessary
- 36 For optimised results, look for the motor! (2)
- 38 In Victoria, this territorial zone has lots of money (abbrev)
- 39 Turn it on so you can broadcast your pathogenic invasion (abbrev)
- 41 To start the folks from that Anishinaabe First Nations community declined streaming
- 42 In response, the lady piper put money in an envelope.
- 45 His aged mother says she's both surprised and confused
- 46 You too?!
- 47 It's shocking to see them wire him! He tears up and can't move



- 48 This old item-connecting transport procedure should have had a user-friendly name! (abbrev)
- 49 At 1, this lingo needs a price increase (abbrev)
- 27 When I see a deer, I mix it up with a duck
- 29 In the end they're usually a small size or an imitation, but in France they're just girlish
- 30 Sir, might you be confused by an ideological angle?
- 32 Yuck! Don't give me a hug
- 35 Remember when you would phone me when you needed to connect
- 36 Robert was on the lookout for a good colonist to narrate Lee's story
- 37 Don't cry! Be happy that humans and machines can communicate!
- 39 Add some zest of the earth for this season
- 40 At a matinee, an American adores one
- 42 Give a cheer for the hospital in Edmonton where I was born!
- 43 In Ottawa, they're saving sunlight for the Fourth Dimension (abbrev)
- 44 Humph! My dad sounds unconvinced.

DOWN

- 1 The highlight of our connection is that it's excessively active!
- 2 One of her leggings took my breath away
- 3 She adds a new covering for Rose and her domain
- 4 When he stumbled on those telegrams, he really raised that twirp's ire (2)
- 5 Dylan was angry when the light went out
- 6 The musicians say it will take a second for this bit to reach its full breadth
- 7 Are you familiar with that spaced-out gay woman who was first?
- 9 When you bend over, the horsehair tightens
- 10 For a student at uni, he certainly is boorish!
- 11 I can't compute when it isn't promoted as part of the crowd (abbrev)
- 13 To gain access, be sure to type your name correctly
- 16 Torontonians were after Hanlan's scull because of his showboating
- 18 Wow, Ray's cutting-edge increase in illumination is an exciting exit strategy!
- 19 Remember that TV show about beginner's instructions and code?
- 21 Coders balk at getting mixed up with obstructive folks
- 24 When I kern letters, I remember that old-time typesetter
- 25 In the valley, a treehugger protested with music and a glass of beer

Solution to Puzzle 130

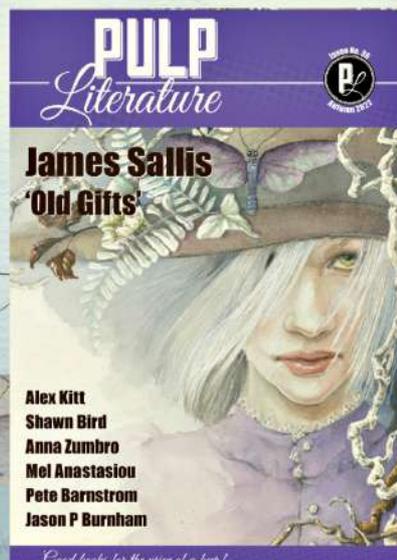
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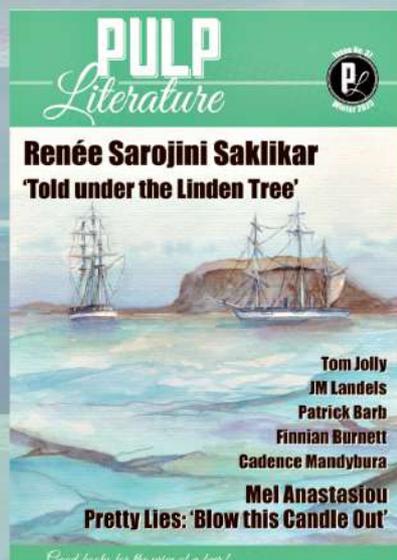
The Bumblebee Flash Fiction Contest

Deadline: 15 February
Prize: \$300



The Magpie Award for Poetry

Deadline: 15 April
First Prize: \$500



The Hummingbird Flash Fiction Prize

Deadline: 15 June
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The Kingfisher Poetry Prize

Deadline: 15 August
Prize: \$300

The First Page Cage

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The Raven Short Story Contest

Deadline: 15 October
Prize: \$300



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