FROM THE LIT MAG LOVE COURSE COMMUNITY

LIT MAG LOVE

ANTHOLOGY 1: BLOOD & WATER

Twenty-five writers share work they published in journals—and the tales of how they did it!

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LIT MAG LOVE

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Ludi Leiva

Given I was born suspended between worlds—the mixed daughter of a Central American mother and a Slavic father—my entire life has been an attempt to understand my place.

In the past, listening to Armando Manzanero tapes or flipping through my grandfather's dusty books of poetry helped me begin to close in on an answer, but still I find myself asking: Where do I belong?

I spent my childhood between a coastal mountain town near Vancouver, Canada and a small suburb of Seattle, Washington—thousands of miles away from my ancestral homelands. Having spent most of my life feeling untethered, I have dedicated myself to artistically interrogating some of the subjects that occupy my thoughts, namely diaspora, (de) colonization, trauma—and healing.

As an artist, my work is an unearthing of myself that calls upon the memories of my ancestors' dreams—scattered from the backs of horses across the verdant valleys of Honduras and Guatemala, or pressed into the damp earth of WWII refugee camps in Eastern Europe.

My artistic practice evolves with the seasons, but my work is currently focused on storytelling through both visual art and prose. No matter the medium, I use art to explore themes of femininity, objectification, isolation, and liberation. I am particularly interested in examining the ways that women of color move through the world.

Above all else, my artistic practice is an act of healing and resistance—a ritual that investigates the forgotten and overlooked mythologies of those who, like me, have wondered where they truly belong.

Table of Contents

Section One: BLOOD

CREATIVE NONFICTION

POETRY

Section Two: WATER

CREATIVE NONFICTION

FICTION

POETRY

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR:

Blood & Water

Welcome to the first anthology of writing produced by alumni of the Lit Mag Love Course.

Each poem or story in this collection first found a home in a literary magazine (a.k.a. lit mag). This anthology republishes these works alongside the tale of how each author successfully submitted to the lit mag. I'm so thrilled to show the results of these writers' dedicated writing and submitting practices—this is work of both their creative hearts and luminous minds.

Some of the writers appearing in these pages had many published works to choose from as they prepared to share their writing with you. Others are sharing their first and only publication in a journal—thus far! I'm proud of all of them and their accomplishments.

You'll find a few rare cases where the poem or story was accepted by the first place it landed, but most often the writer submitted many times—sometimes over years—before finding a literary home for their work.

What each writer in this publication has in common through their experience in the Lit Mag Love Course, is the persistence, courage, and strategic thinking it takes to revise their work well, submit wisely, and keep going no matter the result. They share an understanding that rejection is an inevitable and necessary part of a writer's life.

Even on days it feels hard, they know how to work through this and keep on submitting. As you can imagine, sometimes writing stories from this deep centre can hurt, and writers draw strength from other *lovelies* to continue telling vital truths, to take care as they do, and to take breaks when needed.

In the Lit Mag Love Course, our writing and submissions radiate from our community. We start in a centre of support and connection with other brave and vulnerable writers also trying to publish in journals, then we ripple out, encircling journal editors and readers in our growing community. As our members place pieces in journals, they report back on their experiences. Lit Mag *Lovelies* (our affectionate name for our members), tune-in to seek the gate openers—editors ready to receive their waves of powerful, sublime, sad, angry, or joyful submissions that they diligently prepare for publication. Don't misunderstand this research and strategy as conforming to what they *think* editors want to read. Writers in our community claim space for *their* stories. They don't bend the work to fit the journals. Instead they hone in on what is most vital to them and write on life and death, politics and humour, families and fertility, or whatever other concerns they wish to explore.

As I was gathering the writing for this anthology, two fluid themes emerged—blood and water. (Beautifully illustrated on our cover, by Lit Mag Love Course alumna, Ludi Leiva.) "I had never seen

anything so blood red before," Lina Lau writes in her touching nonfiction story, "How To Peel a Pomegranate," first published by *carte blanche*. "Tears—your internal waterline—rise to the surface," writes Rachel Laverdiere in her clever triptych, "Saturday Afternoon: Three Views," first published by *The Nasiona*.

In *Blood*, our first section, the blood is often literal, referring to family and bloodlines. "B is for Blood: as in ties, as in relatives, as in covenant," writes Rowan McCandless' in her astonishing abecedarian, "Blood Tithes: A Primer," first published by *The Fiddlehead*. "There is a freedom—and maybe a bit of paralysis—in not having a hereditary path," writes Elizabeth Cone in her enchanting segmented essay, "Family: Three Chapters," first published by *The Doctor T.J. Eckleburg Review*. "I take a deep breath and accept that while the Simpcw are my family, blending in is not an option," writes Deanna Partridge-Da-vid in another moving abecedarian (this one uses letters from the Secwépemc language), "Lost and Found." By the way, this is one of three pieces in this anthology first published by me as editor of *Room*'s Family Secrets issue. It came as no surprise when my students took all they learned about researching and targeting editors and used it on me! (Naturally, they had to pass readings from others on the collective before I'd consider them for publication.)

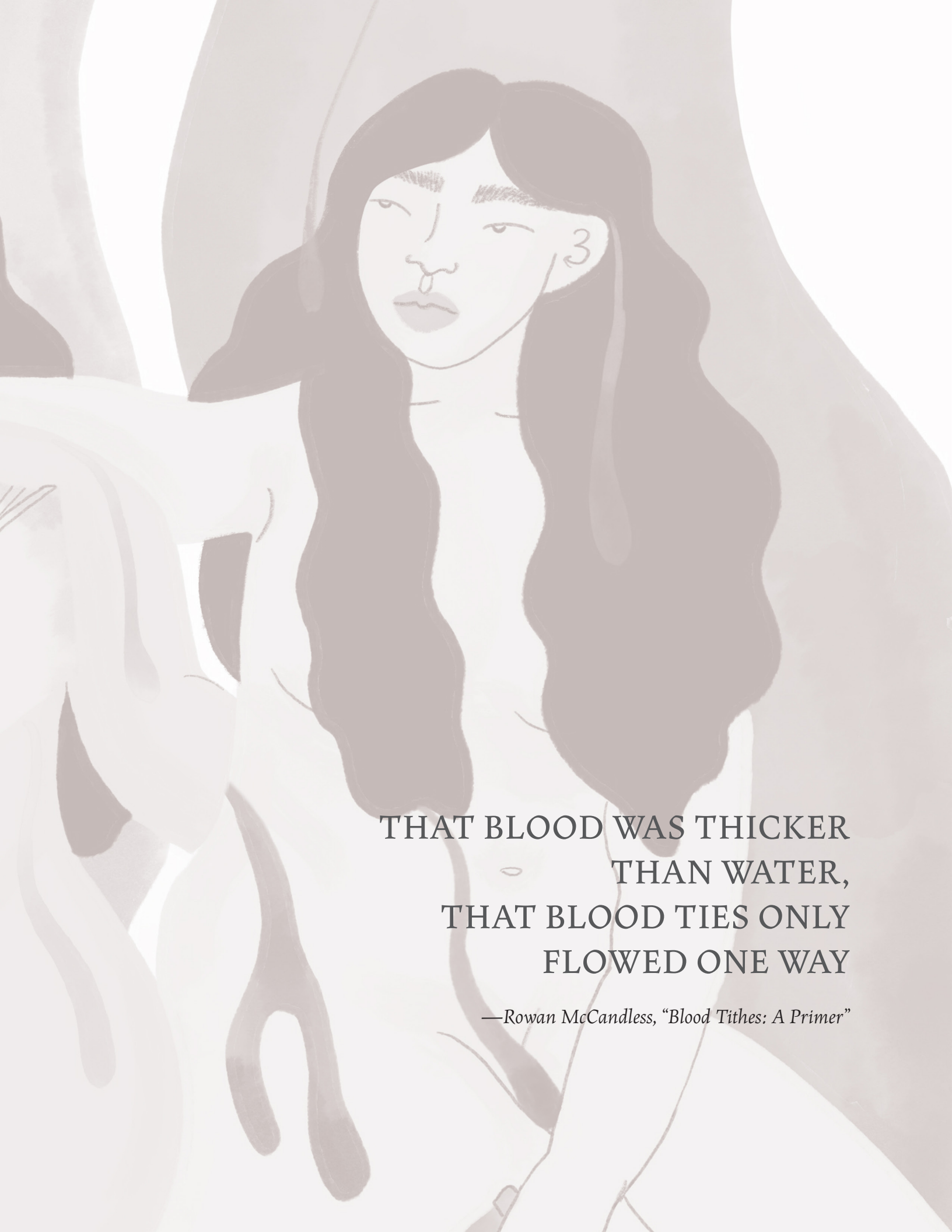
Julie Hart's "My Mother is a Tardigrade," bridges us between blood and water when she writes, "She can withstand such temperatures, pressures, radiations, go without food or water for more than thirty years, then rehydrate, forage, reproduce," in her charming poem first published by *Anti-Heroin Chic*. This sub-theme of desiccation appears in the "Sweet-smelling fruit extracts to moisturize, rejuvenate, illuminate," from Karen Zey's cheeky "Living With Mature Skin," first published by *Drunk Monkeys*, and uproariously in "Dead Amy" by Michelle Kelm, "There are so many factors to think about and I doubt it's ever cool to tell someone that they are dead with a crowd of strangers standing around," which won honourable mention in a fiction contest with *Room Magazine*.

The *Water* section of the anthology flows from funny to deep, like the ocean in Margaret Nowaczyk's brilliant essay, "Matisse, the Sea, and Me"—"O-ce-an—the susurration of the waves captured in the word itself"—first published by *The Antigonish Review*. And in the central metaphor of Heather Dia-mond's sublime "Waterbabies"—"Lost or refused entry, their souls swim between worlds in the realm of liquid life"—first published by *Memoir Magazine*.

As Ellen Chang-Richardson writes in her poem, "Meltwater Basin," first published in *Ricepaper Magazine*, "where my seas and your shores met like towers in rain." With that sea and shore image in mind, dear reader, I hope you will meet us in these pages and connect with our Lit Mag Love Community.

—Rachel Thompson

BLOOD



THAT BLOOD WAS THICKER
THAN WATER,
THAT BLOOD TIES ONLY
FLOWED ONE WAY

—Rowan McCandless, "Blood Tithes: A Primer"

A.K. Shakour

Lit Mag Love taught me how important it is to have a writing community to help lift you up. Slowly, I am meeting more and more people who are dedicated to publishing their work, and that is exciting.

Publishing "flying to yama" in *The Foundationalist* was one acceptance in a sea of lit-mag rejections. Through taking Lit Mag Love, I learned having more information about a literary magazine allows for a better understanding of whether your writing fits their vibe. This sometimes makes submitting to magazines terrifying and intimidating. I have been submitting works of poetry to magazines for two years. When I submit my poetry, it is normally accompanied months later with an "I'm sorry" note attached from the magazine, yet I have now published two poems, both in university magazines. This is encouraging, but also discouraging. I wanted my work to have a voice outside of the university crowd.

The Foundationalist is a magazine at Yale. I read all of their previously published poetry before writing my own, noticing that they publish works that take risks. This fit for me because I want to take as many risks with my poetry as possible, and to keep growing and learning. As a young poet, I am emboldened to keep trying, especially when I see the success of other hard-working young poets, such as Isabella Wang.

Lit Mag Love taught me how important it is to have a writing community to help lift you up. Slowly, I am meeting more and more people who are dedicated to publishing their work, and that is exciting.

flying to yama

By A.K. Shakour
First published by *The Foundationalist Journal*

waiting in the frostbitten grass
the air is cool
pocket buzzing
        babe! can you see the moon?
pocket buzzing
        it's red and full
fingers clicking
        i love it

it is the night of the super blood wolf moon
chin tilted up
squinting into the sky.

trying to read the solar system

it is a page
in a book about oriental rugs and other drugs
silky stars spreading on the ceiling,
each a thread each a story.
if i could fly to yama
i'd walk barefoot
all over that celestial persian carpet.

. . .
babe! can you see the moon?
. . .

the moon is lukewarm porcelain
i gurgle into it
as you rub my back,
we're back from the strip clubs in bangkok.

bars litter the road,
dots on soi cowboy, those neon fluorescent signs
sparkling pink, yellow, and green stars
flashing dazzling
women.

number six brings me the wiskey,
while number four twenty four flirts with a balding man.
i whisper *you're like lightning* but you can't hear me.

here we are,
strippers spinning on a sunday night, the show includes
nipples and needles
dangling,
from a string between their legs
pop pop floating balloons.

hooting hollering howling
all the way back to the hotel.
my finger slides down the man's chest like butter,
as i laugh, *no tuk tuk*.

you wrap your hand in mine as i stumble.

sticking my head in
the crescent moon,
night dimming,
you hold my hair back.

. . .
it's red and full
. . .

uncorking the red wine
you hid in your closet, i've noticed
it's where you hide
secrets in between the dress shirts.
they're collecting dust
near the box
of ticket stubs and lovesick notes i wrote,
that you're saving for a special occasion.

in the kitchen,
ben sighs as he butters his freshly made baguette
she's a rocket.
he speaks of love and hair
the shade of an ambulance siren.
someone scoffs to themselves.

you soak the chicken wings in milk and lemon,
this table is dotted with culinary heaven,
shrimp smoked on the grill,
pink as my cheeks,
baguettes and sour dough spheres,
wings, wine, and soon,
steak. i can't help but squeal
this is the best night ever.

slipping through the screen door
i am orion's belt
when i wrap my arms around your waist.
i leave a blob of lipstick on your cheek.

the night is black coal we light it on fire.
it brings the whole barbecue to life,
between the ember kisses
and you flipping the sizzling cuts of cow.

it's all i can remember.
my heart is warm

it's butter chicken curry that you made just for me.

we swap stories
they're rich
we gnaw them to the bones.

. . .
i / love / it /
. . .

(i)
never
did think i would be covered like this
you tuck me in. the duvet feels milky
the way i feel when
we dance on the wood in my bedroom
and it is a green world-

what do i know about the world?

. . .
(love)
my aunt told me,
hugging trees;
it's how i reconnect with the earth
but sometimes, when disconnecting with myself,
hugging trees grounds me, makes me feel
less soiled
like dirt.
. . .

(it)
sometimes is too much,
being abandoned in the alley,
walking barefoot
on broken beer bottles and
pebbles.

sometimes i scrub my skin so hard that i look red and full.

i howl just like the super blood red wolf moon,
after i've been used.
on the bathroom floor,
lay there like a limp condom,
rubber empty sticky.
feel my limbs come undone
floating up into the solar system,
wanting to fly to yama, wanting to escape this trauma.

the moon
hovers, a protector,
from neighbors who don't know the word no.
her name is the sky. she scooped out my stars
with her fingers and tongue.
. . .

what do i know about the world?

i still love it

still it brings moons red and juicy like grapefruit,
as i wait on the grass,
a blob of ink soaking the page.
i try to connect my threads like stars
i don't know what i am.

squinting up,
fingers clicking,
i send,
the super blood red wolf moon is beautiful.

she is tucked in by a blanket of stars.

i imagine constellation kisses,
in the milkiest way, helping her realize,
she deserves love, too.

pocket buzzing *so are you*
staring at my hands
trying to read myself, too,
i want to love myself the way i love you.

Hege A. Jakobsen Lepri

It took me six years and many edits to get the essay into its current shape because I wanted to get it 'right'

I had been sending out "My Tiny Country" for more than a year and had received at least half a dozen rejections on it when I submitted it to *Carve Magazine*. I discovered *Carve* early on when I started submitting to literary magazines. I fell in love with a couple of their short stories featured online ("Kudzu" by Andrea Bobotis was one of these stories) and felt that the writing had that sense of place I keep trying to achieve in my own writing. I had been rejected by them five times before this essay was accepted, though two were personal rejections.

It took me six years and many edits to get the essay into its current shape because I wanted to get it 'right'. The events described were traumatic enough to keep me from submitting it until 2017. Every time I touched it, the pain and bewilderment I felt back in 2011 flooded me all over again. If the editing had been less respectful, I may not have been able to see it through to publication. The editing process was long and thorough, but editor Cameron Maynard was ready to listen when I didn't agree with his suggestions, and we managed to reach an agreement every time.

My Tiny Country

By Hege A. Jakobsen Lepri
First published by *Carve Magazine*

Before the attacks, everything is as I expect it to be: We're in the car and my father is driving, the way he always does. I've had my licence for decades, but when I return to my parents' house—even now, in my forties—I slide over to the passenger's seat without discussion. Even a short shopping trip to town requires my father's participation.

We don't talk much, and I'm grateful for it. My throat is sore from speaking Norwegian all day. Every time I swallow, I'm reminded of the price of leaving and coming back.

We're following the road along the coast that will take us from the small town centre to my parent's house. The cobalt Strait and the green island of Senja on our left, well-kept wooden houses and a steep hill on our right, all veiled with a grey fog. I fix my gaze on the horizon. There's a sun back there, trying to break through, but the misty, swollen clouds are holding the punch of it, leaving only an eerie, aimless glow.

In the backseat, my youngest daughter and her cousins fill the silence with whispers and giggling. I can't hear what they're saying, but my daughter's Norwegian seems, limping and wobbly only a short while ago in Toronto, smooth and efficient. I wonder how she does it.

When the phone rings, my father slows down and stops the car to dig the cell phone from his pocket. I almost tell him to just let it ring, we'll be home in four minutes anyway. I'm sure it's my Mom wanting to tell us we're late, just like she did ten minutes ago. But I remind myself of my list of what not to do this time around. I know what happens when I interfere, how easily things escalate. This time I won't yell back and leave four days early. I open the window slightly, stick out my hand to feel the moisture and smell the grass. The scent softens everything. I relax even as my father keeps fumbling to find his phone.

After a dozen Nokia tunes, my father finally says hello. I know right away it isn't my Mom. My father keeps repeating "You're not playing tricks on me, are you?" It is three thirty-five in the afternoon on July twenty-second, 2011, and my uncle has called my Dad to tell him bombs have just exploded in the centre of Oslo.

"*Al-Qaida*," my uncle says, "It has to be the fucking Muslims."

My uncle is yelling so loudly my father has to keep the phone away from his ear.

By the time I make it into the house with the last grocery bags, the TV and radio are blasting out the same few sentences: "a car bomb went off at 3:25 in a side street near the Ministry of Justice. The building is damaged but still standing. No one has yet claimed responsibility for this act. Emergency crews are searching for victims."

In the aftermath, we forget our roles. My mother stops complaining. My father sits down instead of running in and out of the house between chores. I forget to keep the kids under surveillance and make sure they stay away from my mother's trigger points. I hear squeals and laughter from outside the house, but I don't move. The groceries are left on the heated tile floor while we watch amateur footage from anonymous cell phones.

In one of the brief recordings, I see a structure I think I recognize. Though I visit it almost every year, I don't know Oslo all that well, but I believe it's where three of my brothers work. I stop breathing for a moment, hoping to see evidence it's a different building.

"How far is Pål and Jon-Eirik's office from the Ministry of Justice?" I ask, but my parents know the capital even less than I do. They've lived their whole lives north of the Arctic Circle and never had their brains trained to learn street-names or recognize cityscapes.

But what they lack in urban navigation skills, they make up for in an inbred ability to pull together in a crisis. Centuries of having only your local community to count on will do that. My mother is already working her way down her phone list. I can hear her breaths, each one faster and louder as the adrenaline runs through her veins. Once in a while she'll ask a question, which she'll answer herself too quickly for anyone to have the time to reply. Within twenty minutes she's able to account for the whereabouts of my four brothers and one sister, who all live in Oslo. Two of them were away, and the third left the office around three since it's Friday, it's the middle of the summer, and this is Norway. My fourth brother works in a different part of town.

Only my sister has been affected—she's stuck in her office because everyone has been advised to stay out of the downtown core. There may be other bombs. There may be other terrorists. None of the amateur footage can tell us. We're watching the same images in unison across the country. It's hypnotising. Numbing.

"Nora isn't supposed to be in Oslo now, is she?"

My mother's voice stirs me awake.

My oldest daughter, only 18, has been travelling in Europe since June with three friends from Canada. Yesterday she sent me an e-mail from Trondheim, 550 kilometres from Oslo. I try to remember her travel schedule, but I've been checking it less frequently since they made it to Scandinavia. Safer, I've said to myself, not so much to worry about.

"I think she is somewhere on the western coast," I say, "On her way to Åndalsnes." It sounds accurate and sharp, and it calms me to hear the words come out of my mouth. But now my blood flow is picking up speed. I'll have to try to locate them and notify the other parents that everyone is all right. I finally have something to do, but I take another moment while I watch the images flow across the screen one last time. I'm trying to merge what I see with what I know to be true about this country. In the past twenty-five years, there hasn't been a single death due to terrorism. The homicide rate is steadily among the bottom ten in the world. The only way this could make sense would be if it were all a big hoax.

As I head for my laptop, my father finally says "If it is Al-Qaida, the right-wing progressive party will win this fall's election." My father loathes the right-wing progressives. And then my mother remembers dinner was ready almost an hour ago. I hear her shout "Oh, the dinner" as if she's startled, and for once everybody falls into her rhythm without resistance.

I send Nora an e-mail and a text before I sit down to eat, hoping she'll get back to me before we're done. Only the radio emits sounds during the meal. Even the children are quiet.

The silence makes everything easier. For a few minutes, I can forget my duty to say the right thing, look like I belong. My first days back are always like this: measuring my steps, searching for the right amount of at-homeness. The rules are made up as we go, but they all center on remembering who I am in this place, what this place is. Staying mute helps me avoid missteps. I weigh the fork and knife in my hand, curl my feet around the legs of my chair.

French philosopher Gaston Bachelard dedicated his life to exploring space and memory and how these relate to our feeling of being at home. In his book *Poetic of Space,* he states "The house is 'the topography of our intimate being', both the repository of memory and the lodging of the soul—in many ways simply the space in our own heads." My parents' house *is* a repository, both of things I want to remember, and aches I try to forget. I often spend all my time in this place that I still *come home to*—twenty years later—going from room to room touching things. By the time I've found my footing, it's usually time to leave.

But feeling at home is not only about furniture and rooms and windows. At-homeness is also about the people we share these spaces with. My relationship with my parents is complicated at the best of times. So what happens to us under the cloud of terrorism?

After dinner, I try to call Nora several times, but there is a constant busy signal, so I send another text and a longer, snappier e-mail. One of the conditions for going on this trip was frequent check-ins.

I'm in the kitchen, loading the dishwasher, when the first reports of shootings at the Labour Party youth camp, less than an hour's drive from Oslo, come through the radio. No journalists are there. Some parents have received text messages from their teenagers about a gunman and then contacted the police.

We continue to sit in silence, just waiting for more news. At six thirty, there's confirmation that the gunman has surrendered. They are still not sure if he was alone. It doesn't seem credible that one person could manage to detonate a bomb in downtown Oslo, and then take a car to go shoot up a youth camp, all in one afternoon. I listen to the words of the news anchors and see their drawn faces. My parents mutter to themselves, "Is that even possible?" and "He must have had accomplices."

We switch channels, but the story is the same. The man is white, Norwegian. There is no sign of an Al-Qaida connection. "Ethnic Norwegian" a couple of the media outlets call him, to distinguish him from "Norwegians" that may be of different "colour", with parents who speak a different language. I cringe when I hear it. I'm ashamed of that kind of discourse, that in the many years I've lived elsewhere, so much has changed, but this clear boundary between *us* and *them* has stayed the same. For a moment, I miss Canada.

It's still light outside when we go to bed, the same dreary grey light that's filled the day, the same light that is present all summer, between short spells of bliss when you can see the midnight sun. Emma and her cousins are sleeping at the other end of the house. I realize I haven't said good-night to her. I know she is safe, but I also know this is something I only do when I shrink back into this place, into being a daughter more than a mother. My throat is sore because my voice here has a higher pitch, which no longer fits my older body. My back hurts from curling up in my old corner of the couch. I forget the tiny rituals that shape my adult life. It is a tide I cannot thwart.

I lie down and feel how soft the bed is, softer than the bed I usually sleep in. For a while, it feels like I'm sinking in, sinking through the mattress, like there is nothing solid there. I think of the plans I had to find a new way to be with my parents this summer, after that huge fight with my Mom that kept me away for four years. And then I wonder if all that even matters now.

My body resists sleep, resists the notion that this is night. *Døgnvill,* I think, that's what I am. *Døgnvill,* one of these words that can never fully be translated—two syllables to describe the state of not knowing where night and day start or end. It is like jet lag without having travelled, not knowing night from day. It is a wonderful word—a word I often miss in English. The suffix *–vill* has the same origin as "wild," but its meaning extends further, to other states of uncertainty and confusion. Remembering the name for it relaxes me, and I start feeling sleepy.

The morning after, after short bouts of interrupted sleep, I sit in the darkest corner of my parent's living room, on a dark green sofa. I'm wearing black leggings and a sweater, again mimicking myself from years ago. Nora has finally replied to my messages. Everyone is fine—they switched trains in Oslo long before anything happened. I've written all the parents, trying to find the right words, solemn but not too worried. *It must be awful to be so close to it all*, one of the mothers replies. *Yes, it is*, I write back, thinking of the foreign-looking footage still playing in the background.

I go downstairs to the TV-room where they're broadcasting an endless cycle of minor updates about the tragedy. There still aren't many images to show. No one but the rescuers and police have access to the island

strewn with bodies and bullets, and the streets around the Oslo explosion have been blocked off. But there are enough private citizens who supply their cell-phone content to fill the void. You can recognize the lack of a clear focus provided by an arm stretched out to get as close as possible to the scenes without knowing where to aim: young men who heard a bomb and ran out of their apartments to get as close to the source as possible; families, who at the first rumours of shots on the island, took out their cameras to record it all.

I wonder who these people are. Where do they get their readiness to take these pictures? Do they think they're helping? I feel uncomfortable, both on their behalf and about myself, for watching. *Skamvett*, I think, that's what they are missing. *Skamvett* is another one of those words I keep looking for in the other languages I know. But nowhere have I found such a quick way to express *the wisdom to feel shame.* These people with their cameras don't have the wisdom to feel shame when appropriate.

Restlessness drives me from one room to the other. Next to the TV-room is an open hall where the piano was moved after I moved out. Above it, bookshelves made of blond wood, one of my father's many Christmas projects, finished in the wee hours of December 22nd one year, to the accompaniment of my mother's yelling. The bookshelves contain the whole canon of classical Norwegian literature. Everything from the Sagas to Holberg, Ibsen, Undset, Hamsun, Vesaas, Solstad. I pull out books randomly. Reading always centered me, and if ever there was a time for centering, this is it. I'm looking for poetry. Even after twenty years of living in other languages, poetry in Norwegian feels different, deeper, than poetry in my other languages.

I know this thought is not original. Hanna Arendt stated that what remained of the Germany she grew up in was the German language. Her belief about her mother tongue as *home*—or the closest she felt to home after leaving when the Nazis rose to power—is what I turn to when I feel homeless. Arendt always remained true to this sentiment, yet she started writing in English after only a few years in the United States. In an interview from 1964, she explains further how "I felt a distance towards French and English. In German I know a great number of poems by heart." The language of poetry represented the continuity she needed to connect herself to what she had lost. I'm moved when I imagine her, and I wonder if the ability of poetry to *move us* becomes even more important when we ourselves move.

But the poetry books aren't where I remember them. Somebody must have moved them during a spring cleaning or whatever they do when I'm not here. I try the shelves above and below and even consider asking my parents, but now is not the time to inquire about lost poetry collections. I give up, go outside to check what the kids are doing.

Emma and her cousin Edith are playing on the hammock. Thirteen and seventeen, but still able to play, laughing as they swing back and forth as fast as they can. The tree holding one end of the hammock strings is making a worrisome sound.

"Careful so you don't break anything," I say, thinking about the tree. The girls will be fine—the ground is soft. They laugh.

When I lived here, I spent much of my time reading and dreaming of moving away. I can't remember myself laughing as much as these girls do, but maybe my memories are tainted by everything that's happened since. Still, I do remember younger versions of myself running out of the house barefoot into the damp, cool grass, like they do. And I remember the freedom of the vast, wild woods behind our house, where my brothers and I would escape to, to dodge our chores and get away from our mother's temperament. I could put on my hiking shoes and go explore my old roaming grounds, get something out of my time here in spite of everything. The thought hangs for a while until the girls run back inside because their bare feet are cold. I follow them to see if there is something for me to do.

Both my mother and father are teachers, but they are also of ancient northern stock. They know tragedies. They know worry. Fishing vessels would go missing. Men would fall off the sides of their boats and be lost forever. The arctic winds would blow off roofs, make roads disappear. And the only help would come from your neighbours, friends, and family. Inside the house, they've fallen into a pattern I've never learnt. My mother spends most of the day at the dining table with her computer and cell phone, connecting to people, offering moral support. Hour by hour she's finding more and more names she knows from the list of victims. A girl she approved to send abroad as an exchange student in the fall has lost her brother. The girl herself is wounded but only lightly. A connection my parents know from regional politics has a son among the critically wounded. Both my parents have phone numbers to dial, Facebook messages to respond to, and arrangements to make. My mom keeps asking me, "Didn't you go to school with…?" but I recognize no names. It's been too long.

I have my own work to do. I always bring work when I return to my parents. It's both a diversion and a barrier, an excuse to cut discussions with my mother short. And now I use it as a shield against this *Awful* that has happened, pretending to be working on a translation; an operator's manual for some kind of x-ray equipment that would take concentration and real research to do. So for a long time, I just sit. I google a term now and then but don't commit any of them to my memory.

Instead, I start poring over the Norwegian newspapers, looking for clues and signs. What I find sounds like incoherent film-scripts for a horror movie. They've found teenagers dead in the kitchen, in the conference room, on the beach; they've found terrified survivors hiding in the woods, afraid that the uniformed police may be other gunmen coming to get them. My daughters are eighteen and thirteen. If we lived here, they could have been there on that island. Both are engaged in social issues. If they had grown up here, they could easily have joined the Labour youth. I shudder as the thought makes its way through my body.

The details are so gruesome that my parents have even stopped their life-long bickering. Even the children are quiet. There is nothing but solemn music and newscasts on the radio, all other programming has been suppressed.

Mid-morning they've tallied up the numbers. On that tiny lake island in rural Norway, sixty-nine people are dead, most of them teenagers. The youngest is fourteen. An eighth person has been found in

the rubble by the Ministry of Justice—someone who passed by on foot at the wrong time. In total, seventy-seven people have been slaughtered. The annual number of murders in Norway has been below forty for the past few years.

In the early afternoon, I get an email from the CBC. They're trying to locate Norwegians in Toronto that can comment on what's happened. I tell them I'm in the middle of it, I'm in Norway, so I'm probably not the right person to comment on what it feels like to follow this from Toronto. They don't reply. I'm a little disappointed, then immediately ashamed of this base instinct I have, this urge to be recognized, to appear important. Maybe that's why everyone rushed in with their cameras.

The deadline for delivering my translation is Tuesday night, but I've spent too much time staring at the screen and very little time actually translating. I still have thousands of words to do. I send the project manager an e-mail asking for a few extra days. *You probably know what happened here in Norway*, I write. She gives me an extra week. I'm grateful. This should give me enough respite to find my bearings. I should put my laptop away, take a break. But I don't. For no good reason I decide to check the Italian coverage of the tragedy, and soon I'm hooked.

It's been seven years since I lived in Italy, seven years since my Italian husband and I uprooted our daughters and moved to Canada. Even though I spent ten years there, Italy never became *my* country. It was Canada that became our neutral ground, our fresh start, a place where we were equally foreign and equally at home.

Italian media are generally confusing about Italian affairs and ill-informed about what happens this far away. They rely on poor translations of what other news outlets have already said, so there is every reason to avoid reading what they have to say. But the foreignness I feel in my parents' living room, while Händel's "Largo" is being played over and over, somehow reminds me of how I frequently felt in our tiny suburban apartment in Florence, watching the cars jammed on the nearby major road, wondering how anything of what I saw was connected to me.

I check the papers I usually read, *La Repubblica*, *Corriere della Sera*. They're about six hours behind with translating the information from Norwegian. Their own journalists have barely made it to Oslo and still don't know their way around. I spot a few inaccuracies and misunderstandings and send e-mails to the editors to have them corrected. Then I venture further. I open the front page of the conservative newspaper, *Il Giornale*. On their front page, the main headline is "Attacks in Norway, Suspected Islamic Terrorism." The sidebar contains a link to an opinion piece by Fiamma Nirenstein, where she discusses why Norway should have been prepared for an Islamist attack. I write a long letter to the editor, telling him everything that's wrong with their front page, how they're using the events in Norway to forward their own political agenda, never mind the facts. Then I tell him Fiamma Nirenstein should be quarantined, she's toxic and somebody should do something for crying out loud. Afterwards, I'm worn out and out of words.

Even in the silence that afternoon, I believe the right words can make sense of things. It's what I've relied on since I discovered reading. It is what I do for a living. In my teens, one of my favourite poets was Tor Jonsson. He was the quintessential tragic poet that weary teenagers are drawn to—a lonely man who died by his own hand at only 36. Later, his poetry made it into inspirational cards and lost their meaning, but one of his verses has become a mantra that I repeat to myself in times of trouble:

You're closest to me when you're away

Something is lost when you're near

This is something I call Love—I don't quite know what it is.

I've tried to explain to my husband the profound effect of those words, how they captured something deep inside me the first years of leaving and coming back to my hometown, but even I can see something is lost in translation. In English they sound prosaic; in Italian, the rhythm is off. When I recite them to myself on that 23rd of July, while cleaning the kitchen counters, they are the only sensible thing I've heard all day.

After dinner, the pictures of Anders Behring Breivik are suddenly everywhere. The blond hair, the muscles, the Hitleresque sideways comb. But most of my attention is directed at the red curls of Fiamma Nirenstein, and I flip back and forth between her opinion piece, where nobody is making the necessary changes, and the continuing updates on Breivik, where new elements are added every minute.

"What are you doing?" my daughter asks. She's been outside with her cousin all day.

"Working," I say, closing the page.

"Didn't you say you wanted to go up the mountain?" she says. "Maybe we'll come too, now that the weather is better."

"I don't have time," I say.

In the evening one of my brothers calls. He's at the Sami music festival *Riddu Riđđu*, far away from his office in Oslo where the windows were blown in Friday afternoon. They are cancelling the rest of the festival. Two of the organizers have kids who were at the Labour party youth camp; they've had to leave to sit by their children's bedsides in the hospital.

He needs a favour, if I have time and a computer. There are indigenous musicians and artists from all over the world at the festival, and journalists from several countries need the press release translated into English. My laptop is still there, on my lap, always ready.

"Normally we'd do it ourselves," he says, "But it seems important that everything is correct and accurate at a time like this."

I spend more than an hour on the 450-word release. The language is easy, but I weigh every word carefully. Somewhere in the last paragraph, I feel something move, as if the hard lump I have in my throat is about to burst: These are people I could have known, that would have been my friends if I hadn't chosen to leave my home country. I close my eyes to stop the tears.

The next morning, I check *Il Giornale* again. They've removed the reference to Muslim terrorists, but Fiamma Nirenstein's opinion piece is still there. I start writing a comment, but I close the window before I've finished. My misdirected anger has finally burned through its fuel.

That day, Sunday, the 24th of July, most of the facts are out in the open. Breivik's 1500-page manifesto is already being pulled apart and analyzed. The document is written in stilted English and is a hotchpotch of passages stolen from the Unabomber, as well as anti-Muslim and nationalist groups. The man is no genius, and he had no accomplice.

The whole weekend after the tragedy, the weather in Oslo is magnificent. People are gathering in downtown Oslo—many of them from nearby towns—to leave flowers by the Oslo Cathedral and the bomb's ruins. The TV cameras are there all the time now, and we can follow instant by instant how the flowers are heaped up, fresh ones on top, resembling burial mounds. The soundtrack has changed. It's no longer Händel's slow funeral march, but a ballad, "My Tiny Country," recorded two years ago by a Norwegian artist living in London. The song is a kind of hymn to the mountains and fjords, and to the resilience of the people scattered along the coast and valleys. "A tiny place; some grains of peace," Maria Mena sings. It is solace to sore ears.

Some foreign journalists hint that the calmness and composure seem unnatural. They compare it to the reactions after 9/11 and the London bombings in 2005, and they find the lack of anger unsettling. People cry, but very few seem to thirst for revenge. They suggest there's something wrong with that. What do they know? I think. Why don't they just shut up?

"Where peaks are wedged amid houses, men and words," Maria Mena continues to sing.

The last day before I fly back to Oslo for the next stretch of travelling, I finally do the trek I've been planning. Alone—Emma has lost interest. It's still cool outside, but the cloud cover has lifted. I struggle to find the right pace up the first steep hill, but then old muscle memory kicks in and my body is swiftly one with its task. I remember how I miss having mountains to climb in Toronto, how the smell of the ocean can make me weep.

As I pace myself to control my breath, I mumble lists of words I've recovered over the past few days. One after the other they've plowed their way back in: *stedvill, husvill, veivill,* all related to not knowing where you are and where you're going—or not finding or having a home. Having words for it won't heal us, but it does help.

When I reach the peak, above the treeline, but still a mere 500 m above sea level, the air is crisp and fresh. The islands and fjords and the Gisund sound are all there in front of me, just like every year before—and behind me a slight slope to higher, treeless mountain tops. I'm alone, and for a moment I have the sensation of seeing things clearly. I recognize that this place is *home* when I have the necessary distance from the strip of houses and the people in them. It lasts only a few minutes, but it's enough to steady me while I descend.

Deanna Partridge-David

I realize publishing isn't always going to be this easy, but it was the confidence boost I needed to get back in the game.

Publishing "Lost and Found" has spoiled me for all future publishing. It was my first submission after decades of being too busy and too intimidated to write or submit anything. I wrote it as an assignment for Nicole Breit's CNF Outliers course, which I took right before Lit Mag Love. I worked with Nicole on edits to get it submission ready, then polished its presentation during the Lit Mag Love course. Both courses gave me the material and the confidence to engage with the publishing world.

It was helpful to be able to ask Rachel questions in the course, such as how to preserve the Aboriginal Sans font needed to represent the Secwépemc language in my submission. (PDF, if you're wondering.)

I chose to submit to *Room* first because I love that magazine and we seemed like a good fit. I decided not to do multiple submissions for this essay. Emotionally, at the time, I could only deal with having one thing out there in one place at a time. A few weeks later I got my first acceptance!

After the course taught me to roll with rejection, and to keep revising and sending work out, I was not expecting my first submission to be published. I honestly don't remember many changes at all, just tweaks to punctuation here and there.

I realize publishing isn't always going to be this easy, but it was the confidence boost I needed to get back in the game. I'm so grateful for the experience.

Lost and Found

By Deanna Partridge-David
First published by *Room Magazine*

a

I didn't know I was afraid of cowboys until I find myself surrounded. Apparently, we've arrived during a cowboy convention. Silver tips on their shirt collars glint in the sun, shiny trucks taking up two parking spaces, names like "Frank the Chief" decalled onto their trucks alongside confederate flags. Dream catchers made in China hang from rear-view mirrors. Dad is as comfortable as he ever is with this. Mom, my daughter, and I have uneasy smiles. Our ancestral memories are flinching.

á

When we were kids, Great Grandma gave us beautiful moccasins with seventies pop imagery stitched on them, like happy faces and daisies.

c

I have high hopes of learning about Simpcw culture at this Spring Equinox celebration and craft day. I want to see our beadwork, our moccasins, our plant medicines, hear our songs, taste our dried fish and bannock. In my mind, I can smell the sage burning already.

cw

Okay, you can bring Pikachu, but I'm going to write my phone number on him in case he gets lost.

e

The city of Kamloops gets its name from the First Nations people of that territory, Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc, which refers to "the people of the confluence." They are Interior Salish and Secwépemc like us.

é

We drive past the site where the big fire was. Blackened trees standing like stick candles in a mud birthday cake.

g

"Are you here for the cowboy convention?" everyone asks. "No, we're the Indians," I reply. I look white, so they chuckle uneasily.

gw

My single memory of Great Grandma was the alarming sound she made when my three-year-old self reached to lift the lid off her crystal sugar bowl. So certain she was that I would destroy it, her cry was already full of grief. I'd never heard grief before. It terrified me.

g̓w

Clearwater, where we were when we discovered we were lost, has an Aboriginal Cultural Centre. We hoped it was the Chu Chua Community Hall, but no.

h

"I made a flag!" Where we first ask directions, my daughter sticks a muddy branch into an old sooty pile of snow and makes a "castle." She doesn't feel lost. She's with her family.

i

Later, asking locals at the A&W/gas station/convenience store combo in Barriere elicits smiles and enthusiastic strangers chiming in about how easy it is to find Chu Chua.

í

A decade after the big fire, the *Kamloops Daily News* reported, "It was a devastating, far-reaching event with serious impacts."

k

A towering man, barely an adult, passes in front of our car to bully the man checking the oil in the truck next to us, his friend. He is dressed like a clean and flashy fashion cowboy. (Black hat) I've never seen someone so self-assured. I would roll up the window to shelter my daughter from his foul language except Mom has the keys.

kw

Great Grandma was Catholic. She was with Great Grandpa long enough to baptize her children with an Italian name. "Pretend to be Italian," she told them.

k̓

As we get closer, my expectations are stratospheric. I'm picturing my daughter playing tag with the Simpcw kids while I learn how to sew a ribbon skirt by a wizened elder who is delighted that I brought tobacco to honour her teaching.

k̓w

We arrive in time for lunch. The chef himself warmly welcomes us at the door. He's serving corn chowder and ham and cheese sandwiches on what might be Wonder Bread. My daughter is thrilled. No spirit plate. No smudge today. It's still delicious.

l

While I am way more comfortable on the reservation than I have felt anywhere in our travels so far, I've also never felt more conspicuous. I look like my dad. My daughter looks like her dad. My mom looks like her dad. Our maternal lineage is hiding demurely behind the cowboy bravado of our fathers. And my hair is Steller's Jay blue in a room of raven tresses. I take a deep breath and accept that while the Simpcw are my family, blending in is not an option.

l'

The paper reported that the man blamed for one of the most destructive wildfires in Canadian history says he feels intense guilt for the damage it did.

ll

I have a secret love of Westerns.

m

The people are warm and kind when you speak to them, but most avoid eye contact until you do. Just like at Grandma's, I remind myself not to overwhelm people with small talk.

ḿ

One of the only other white women here hosts the craft-making table. We will be making antique-style folk art signs using stencils, the kind that you buy in gardening shops: "Don't mind the mess, the children are making memories." The cultural coordinator tells me that everyone loves making signs. They've had her up lots of times. There's one stencil in the Secwépemc language. The guest crafter can't pronounce it, but tells me it means "Welcome." We are also welcome to make wind chimes out of tin cans.

n

When my daughter feels joy, she skips around singing "Hallelujah" over and over. She learned to sing "Hallelujah" at Camp Spirit last summer, a Christian camp that accepts children from poor families for free. When she's distressed, she hides under tables. At the festival, she does both.

ń

We won't have time to visit the Secwépemc Museum on this trip, but I make a note to come back to see Simpcw crafts.

o

"The 2003 wildfire . . . didn't destroy the community's spirit, and most rebuilt their buildings and their lives after the fire cooled and the smoke cleared," reports the *Kamloops Daily Mail*.

p

I chat with an elder about genealogy. He wears his long grey hair in a braid and proudly wears the Simpcw logo: Two sacred pipes, the bowls facing the centre as they should. The Kamloops Cowboys would call those "peace pipes."

ṕ

My sister and I pretended to do a rain dance around an imaginary fire in Grandma's front yard. Dry grass crunched sharply under our bare feet at twilight. The sky broke open with thick drops of rain, heavy with the promise of thunder.

q

An elder from Tk'emlúps is invited to teach us Secwépemc songs and dances. All at once, I understand that I'm not the only one who was kept from our culture. Outlawed for centuries, these songs and dances were passed in secret from one generation to the next.
A little off rhythm and unsure, we stamp to ancient drum beats our bodies recognize. We learn about the most sacred time when light meets dark. I feel so cool.

qw

My phone rings. "Hi, we have a *Po-kee-mon* here at the A&W. He has your phone number on his butt?" (Hallelujah!)

q́

Twilight and it's time to drive back along the ribbon of potholes that connects Chu Chua to the places my GPS has heard of.

q́w

The trees nearest the Thompson River are starting to draw its vitality up their spines. It's taken a decade, but there are little patches of green on the tips of branches.

Andrea Schwenke Wyile

I have had a steady "sorry-try-again" stream of responses from my submissions, but this is offset by the delight of hearing the responses "conversational cul-de-sac" provokes in readers and their theories about what relationship it is about—which is for you to decide!

I wrote "conversational cul-de-sac" by hand to dispel the peaked heat of a long-ago moment. Early on in the poem's life, a writing friend suggested the addition of a stanza, but three years later, I went back to the original ending. And the poem was accepted without edits by *Vallum*, so there was no further editorial process before publication.

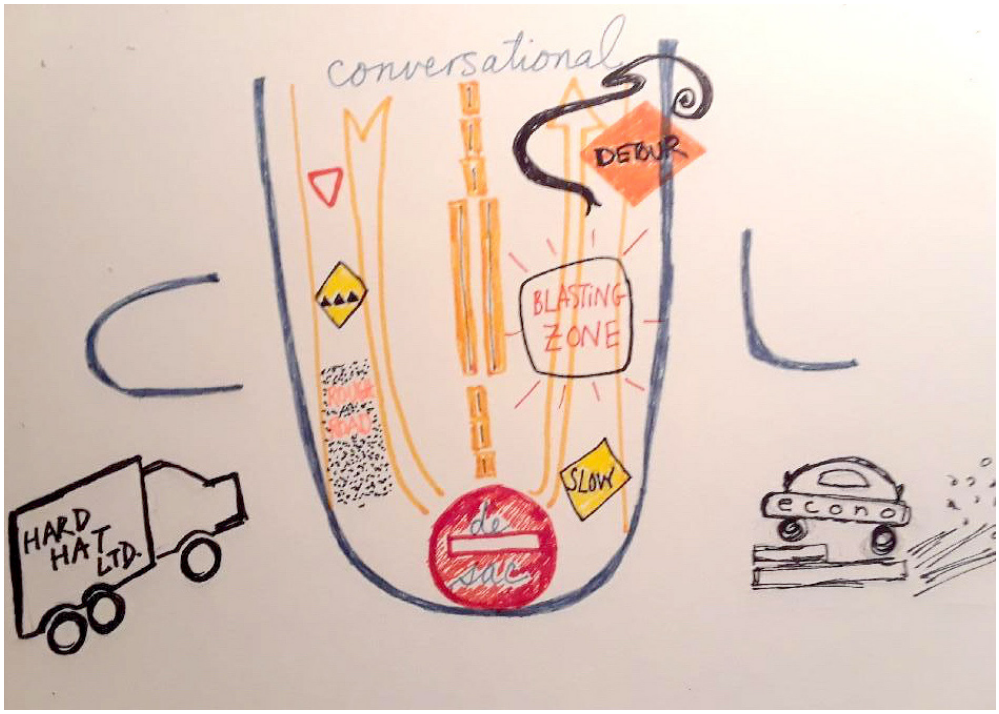
What seemed like many submissions for this piece was actually not so many. The typed version dates from late 2010, and I was surprised to realize I had only submitted it six times before it was accepted. But that was over a period of at least nine years from writing to publication, during which time I also submitted several other pieces. Now that simultaneous submissions have become acceptable (they weren't when I started), I am encouraged once again to try for a higher and more frequent rate of submissions, to move poems out of their own cul-de-sacs.

I have had a steady "sorry-try-again" stream of responses from my submissions, but this is offset by the delight of hearing the responses "conversational cul-de-sac" provokes in readers and their theories about what relationship it is about—which is for you to decide!—and the thrill of publishing with *Vallum*, which I had considered an impossible ambition long ago. This Lit Mag Love publication is a surprise second blossom.

conversational cul-de-sac

By Andrea Schwenke Wyile
First published by *Vallum Contemporary Poetry*

You say discussion
is a two-way street
but the road is rough
— my way is impeded —
Halted Blocked
    by familiar signs
STOP Wrong Way
Yield No Passing
Detour HERE a really good idea



Whereas on your side
OverSize Machinery Rolls Steadily ON
a continuous flow of
oncoming traffic
that will not be deterred
by some small economy car
making its way among potholes
speedbumps loose gravel
and uneven shoulders

On the rare occasions
when I toot my horn for attention
you blow a freak tire
and roll down your window to yell
“I can’t take this anymore!”
My usual silence
on the other hand
gets good mileage
though it eventually leaves my carburetor clogged
my windows foggy
and my engine choked
in the north bound lane

Elizabeth Cone

Since taking the Lit Mag Love course, I've become much more strategic with submitting. I look for places that are more likely to accept submissions from emerging writers, and then from those, choose places where it seems like my writing might be a good fit.

"Family: Three Chapters" was rejected by four other literary magazines before it was accepted by *The Dr. T.J. Eckleburg Review*, after a three-month wait. It was my second acceptance but ended up being my first publication.

I originally submitted the piece to five places within one week. I found all of these lit mags from calls for submissions on the Creative Writing Opportunities email list, which you can find at crwropps@aol.com.

The nonfiction editor, Vipra Ghimire, emailed me in late May to say they'd like to publish the piece online. She made only minor edits, which I approved, and then she sent me a preview of the piece on their website. The whole process took about a week. It was really an easy and streamlined experience. Hearing from the *Eckleburg Review* was very encouraging, because while I've only been submitting for about a year now, I've collected a lot of rejections!

I got lucky with this piece. It was written fairly quickly—it's only about 1200 words—and only went through a bit of workshopping and some reworking. Pieces I'm working on now have undergone much more in-depth revision.

Since taking the Lit Mag Love course, I've become much more strategic with submitting. I look for places that are more likely to accept submissions from emerging writers, and then from those, choose places where it seems like my writing might be a good fit. I still look at the Creative Writing Opportunities list, but instead of reading a few pieces in each magazine like I used to, I now consult the *Poets&Writers* database of literary journals to get more information to make sure it makes sense for my writing goals.

Family: Three Chapters

By Elizabeth Cone
First published by *The Doctor T.J. Eckleburg Review*

1.

After she was married for four years and no children seemed to be coming, my mother did what any good Catholic girl in the 1960s would do: she prayed to the Blessed Mother. She promised if she had a little girl, she'd name her Elizabeth Ann, for Mary's cousin and mother. She promised she'd name a boy Michael, after the archangel. Then she and my father went to the Angel Guardian Home and applied to adopt.

A few months later, a nun from the adoption agency called and said they had a little girl for my parents, and her name was Elizabeth Ann. A few years after that, the adoption agency called again and said they had a little boy for us named Michael. And in 1998, the story of our names was published in a book called *Mary Miraculous: Extraordinary Stories of Ordinary People Touched by Our Lady.*

At the moment of my adoption, I was merged into this family abounding with grandmothers, aunts, uncles, first cousins, second cousins, third, and replete with stories—stories that neatly subsumed the existence of my first family. My father told stories about my great-grandparents immigrating to New Orleans and later to New York, and of my grandfather walking over the Brooklyn Bridge every day to his job on the *Journal-American* newspaper. He told me stories about his own childhood growing up with his three sisters and dozens of cousins on E. 2nd Street in Brooklyn—the same street they brought me home to from the adoption agency, the same cousins running to meet me.

Those stories led up to stories about me and Mike. That a cosmic, God-like force brought us together was explained right there in the book my parents read to us when we were young.

"Then suddenly one day the Lady at the Home called up and said: 'We have three fine babies for you to choose from. Will you both come and see them?' So the very next day the Man and his Wife, feeling very excited, hurried to the Home. The Lady told them all about the babies.

"The first baby was a little boy with blue eyes and curly blond hair. He laughed and played with a rattle. The Man and his Wife watched the baby, then they shook their heads and said, 'This is a beautiful child, but we know it is not our baby.' And they were taken to see the next."

Valentina P. Wasson, *The Chosen Baby*, 1939

What happened, I wondered years later, to the unchosen baby?

2.

There is a freedom—and maybe a bit of paralysis—in not having a hereditary path. I have no genetic path to follow, no ancestors to take after, or reject.

When I am fifty years old, I realize my birth mother, too, is aging, and I hire an adoption investigator to find her. I am grown, mature, my life already in motion, but I am still a little shocked that she exists. When I talk about the things that I love, reading, writing, teaching, and she says, "You didn't get that from me," or "Are you sure you're mine?" I feel a strange sort of pride.

But. I am looking, constantly, always listening, for ways that we—my birth mother, my half-sisters, and my half-brother—are the same.

The sparseness of my eyebrows, and Kerry's, delights me. That Shannon's hair goes grey in the same places mine does. That we all started out with the same overbite. I ask who else has my wonky, wavy middle fingernail on each hand.

Who has asthma and who burns but never tans in the sun?

3.

When I first find my birth mother, I feel possibilities narrowing, all my imaginings of her ending. I think at first that this is okay, that wonderful new and true stories are coming, but they don't. Conversations are shut down. There are things I cannot tell her, about growing up with a mentally ill mother. I cannot tell my birth mother about my frustration that she doesn't remember anything about my birth father—"I met him at a party. . .we were drinking. . .I never saw him again"—and my adult but childlike hurt that she married so quickly and had five more babies, the first one born just 21 months after I was. There are things she will not tell me.

I become the keeper of secrets, the whitewasher of my past. I tell her only happy things, memories of growing up surrounded by cousins and friends; big, grassy backyards shaded by old oak trees, swing sets and barbecues and collies; playing Manhunt in the woods every summer night; and scaring ourselves silly trying to contact the dead with our Ouija boards from Toys "R" Us.

I breeze over the screaming matches in high school and college, the suspicions, the accusations that still happen:

"I know you and your brother talk about me behind my back."

"I know you love your father more than me."

"I know you tell your friends bad things about me."

The bedroom searches for signs of drugs and alcohol and sex, things we aren't doing yet. My brother and I pitted against each other over and over:

"You are both staying in your rooms until one of you admits you lost the house key/let the cat out/took the Tupperware to school and never brought it back."

Hours spent in our rooms as punishment for things my mother had done herself.

I say, "My mom and I get along much better when we don't live together."

I say, "I had a blast in high school," and I did.

The mornings I stormed out of the house, slammed the front door, cried on the bus and in the bathroom at school, the knot in my stomach when it was time to go home, just broken parts of the story neatly recessed.

I say, "I know! Ridiculous that I lived on campus during college, five miles from my house. But I loved the dorms!"

I cringe when my birth mother thanks my adoptive mother for raising me.

My birth mother, in turn, keeps from me her relationship with my birth father. She says she doesn't remember telling the adoption agency anything at all about him. She lets me believe the adoption agency created a detailed story of their relationship and of his life, his family.

I find my birth father's family, and find out everything my birth mother told the adoption agency at the time was in fact true. We both say, "Wow. Weird," that the adoption agency says she gave them this information and she doesn't remember anything about it. I am careful to keep any accusation out of my voice.

She does remember that her roommate's brother was a priest and that he arranged the adoption. She does not remember that my birth father had blond hair and blue eyes.

She remembers her job at the airline. She does not remember meeting my father at that job. She does not remember that he told her that his parents died when he was young, that he was sending money home to help his aunt raise his sisters, that he was from Ohio, that he enlisted in the Army in May 1966 and went to Germany, just a month after I was conceived.

As narrators of our story, we are both unreliable.

Rowan McCandless

Throughout the entire process my work was respected and *The Fiddlehead* worked hard to bring my essay's vision to fruition. They really understood what I was trying to say with this piece; going so far as to allot an entire page to a single phrase, "Generations stolen from Africa."

I first heard about *The Fiddlehead* through Lit Mag Love. After listening to an interview with Alicia Elliott, I thought "Blood Tithes: A Primer" might be an essay that would vibe with her. In the interview she spoke about blood quantum and how it was/is a tool of euro-settler-colonialism to police the membership ties of Indigenous people. As a daughter of the African diaspora, my ancestors were policed by the one drop rule; again a euro-settler-colonial tool to bolster the social construct called race and exclude Black people within the larger society.

By the time I submitted the piece to *The Fiddlehead*, it had undergone numerous revisions. Given its length, and the time I submitted, it wasn't possible for it to be included in *The Fiddlehead*'s inaugural CNF issue. Alicia emailed to let me know how much she admired my essay and ask if I would be okay with it being published in their winter issue. I was thrilled!!! Not only to have this essay find its home with *The Fiddlehead* but to have the opportunity to work with Alicia.

Alicia's touch was light as I had forwarded a very polished piece. Her suggestions, done via email, elevated my work, and I couldn't be happier with the final product. Throughout the entire process my work was respected and *The Fiddlehead* worked hard to bring my essay's vision to fruition. They really understood what I was trying to say with this piece; going so far as to allot an entire page to a single phrase, "Generations stolen from Africa." They understood the necessity of the white space to surround and suggest the overpowering of the text.

Ian LeTourneau was fantastic to work with on design and layout; no easy task as my essay included photographs and charts. When it was time for final proofreading, Sabine Campbell was lovely to work with. I was especially touched by her letting me know that parts of "Blood Tithes" resonated with her. I cannot speak highly enough of the people working over at *The Fiddlehead*, and I encourage writers to polish up those pieces and submit to them. Amazing things can happen!!!

Blood Tithes: A Primer

By Rowan McCandless
First published by *The Fiddlehead*

A is for apple:

as in red, as in delicious, as in rotten, as in poisoned. Apple: from the family: Rosaceae. Genus: Malus. Apple in Latin is malum, alternative translations: bad, wicked, or evil.

A wicked Queen gave Snow White a poisoned apple, and swayed by an evil serpent, a naked Eve bit into a forbidden apple. A fruit perhaps red, perhaps delicious, perhaps not an apple after all but maybe a fig or grape or pomegranate.

Mother chopped MacIntosh apples, layered thick slices sprinkled with cinnamon and white sugar in homemade pie crusts. She treated me to chunky apple cores, laced with sweetness and spice and everything nice, as pies baked in the oven.

Amygdalin: a plant compound found in apple seeds which provides protection, their bitter taste. Amygdalin, harmless when pips are swallowed whole, but chewed, degrades into trace amounts of hydrogen cyanide.

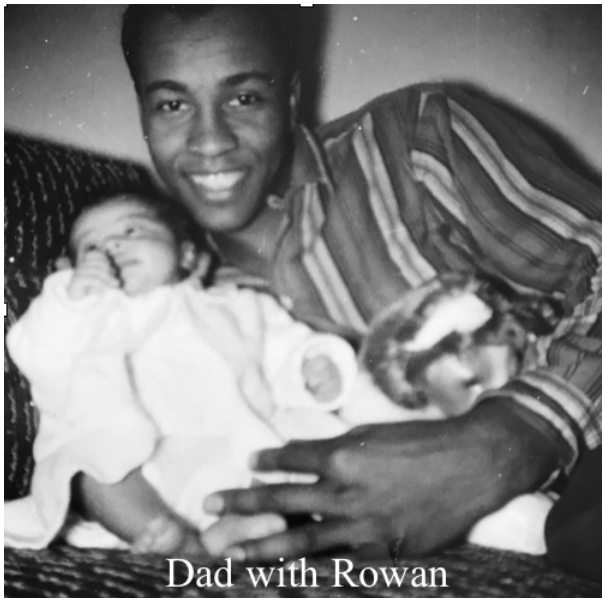
Amygdala: one of two brain structures which acts as "the integrative centre for emotions, emotional behaviour and motivation." —*Neuroscience Online*

"When you were born you were the apple of everyone's eyes," Mother said.

I could never tell whether she was pleased by this or not.

A is for almost, as in almost died. I was born premature, and spent my first days of life behind the glass of an incubator. While I struggled for breath, my family collectively held their own. They wondered, would I live? Which side of the coin—maternal/paternal—would my racial ambiguity land on?


Mom with Rowan


Dad with Rowan

A is also for ambiguity, anemia, and ancestry.ca.

B is for Blood:

as in ties, as in relatives, as in covenant.

Blood can boil, run hot, run cold. Blood is thicker than water, according to my father's family creed passed down through generations. Cast adrift on a sea of whiteness, family became our only life preserver.

Blood of the covenant. Blood of the womb. Another interpretation: The bond between soldiers on the battlefield, forged ties stronger than family.

B is for Black Empire Loyalists, for Black Canadian history neglected, erased, and never taught in school.

Grandma Daisy, my father's mother, was the keeper of family history.

"Remember," she said. "You be proud. You're eighth-generation Canadian on your father's side. Our people came up with the Empire Loyalists. We've been here longer than most, and still they treat us like dirt."

B is also for brown, for black, for a colour of crayon, a bullshit concept called "race"—the "One Drop Rule" that reigned over wombs for the benefit of white privilege.

C is for Conception:

immaculate, miraculous or otherwise.

C is also for childbirth, and for crabapple—the only species native to North America.

Once upon a time, a pregnant woman was tempted by ripe, reddened crabapples hanging from backyard tree branches. She plucked and ate, ate and plucked, until she doubled-over in pain and was rushed to the hospital, confusing the agony of childbirth with a wicked stomach ache. My mother called me her "crabapple baby," as if my intention since conception was to cause her pain.

Civil rights. Civil wrongs. C is for colour, coloured, colouring. First years of elementary school with fresh packs of Crayolas, I had trouble staying within the lines—excited by the prospect of filling mimeographed colouring sheets with tangerine grass, ruby-red raindrops and aubergine skies.

But I never knew what to do with that "flesh" crayon.

Before I was,

I was black,

I was coloured,

I was caught

In a trap

Not of my choice or creation.

C is for Catholicism,

censer,

censor,

and censure.

"We had trouble finding a priest that would marry us," Mother said. "They said it was wrong for a black man and a white woman to be together."

Father was in charge of Sunday family drives while Mother nourished soul as well as body. We rose early morning, dressed in our very best for Catholic Mass, my dark hair hidden modestly, apologetically,

beneath a babushka, just like my Polish-Canadian mother, her mother, her grandmothers' mothers; Eve's daughters, our bodies wellsprings of original sin.

I sat on worn, wooden pews next to Mother, next to my brothers, next to families that accepted us and families who didn't. We listened to the liturgy in Latin. We sat, stood, kneeled and genuflected under the watchful eyes of priests, saints in stained-glass windows, statues of the Virgin Mary and her son nailed to the Cross.

We learned man was made in God's image—a likeness white as driven snow.

Father, Son and the Holy Ghost. I questioned how I fit in without a penis or purity of bloodline.

Thoughts later shared in the confessional.

Sins later atoned on bended knee, clutching rosary beads and praying for forgiveness.

D is for Dark Shadows:

the late sixties/early seventies black and white American gothic TV soap opera that scared the bejesus out of me when I was younger. Dark Shadows, a supernatural tale of the Collins family, with witches, ghosts and vampire curses; Barnabas Collins, released from his coffin with an unquenchable thirst for blood.

For a time, as a child, I believed vampires were real. At night I sought comfort in the rose-coloured plastic crucifix Grandma Frances had given me. It dangled from a delicate chain worn around my neck. I slept in bed with the hallway light on, slept on the living room couch with one arm draped across my neck.

D is for dolls and dress-up, being "daddy's little girl" whether I wanted to be or not.

D is for diasporas across ocean and continents, huddled masses fleeing poverty and persecution in the bowels of ship's steerage, white Massa's slaves, shackled in chains, transported in Hell's wooden underbelly.

D is for divisions.

Divides not to be crossed.

Father was always on the run, out on a run, with the railroad, with whichever woman currently had his favour.

A train whistle echoed from the railroad tracks a block away from our bungalow on Washington Avenue; reminders of father and grandfather, the dirge of men called "boy," carrying the baggage of strangers.

A thin wall separated our living room from kitchen, me—from—Mother, visiting aunt and grandmother gathered around a formica table, divining their futures in the slurry of leaves left in the bottoms of tea cups.

A single globe illuminated the kitchen. Its reflection made a full moon on the dark screen of our television, the same screen from which Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement marched daily into our home. I pretended to be asleep on the pull-out couch, attuned to their conversation.

"You're welcome to come with the kids," Grandma Frances said. "But if you come to visit he can't come with you. And you'll have to tell people they're Spanish."

No pushback but the push back of Mother's chair. Then silence. The sound of running water as Mother stood at the sink and washed hope and tea leaves down the drain.

No further need of divination. We would never visit my grandparents in California, my aunt and uncle who lived next door to them with their adorable, blond-haired, blue-eyed babies.

E is for Eucharist:

the body and blood of Christ, a sacrament that filled me momentarily with divine grace as a child, a sacrament that also filled me with trepidation and sorrow for the god that could have sacrificed his son.

F is for First Communion: the two by twos procession down the scarlet, carpeted aisle of St. Alphonsus Church. Boys in suits. Girls wearing virginal layers of satin, tulle and lace, floral headbands and matching veils.

Our souls were wed to Christ.

F is for fathers, lost and found, founders of colonization, Confederation and genocide.

House of Commons Debate, 1885: "The Aryan races will not wholesomely amalgamate with the Africans . . . the cross of those races, like the cross of the dog and the fox, is not successful; it cannot be, and never will be." - Sir John A. McDonald

F is for father, our father, my father, the holy ghost who left us more times than I can remember.

G is for Genesis:

the legacy of blood lines—cut and bruised, black and blue....

Generations stolen from Africa.

G is for grands and greats.

Genesis 3:16: "I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children."

Grade six health class. The girls were sequestered in the classroom for "the talk," seated behind desks, blinds drawn, door closed. Keep out—no boys allowed! The projector screen rattled as it was lowered in front of the blackboard. The motor hummed and film reel spun clickclickclick. Dust motes floated in front of the projector's beam while we froze—caught in the headlights—and bore witness to sloughed cells and sterile, anatomical line drawings explaining menstruation.

I heard the recess crack of baseball bats, the whoop and holler of boys at play and longed to join them.

Mother called menstruation "the curse." She purchased cumbersome boxes of Kotex kept hidden from view behind Bendersky's grocery counter.

The day I started bleeding, I was walking home from Junior High school. Blood stained white leotards, white cotton panties. I rushed home and dialed Mother at work. She returned with a box of sanitary pads the size of pillows, an elastic belt to hold them in place, and the following pronouncement. "Be careful," she said. "You could have a baby now."

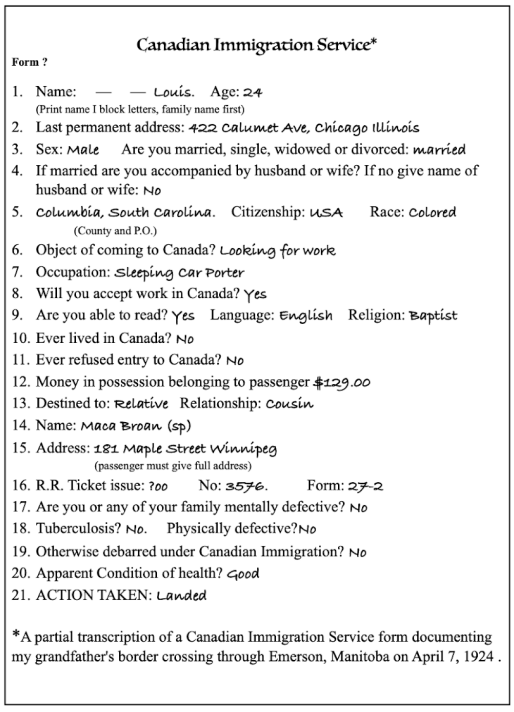
Which left me confused. At twelve, I had yet to kiss a boy and was more interested in riding my bike, reading books, and playing baseball.

H is for Hypodescent:

the assignment of "mixed-race" children to the subordinate group by the dominant culture.

Hyperdescent: the assignment of "mixed-race" children to the more advantaged group by the dominant culture.

Hit and miss: whether I'm perceived as Black, White, or somewhere in-between a rock and a hard place.



Canadian Immigration Service*

Form ?

1. Name: — — Louis. Age: 24
   (Print name I block letters, family name first)
2. Last permanent address: 422 Calumet Ave, Chicago Illinois
3. Sex: Male Are you married, single, widowed or divorced: married
4. If married are you accompanied by husband or wife? If no give name of husband or wife: No
5. Columbia, South Carolina. Citizenship: USA Race: Colored
   (County and P.O.)
6. Object of coming to Canada? Looking for work
7. Occupation: Sleeping Car Porter
8. Will you accept work in Canada? Yes
9. Are you able to read? Yes Language: English Religion: Baptist
10. Ever lived in Canada? No
11. Ever refused entry to Canada? No
12. Money in possession belonging to passenger $129.00
13. Destined to: Relative Relationship: Cousin
14. Name: Maca Broan (sp)
15. Address: 181 Maple Street Winnipeg
    (passenger must give full address)
16. R.R. Ticket issue: ?oo No: 3576. Form: 27-2
17. Are you or any of your family mentally defective? No
18. Tuberculosis? No. Physically defective?No
19. Otherwise debarred under Canadian Immigration? No
20. Apparent Condition of health? Good
21. ACTION TAKEN: Landed

*A partial transcription of a Canadian Immigration Service form documenting my grandfather's border crossing through Emerson, Manitoba on April 7, 1924 .

I is for immigration.

"To talk of racism in Canadian immigration policy is over generous to the Government of Canada. Rather we should talk of racism as Canadian immigration policy." (David Matas, Refuge Vol 5, No 2 1985)

Fuelled by British Imperialism, after the genocide of First Nations people on the Prairie, Canada sought to populate the West. The desirability of new arrivals was rated accordingly: immigrants from Great Britain and the United States, Northern and Western Europeans, Central and Eastern Europeans, Jews and Southern Europeans, pacifist religious sects. Black and Asian immigrants need not apply.

Descendants of peasants, of serfs tied to the land and to landowners who ruled over their lives from birth to grave, Mother's family was part of the first two waves of Polish immigration to Canada. They left behind famine and flood, occupation and poverty, loved ones and all they knew in Oleszyce and Ruda Różaniecka. Aboard ships christened the SS Bulgaria, and the SS Montrose, they landed in Halifax, Nova Scotia, St. Johns, New Brunswick and Ellis Island, eventually homesteading in Manitoba.

Grandpa Louis fled Columbia, South Carolina at the age of sixteen. Grandma Daisy said he left after his uncle was beaten to death with a hammer for having applied for a white man's job.

He journeyed to Chicago, part of the Great Migration of Southern African-Americans headed North in hopes of a better life. April 7th, 1924, he immigrated to Canada and became a porter for the railroad—one of the few jobs available to Black men at that time.

Grandpa Mike uprooted Grandma Frances and Aunt Vee—their "good" daughter, who kept her racial purity—then hightailed it to the land of the free, home of the brave. In California there was fresh-squeezed orange juice to go with Grandpa Mike's vodka, served at "separate but equal" lunch counters.

I is for "Imitation of Life:"

a 1959 melodrama that, years later, became late-night TV fodder. It told the tale of two widowed mothers: Annie Johnson, the Black, faithful, live-in maid, and Lora Meredith, the White, glamorous, self-centred movie star. Annie's daughter, Sarah Jane, "mixed-race" and light-complexioned, is raised alongside, Susie, Lola's blonde and privileged daughter. In my teens, I watched the story unfold with a mixture of horror, shame, and fascination.

Annie: "How do you tell a child that she was born to be hurt?"

My heart ached for Sarah Jane, destined for misery because she refused to accept "her place." Sarah Jane: "I don't want to come in through back doors or feel lower than other people or apologize for my mother's colour."

I watched young Sarah Jane get ridiculed by classmates, then as a teenager fall in love with her first boyfriend.

Sarah Jane: "He's cute. Really cute. He's white and if he ever finds out about me, I'll kill myself! . . . cuz I never had a boyfriend before. Because he wants to marry me some day . . . But how do you think he and his folks would feel . . . what do you think people would say, where we'd live, if they knew my mother? They'd spit at me and my children."

I witnessed Sarah Jane beaten by that same boyfriend when he discovered she was Black. Watched her run away from home and, with few options available, become a burlesque dancer in seedy nightclubs—white patrons only. Maltreated. Defeated. Retreating home only to discover her mother had died from grief in her absence.

J is for Jezebel:

From the Old Testament, a Phoenician princess.

From Christian lore, a fallen woman.

From the roots of colonialism and the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, a racial stereotype.

Black female bodies hyper-sexualized and made fetish. Daughters, mothers, grandmothers, viewed by the white gaze as promiscuous, animalistic, sexualized commodities lacking agency.

K is for KKK.

In 1926 there were chapters of the Ku Klux Klan in Quebec, Ontario, Alberta and Saskatchewan, which had over 25,000 members and charged $13 for memberships. The Klan's presence included cross burnings, dynamite set off in St. Mary's Catholic Church in Barrie, Ontario, and the 1930 kidnapping of Ira Johnson, who was Black, in order to prevent his marriage to Isobel Jones, who was White. The day after the incident occurred, Oakville Mayor A. B. Moat said, "Personally I think the Ku Klux Klan acted quite properly in the matter. The feeling in the town is generally against such a marriage. Everything was done in an orderly manner. It will be quite an object lesson."

L is for the Liturgy in Latin.

"In nòmine Patris, et Fìlii, et Spìritus Sancti."

I loved the ritual as a child, the waft of incense as the censer swayed in the hands of priests. But I couldn't fully embrace a faith that refused to embrace my parents.

Sundays after church we'd head to Grandma Daisy's and Grandpa Louis's North End home on Cathedral Avenue. They embraced my parents and me, although my mother somewhat reluctantly. Troubled waters connected my parents' childhood homes and haunts and working-class neighbourhoods. My heart would pound as Father's butter-yellow convertible approached the Redwood Bridge. I'd hold my breath, cross my fingers and pray; afraid a hole would materialize as we crossed, that our car would plummet

into the river, and we'd drown. It was a childhood fear I developed after my aunt and uncle had a serious car accident on a Winnipeg bridge. Until eight, I imagined protective air pockets enveloping our car and transporting us safe to the other side.

L is for the Lysol Grandma Daisy scoured her home with; a practice which left fumes so potent that noses stung, eyes burned and watered as soon as you stepped through the doorway. The scent of disinfectant lingered on skin, on clothing, on birthday cards and family history.

Lake Agassiz. Before city, before town, before fort and farmland, colonizer and colonialism, before sweetgrass and bison herds, a glacial lake the size of the Black Sea engulfed what is now called Manitoba, Saskatchewan and northwestern Ontario.

M is for Marriage. Mother. Matrilineal. Mother shared her womb but not her secrets. No mention of her courtship with Father. No snap-shots of the two of them together. No anniversary celebrations. Not a single cherished wedding photograph tucked in a family album. For a brief time during childhood, I'd ask, "When did you and Father get married?" Tight-lipped, Mother would glare in stony silence. Eventually I stopped asking because you can't get blood from a stone.

Before I was

I was black,

I was coloured,

I was mulatto,

I was mixed-raced,

I was caught

In a trap

Not of my choice or creation.

Mulatto: derived from mula, old Galician-Portuguese, Latin: Mulas, meaning mule, the offspring of a horse and donkey.

Mulatto: defined by Merriam-Webster's dictionary as the first generation offspring of a black person and a white person.

Mulatto: as defined by colonialism—Rowan—the offspring of an Africadian/African-American father and Polish mother.

M is for M I S S I S S I P P I.

A childhood skipping game.

A Southern state that repealed its legal ban on miscegenation in 1987.

Mississippi Appendectomies: phrase given to describe the nonconsensual, medically unnecessary sterilization of Black women in the Southern United States.

Mississippi of the North: how Grandma Daisy described her hometown of Truro, Nova Scotia.

N is for Never.

"Never get married," Mother said. "Never have children. It'll ruin your life."

N is for *nigger babies*, a children's game, a combination of dodgeball and frozen tag that I had no idea was racist. "One, two, three, nigger babies," I shouted out with the neighbourhood kids as we played in

my best friend, Patty's yard. *Nigger babies*, words I didn't understand until Father came out the house, walked down the street and led me home.

N is for *nigger*, as in house, as in field, as in slave, a word that cuts as deep as an overseer's lash.

O is for the One-Drop Rule.*

In the United States, the One-Drop Rule required that any person with a trace of African ancestry be legally classified as Black; regardless of self-identity or attachment to both parents.

Although not formally adopted as law in Canada, the One-Drop-Rule permeates our history. FOURTH CENSUS OF CANADA 1901

INSTRUCTIONS TO CHIEF OFFICERS, COMMISSIONERS AND ENUMERATORS.

"47. Only pure whites will be classed as whites; the Children begotten of marriages between whites and any one of the other races will be classed as red, black or yellow, as the case may be, irrespective of the degree of colour."

THE SIX CENSUS OF CANADA 1921

INSTRUCTIONS TO CHIEF OFFICERS, COMMISSIONERS AND ENUMERATORS.

"94. The children begotten of marriages between white and black or yellow or red will be classified as Negro or Mongolian (Chinese or Japanese) as the case may be."

Octoroon: defined by Merriam Webster's dictionary as persons of one-eighth black ancestry. Octoroon: my newborn granddaughter, Gracie.

*For additional information, see letters: A, B, C, D, F, G, H, I, K, M, P, Q, R, V, X.

P is for Polly:

Page No. 133

278

SCHEDULE 2—Slave Inhabitants in *the District* **in the County of** *Sumter* **State of** *S.C.*, **enumerated by me, on the** *6* **day of** *Aug*, **1860.** ___ **Ass't Marshal.**

NAMES OF SLAVE OWNERS	Number of Slaves	DESCRIPTION			Fugitive from the State	Number Manumitted	Deaf & dumb, blind, insane or idiotic	No. Of Slave Houses
		Age	Sex.	Color				
1. Sebastian Sumter								
17. Rosie-inferred	**26.**	**5.**	**F.**	**B.**				
18.	**27.**	**3.**	**F.**	**B.**				
19.	**28.**	**4.**	**M.**	**B.**				
20.	**29.**	**2.**	**M.**	**B.**				
21.	**30.**	**3.**	**M.**	**B.**				
22.	**31.**	**9.**	**F.**	**B.**				
23.	**32.**	**1.**	**F.**	**B.**				
24.	**33.**	**1.**	**F.**	**B.**				
25. Polly-inferred	**34.**	**32.**	**F.**	**B.**				**6.**

inferred mother of Rosie, who was born into slavery in South Carolina. Polly, my inferred great-great-grandmother who was manumitted by Sebastian Sumter, son of General Thomas Sumter, prior to August 6, 1860.

P is for passing: like ships in the night, between worlds.

In Greek mythology, Persephone was the daughter of Zeus and the goddess Demeter. Kidnapped by Hades, she was taken as bride to the Underworld. When allowed to return to her grief-stricken mother, Persephone was still bound to Hades because she had eaten seeds from the pomegranate while in the Underworld. Each year, every seed consumed obligated Persephone to live one month with Hades in the land of the dead.

In historical contexts, passing was a way to escape racism. Light-complexioned Black people would cut ties with family, assume a White identity, move away to never return.

I dreamed of daughters of blue-eyed, blonde-haired, babies. For a time, I felt the only way I could protect my children from racism, was to hope they'd physically resembled me as little as possible.

Beth, 1978: Second year of university, I became pregnant by my high school boyfriend. Not knowing where to turn, a pregnancy distress service arranged prenatal care. When I was about seven months along, my belly swollen, my doctor asked, "What do you plan on doing with the baby?" Shocked, I asked him what he meant. "Well," he said, "there are so many childless couples who would just love to adopt a newborn." Shaking, I told him, I was keeping my baby.

Raven, 1981: Married and fourth year of university, I met my father at The Bay's Paddlewheel restaurant. Against the backdrop of a faux-Mississippi River boat, and with Beth beside me in a highchair, I said to Father, "Guess what? I'm expecting." He frowned. Shook his head. Said, "You should have an abortion. You don't want to wind up some fat slob pumping out babies on welfare."

Me with Beth

Annabella, 1992: It took years to have Annabella—my final baby, my final c-section, one of three incision scars I consider a badge of honour.

Premonitions: I come from a line of women who believe in superstitions and premonitions—information I didn't share with Sarah, the Hospital Chaplin, as we sat in a private room assigned for family. Down the hall, my newborn premature granddaughter Gracie was in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. A floor above, my daughter Beth was in Maternal Intensive Care after the delivery, which had almost taken her life. I considered telling Sarah that a few weeks before I had had a premonition, an image flash of a crimson operating room, my daughter lying beneath carmine sheets, on a carnelian-red table, blood everywhere. But I didn't tell her. Just as I didn't tell Beth. I didn't want to add to the stress of a high-risk pregnancy by being a drama queen.

Q is for Queen.

A gentle snowfall. A Queen sat next to an open window, embroidering on an ebony frame. She pricked her finger and three drops of blood fell onto the snow. "Oh that I had a child as white as snow, as red as blood, and as black as the wood of the embroidery frame," the Queen said. It wasn't long until she had a daughter, with skin as white as snow, lips as red as blood, and hair as black as ebony.

Quadroon: defined by Merriam Webster's dictionary as persons of one-quarter black ancestry.

Quadroon: my daughters Beth, Raven, and Annabella.

Welfare Queen: a derogatory stereotype. A label marginalizing and morally judging women living in poverty. A racist narrative depicting Black women as lazy, unmotivated and sexually promiscuous, having baby after baby after baby in order to collect welfare cheques. Welfare Queen, a racist trope my father accepted without question.

R is for Race.

"Race is the child of racism, not the father." - Ta-Nahesi Coates

R is for red welts and open wounds. Crimson splotches on walls and floors. Grandma Daisy beat her children, made them scrub away bloodstains on hands and knees. She carried a torch, a tortured soul, the overseer's lash handed down like a baton through generations.

R is for roots firmly planted, damaged, lost or stolen.

Roots: a Pulitzer Prize winning novel by Alex Haley. A televised mini-series which premiered January 23, 1977 and told the generational saga of an African-American family, starring Levar Burton as the African slave Kunta Kinte.

Roots: a movie that was hard for me to watch, reminding me of a home I could never return to, a language shorn from my tongue, loved ones lost, loved ones I would never know.

R is for Rosaceae: Latin for rose.

Rose: a girl's name. A flower and symbol of love, believed to have magical properties to ward off vampires.

The most common and inexpensive way to cultivate roses is by grafting, the joining of one rose variety with the hardier rootstock of another cultivar. A downside to propagation in this manner? Rootstocks have a tendency to sucker and to revert to their natural state.

"You make sure people know you're Black," Mother said, whenever someone would mistake me for White, for Spanish, Filipino, East Indian, First Nations, Tahitian, Hawaiian.

A rose, a grandmother, by any other name? Rosie S., Rosie K., Rosalia G., Rozalia Z. and Rozalia W.

Ruda Różaniecka, the tiny village in Poland where my maternal ancestors came from. Ruda: Polish (fem) meaning "ore." Różaniecka: Polish (fem) różaniec: meaning "rosary." The rosary: beads used by Catholics during prayer.

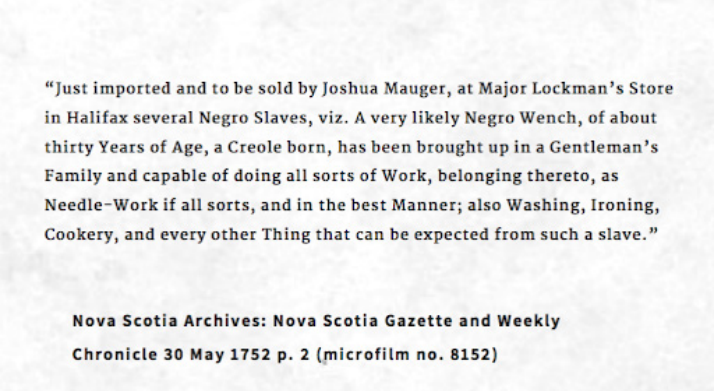
Rowan: derived from the Old Norse: meaning "tree." Also Gaelic: meaning "red." Rowan, another name for Mountain Ash. Genus: Sorbus. Family: Rosaceae. A tree with reddish berries that grew from wild seed in my garden. In parts of Europe, the Rowan tree is believed to have protective and magical powers; considered a favoured wood to fashion dowsing rods, also crosses and stakes to ward off evil spirits and vampires.

S is for Soap opera.

Q: If my family had a soap opera, what would it be called?

A: Black and Blues.

S is for Sub rosa: Latin for secret.



"Just imported and to be sold by Joshua Mauger, at Major Lockman's Store in Halifax several Negro Slaves, viz. A very likely Negro Wench, of about thirty Years of Age, a Creole born, has been brought up in a Gentleman's Family and capable of doing all sorts of Work, belonging thereto, as Needle-Work if all sorts, and in the best Manner; also Washing, Ironing, Cookery, and every other Thing that can be expected from such a slave."

Nova Scotia Archives: Nova Scotia Gazette and Weekly Chronicle 30 May 1752 p. 2 (microfilm no. 8152)

Secret pasts. Secret pacts. Secret crush. Family secrets. Open secrets. Best kept secrets, like the ones kept by Canada, a country in which slavery was practiced for over two hundred years.

In this undated photograph from my mother's family album, my Grandma Frances is seated between her sister Violet and Anne Atkinson, their mother. As far as I know, this is the only photograph of the three of them together, and of Violet. My great-aunt was never mentioned by my grandmother, barely acknowledged by my mother, who referred to Violet as "the one she kept."

By the age of three, Frances had been abandoned by her mother. Left to be raised by Anne's parents on the family farm, she received sporadic visits from her mother, along with the occasional present of Violet's gift-wrapped hand-me-downs.

Stigma. Stigmata: the manifestations of lesions having divine origins, which echo the bleeding wounds found on Christ's crucified body. Stigmata, from the Greek: "stigma," meaning tattoo, a brand mark of ownership made on the body of an animal or slave. How many of us carry the scars, the self-inflicted wounds for sins not our own?

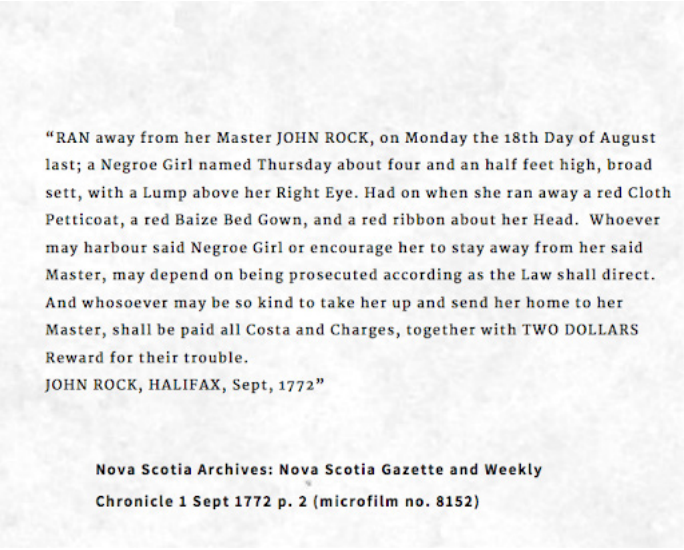
A year after Mother died, my maternal cousin Michael told me he'd known since childhood that my parents had to get married. The scarlet letter "M," for mistake, was no longer mine to bear.

T is for time.

Does time heal all wounds?

T is for tree, as in apple, as in crab, as in the Tree of Knowledge, of good and evil. Trees provide shade, shelter and sustenance, branches for hanging swings and runaway slaves.

T is for Thursday's child, who had oh, so far to go.



"RAN away from her Master JOHN ROCK, on Monday the 18th Day of August last; a Negroe Girl named Thursday about four and an half feet high, broad sett, with a Lump above her Right Eye. Had on when she ran away a red Cloth Petticoat, a red Baize Bed Gown, and a red ribbon about her Head. Whoever may harbour said Negroe Girl or encourage her to stay away from her said Master, may depend on being prosecuted according as the Law shall direct. And whosoever may be so kind to take her up and send her home to her Master, shall be paid all Costa and Charges, together with TWO DOLLARS Reward for their trouble.
JOHN ROCK, HALIFAX, Sept, 1772"

Nova Scotia Archives: Nova Scotia Gazette and Weekly Chronicle 1 Sept 1772 p. 2 (microfilm no. 8152)

T is for texts and the Trans-Canada Highway.

It was 1,328 km from Winnipeg to Calgary. By the time I reached Brandon's Petro-Canada station the texts started coming from Jason, Beth's husband in Calgary.

11:55 AM

Jason:
Please pray, rushing to hospital from ultrasound. Baby's heartbeat has been low then high. We could be delivering today. Will update once we get to hospital.

Rowan:
Please take care. I'm sending prayers. Keep me posted!!!!!!!!! I thought I'd be there on time. Send Beth my love and tell her Mama's on her way.

T is for trepidation

Jason:
Baby is coming and Beth is in the operating room now. Please pray.

Jason:
They say it's over 50% chance the baby's coming today. Just confirmed. It's happening today.

Jason:
Did you get my text? We're at the hospital now. This baby might be coming now.

T is for the time that it took to safely pull my car off the highway.

Rowan:
I just saw your texts. I was on the highway. Please send her my love and blessings for Beth and baby. I hate that I'm not there!!!

Jason:
Baby's here.

Rowan:
How's Beth? How's baby? How are you?

Jason:
Baby's great. Such a cutie. Will send a pic shortly. Can you let her sisters know?

T is for tell me my daughter is okay.

Rowan:
How's baby? When will Beth be out of surgery? Were you able to be with her?

Jason:
She's still in the operating room. Lost lots of blood cuz of fibroids but they're taking care of her.

T is for transfusions of life-saving blood.

Rowan:
Congrats papa. I'll text the girls. What'd baby weigh?

Jason:
Four pounds, I think. 😊

Rowan:
Congrats! Sending you guys so much love. I'll be there as soon as possible. Keep me posted.

Jason:
Thanks. Will send photo once Beth's awake. I want her to see the little one before everyone else!

Rowan:
My girl's superwoman!!!!!! Can't wait to see pics and meet baby in person. ❤️ She's a miracle.

T is for thankful.

Jason:
Beth's finally stabilized and is going to be moved to ICU shortly. Things are much better now. Still not fully out of the woods but this is appreciated news.

Rowan:
Thank you, universe. Almost at Regina.

Jason:
Now, she needs to start healing.

Rowan:
Yes, healing and rest. She has mommy duty for the next forever. 💞

Jason:
First positive news of the day besides the birth. They're not needing blood anymore, praise God! She's not out of the woods but they're not rushing in and out anymore asking for more blood.

Rowan:
You tell her mama's on the way. I absolutely hate not being there. I feel sick. All I want is for my baby to be okay. Driving into Regina.

T is for turn of events

Jason:
Just got an update. They have to do a hysterectomy. She's losing too much blood and they want to keep her alive and so do I. Please send up prayers.

Rowan:
How is she doing? I just pulled off the highway to check texts. How are things going Jason?

T is for terrified.

Jason:
No idea. They're trying to stop the bleeding and are giving her transfusions. She's fighting but they say it's touch and go. So we need prayers for the bleeding to stop. My dad's here with me right now. Just wanted to give you an update.

Rowan:
Please have them take care of her Jason. I know they are. I'm just freaked out because I'm not there.

Jason:
Drive safe please! They are doing all they can and Beth's a fighter!

Jason:
She's not at the ICU yet. They're back in surgery to work on her again. She needs to start clotting. Know better in the next couple of hours.

Rowan:
Tell her mama's on her way. I hate not being there. I feel sick. All I want is for my baby to be okay. I'll text from Swift Current. Tell her I love her, and she's strong. So strong.

T is for thoughts and prayers uttered out loud and in silence from behind the steering wheel. My wish for telepathic connection, the ability to transmit to my daughter the strength to survive.

6:59 PM

Jason:
Doctor came to see us and said she's slowly getting better. Thanks for your support and prayers throughout the day.

Rowan:
What hospital is she at? I'm driving straight through to Calgary.

Jason:
Foothills. I'm going to see her now. If you're tired, stay safe and rest. It's not a fun drive to do all at once. Will keep you updated.

Rowan:
She's semi awake. 🥰 That's a good sign. Tell her I love her and I'm coming!!!!!

Jason:
Things are stabilizing. Just saw her and showed her photos of the baby.

Rowan:
Thank goodness. I'll see you guys as soon as I can. So thankful things have turned a corner. I was sooooooooooo freaking out!!!!!!!!!! Sending hugs to all.

Jason:
Drive safe, first and foremost. Love ya. She's in good hands! They're doing miracles. It wasn't a normal day for the Unit or the doctors. I can't imagine the roller coaster of emotion driving and hearing all the updates. Beth's doing really well and been stable for four hours. Take breaks. You don't need to get here ASAP, but I'm not gonna stop you. She's your baby! 😊

Rowan:
I'll drive extra careful when it gets dark but I'll be there.

T is for transfusions, the three times Beth had her total body's blood volume replaced. T is also for thanks. My gratitude for the sixty people who had previously donated blood products—without their generous gifts my daughter would have died.

U is for Uterus, uteri. Also for uterine fibroids:

benign growths that range in size from microscopic seeds, to peas, to fists, to cantaloupes, to pumpkins. Black women are three times more likely than the rest of the female population to develop them, have five times higher odds of harsher symptoms.

Sisters, raised since slave days to be strong and carry on, suffer in silence—the heavier bleeding, the anemia, the excruciating pelvic pain. Earlier onset of uterine fibroids can lead to infertility, high-risk

pregnancy, and miscarriage; the increased likelihood of delivery by caesarean section, and life-altering hysterectomies.

Two of my three daughters have severe uterine fibroids. At times, I've felt guilty. Had I somehow cursed them with my genetics? Had historical traumas taken hold and expressed themselves on a cellular level? Had I passed down through blood ties the collective memories and tears of mothers, of Mother Africa, of Middle Passage, like I had the wayward kinks and red undertones of our hair?

V is for Vampire.

I mistakenly thought vampires wore black capes, Victorian garb and only came out at night. In reality, vampires are not afraid of daylight. They're afraid of the truth being told, of being seen, of their greed being glimpsed behind their public masks, their ever-present need to feed on the vulnerabilities of others. They wear polyester and silk, checkered shirts and skirts over checkered pasts, coats with London Fog labels, pressed jeans and worn wool cardigans over pit-stained dress shirts—hiding in plain sight under the guise of goodness, of parent, of friend, of lover.

Mother baked apple pies spiced with cinnamon, spiked with her rage, her jealousy and resentment. She fed me lies, tried to drain me of hope: *Nobody loves you. If you think someone does you're either kidding yourself, too stupid to know better, or both; The world will screw you just as soon, look at you; You think you're so special with your nose in that book; You're too fat, too thin, too much; You ruined my life. You're the only one who can convince your father not to leave us for that woman. You're a user just like your father. You owe me.*

Father fed me lies, feasted on my fears and insecurities: *as the matriarch of the family it's your job to pay the bills, raise the kids, keep house, and please your man. I know a woman who started working out at the gym a week after her C-section; you'll ruin your life if you have that baby; it's such a shame because you have such a pretty face; be the best of the best; appearance is all that matters; she looked just like you when you were little, so grown up and sophisticated; you're Daddy's little girl; it's you and me against the world, kiddo; I'm heading out. I won't be long; I'm miserable with your mother. I'm staying just for you. You owe me.*

One side of the family said: *Take care of your mother, so she doesn't wind up killing herself.*

The other one said: *Take care of your father. Look how hard his life is being a black man, being married to your mother.*

Both sides believed loyalty was all that mattered, that blood was thicker than water, that blood ties only flowed one way.

Men have fed me lies. They've feasted on my flesh and lusted after my blood: *You're so exotic. You're quite the lover. Quite the tease. Such a liar. I gave up everything for you. You're the one who invited me in. You ruined my life. You owe us.*

Society fed me lies, transfused my self-worth with doubt: What are you? Where are your people from? You're too white, too black. You don't belong. Your presence makes us uncomfortable and confused. You have no history. You owe us.

V is for Viola Desmond, "Canada's Rosa Parks," who refused to give up her seat and be relocated to the balcony section, referred to as "nigger heaven," at the Roseland Theatre in Nova Scotia.

V is for vestige.

I searched my newborn granddaughter's face, hoping to see some vestiges of myself, no longer thinking I'm selfish for doing so.

W is for Water.

We are made and come from water. We begin life, tiny embryos with slit-like structures resembling gills.

"Wagobagitik:" the Mi'kmaq name for the Truro region, meaning "end of the water's flow."

I carry womb-like remembrances of water. Born on the prairie, a sea of rustling wheat stalks, I'm drawn to the forks of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers, to the white sand beaches of Lake Winnipeg, to ocean shores and salt-water breezes where my body relaxes and, happily, my hair curls from the humidity.

XX. XY.

Why? I have no idea what drew my parents together.
Did the blood of Malcolm X mark the spot where my parents danced under stars, even then bearing the scars of family history, the legacies of slavery and Jim Crow, old country poverty, wounds carried like excess baggage into their brave new world?

Y is for Yellow strands of embroidery thread wrapped around my wrist.

They are reminders of my daughter Beth and my newborn granddaughter Gracie. As friends, as family, we women, we mothers, daughters and grandmothers gathered in celebration to honour Beth's entry into motherhood. Once my daughter was home, after weeks in the hospital, we broke bread, shared wine and stories, and made solemn vows that we would be Beth and Gracie's village, there to support, to guide, to love and to nurture.

Z is for Zion Baptist Church, established 1896, in Truro, Nova Scotia.

Z, a letter of the alphabet pronounced zed and sometimes zee. Z, an unknown quantity in algebraic equations, a girl unknown to her family and community, and called "zebra" on the playground. A girl who, in the end, chose not Black or White, not either or, not one or the other, but her self entirely.

Lina Lau

I expected to have more back and forth, but once I accepted the line edits and cleared up the point of confusion, that was it! Jen's responses were always timely and she answered all of my questions clearly. I was really happy with the whole process.

I started writing this piece in 2017. It went through two critique rounds with my writing group, another round of revisions while taking Rachel Thompson's Lit Mag Love and Revision Love courses, and then workshopped individually with a few people. It is my most heavily revised piece to date, and I was starting to worry that I was losing sight of what the piece was about and that I couldn't step away from it enough to see it through fresh eyes.

Over two years, it was rejected from one CNF contest and two publications before finally finding a home at *carte blanche* in their empathy-themed issue! I can't remember where I first learned about this publication, but at some point I started following them on Twitter. I submitted because I really liked the CNF I was reading there. My first piece was rejected but editor Jen Ferguson suggested I submit another piece before the submission period ended, which she accepted. Jen is friendly, professional and organized!

Jen's suggestions for edits were mostly line edits, though she had one point of clarification. I expected to have more back and forth, but once I accepted the line edits and cleared up the point of confusion, that was it! Jen's responses were always timely and she answered all of my questions clearly. I was really happy with the whole process.

How To Peel a Pomegranate

By Lina Lau
First published by *carte blanche*

I don't feel love for my daughter Zoë right away. I feel a tightness in my stomach. She thrashes in the car seat, shrieks in the stroller, screams in the swing, and generally hates to sleep. I bounce her and pace for hours in a dark room. I leave her alone howling in her crib; in my own bedroom, I scream into a pillow so loudly that the back of my throat burns, and I pound on the wall so hard the paint cracks. Then I rush back and scoop her up, shattered with guilt at her terrified wails. I'm sure I am the worst mother, especially when it takes all of my remaining emotional strength to fight the urge to pin her against the mattress.

As she gets older, there are still days when parenting Zoë leaves me feeling beaten into a pulpy mess. She whines and rolls on the ground because she wants her hair clip which is already in her hair. She calls for "Mommy!! Moooooomy! MOOOOOOMMMYYYY!!!" from the other room, because she wants me to pick something up for her that is lying at her feet. My words are short, my voice thins and my patience disappears.

Other days, she's happy and singing and making me laugh. The daycare staff is impressed because she knows all her body parts, including chin and eyebrows, and I'm unsure if it's actually because of anything I've done.

Mom once told me that she and Dad waited eight years before having kids. "I was scared I wouldn't be a good mother."

I get this now, too late to sit and pull our fears and inadequacies apart with her. I hold onto it, something to anchor me to my mother during the challenging moments of early motherhood when I question myself.

***

I can't remember when Mom stopped remembering. Since before Zoë was born, before my wedding, around the time of a family trip to Greece the summer of 2013. Since then, we've brought my mother to see as many doctors as we can think of: geriatrician, neurologist, psychiatrist, internal medicine specialist, osteopath. Everyone says the term Alzheimer's but no one officially diagnoses it. True to the disease, mom forgets what she did during the day, and can't remember past events like the blazing lights of a

trip to Las Vegas, her wedding, or the birth of her daughters. She can't follow conversations or sitcoms like *Two and a Half Men*. But right now Mom isn't following the typical Alzheimer's path; she is still fairly independent with daily tasks, which seems important given how often the doctors ask this question. Mom can still do the laundry, when reminded. She cooks simple dishes she's made for 40 years, as long as she consults the recipe. She doesn't leave the stove on. She can bathe herself and she hasn't gotten lost yet.

But she also rarely leaves Dad's side. I make sure to tell this to the doctors. They ask Mom how she's feeling or if there have been any changes since they saw her last. Her jaw drops and her shoulders shrug and she looks to Dad, just as he starts to answer for her. He pulls out copies of blood lab results or MRI results to share with each doctor. I take notes. Mom looks around the room, or has her eyes half closed, or sometimes when we glance at each other, she pushes her lips into an exaggerated frown and raises her eyebrows, indicating she is lost in the conversation.

Instead of Alzheimer's, they call it 'mild cognitive impairment,' 'type 3 diabetes,' and 'frontal lobal degeneration,' terms that carry much loss. They stick sharply in my brain, and twist.

***

I used to think Mom was magic. She knew everything, and made everything better. When I was six, I jumped off a swing barefoot and landed on a twig, piercing my sole. Mom soaked my foot in a bowl of warm water in the light blue Pyrex bowl with a folksy pattern of a farmer and his wife and sheaves of corn. The one that she made salads in. The homemade grape juice popsicle she gave me to slurp on took the pain away perfectly. This was the 80s, before the internet and Pinterest, and yet she still created the most marvelous birthday parties in our basement: Pin the Tail On the Donkey, balloons stuck to the wall from the static of rubbing them in our hair, a bed sheet thrown on the carpet and a KFC picnic, everyone sitting cross-legged with french fries and ketchup and fried chicken on paper plates. Mom could remove any stain. She could find any lost thing. I wanted to be a mom like her when I grew up.

Now, how would I learn the magic?

***

I watched Mom peel a pomegranate for the first time when I was 10. I had never seen anything so blood red before. She painstakingly tore back the rind, chunk by chunk, revealing the plump ruby gems inside. With stained fingers, she one-by-one extracted the seeds from the pith and collected them in a bowl. She pushed the bowl towards me with a spoon and a smile.

"Why are you giving me the pits?" I asked.

When I was older and on my own I realized how time-consuming and messy pomegranates were to peel. The crimson juice stuck on my hands, sprayed the counter tops, and splattered my shirt with stains. Seeds escaped to the floor, left to be stepped on and crushed. Even though I loved the crunchy sweetness, I stopped eating the fruit. I only enjoyed it when I visited my parents and Mom had a bowl waiting for me. She refused when I offered her some. I always wondered how she could spend all that time and energy with no reward.

"Don't you like it?" I would ask her.

"Yes," she'd smile widely.

***

When Zoë is two-months old, my husband is away for a few weeks for work. I lug all of the baby gear to stay with my parents. At night Zoë cries for hours as I pace with her, bounce her, and sway in front of the stove fan because a friend told me that's what worked with his crying daughter. I cry myself. Mom plods downstairs rubbing sleep from her eyes and sits with me. During the day, she soaks steel cut oats in a litre of water every morning for me to drink, something my midwife says will help with lactation. She hand-washes stains when Zoë's poop seeps onto her clothes, holds out the towel when I give Zoë a bath and brings me diaper cream. She never actually gives the bath, or changes the diapers. She never offers, and I never ask. There is no guidance, no passing down of any knowledge.

Mom helps the most by holding Zoë. I use the time to eat, shower, or sit in a warm bath and soak my hemorrhoids. I nap, tired from the wakeful nights with a newborn. When Zoë cries, Mom calls for me, saying, "She needs her mommy!" It's easiest for Mom to hold a sleeping Zoë. She likes to sit in the red velour armchair in the living room, looking out the window. She denies my attempts to keep her entertained with the radio, or the iPad. "She's happy to stare outside," she says. When I ask her what she is thinking about, she kisses the top of Zoë's head.

"Nothing," she says. "My mind is blank."

As Zoë gets older, we see my parents often. Dad asks me to bring the baby for visits so that I can stay with Mom while he runs errands. He worries about leaving her alone. I play music for Mom, or sit with her in the family room doing puzzles. I'm constantly buying her puzzles, colourful ones of fish or balls of yarn so that she can group the pieces easily. She only ever sits down if I ask her to.

One afternoon in their dining room, as Zoë practices crawling under the table, I watch Mom turn a corner piece around and around in the middle of the puzzle. She sighs and tosses it into a pile. She stares down at the pieces and I stare at the top of her head. We used to have the same dark, almost-black hair, where hers is now grey and thinning. Dad needs to remind her to wash it, and helps her comb it to cover a growing bald spot.

Mom takes a deep breath and looks around the room. "You know, we used to have a rocking chair...." Her voice trails off and it's unclear if she's finished her sentence.

I wait.

"I know. You used to. You guys gave it to me for Zoë's room."

"We did?" Mom's eyes widened and her face looks more alive than I have seen in a long time. "I *hated* that chair," she whispers. She leans closer. "It wasn't right. You girls never fit."

When Zoë's a bit bigger, I realize Mom is right. The arms of the chair are at an awkward height, and I can't comfortably rest my elbows while nursing Zoë. She pushes her feet against one armrest and re-orients herself and the chair.

The random things that Mom *does* remember seem so fragmented and out of place.

By 18 months, Zoë still wakes in the middle of the night. I lie on the floor beside her crib and stare at the shadows on the ceiling and listen to her flip flop like a fish, trying to get comfortable. When she peers through the slats at me and whispers "Mommy," I say "Shhhhh, it's time to sleep." Sometimes she'll say "song," and I hum quietly tapping my toes against the crib. Sometimes she starts to fuss and cry and I say, "Hold mommy's hand." She scoots closer, her face beside mine and she sticks her little hand out and grabs my finger. I stop humming when her breaths even out and lengthen.

Did Mom ever lie on my floor, or help me fall asleep? I want to reach out to her and ask. Instead, I read books and websites and blogs and hire sleep consultants. I try to figure out on my own how to be a mother. I want to know if I was similar to Zoë as a baby. If she is similar to me. But Mom remembers nothing.

***

As Zoë learns to talk, our conversations become repetitive.

"Daddy go to work?"

"Yes, Zoë, Daddy has gone to work."

"Daddy no home?"

"No, Zoë. Daddy isn't home. He'll be home later."

Zoë sits on the kitchen floor flipping through a board book about zoo animals. "Zebra!" she points and yells out. "Next page!" She sticks her feet in the book and tries to close it and looks up at me and laughs. "Daddy go to work?"

She asks this six more times. It's like she's trying to fit the pieces together of how her world works. As though asking the same questions and getting the same answers gives her confidence in things around her.

Mom often does the same thing. "Where's little sweetie pie?" she asks, looking around quickly, almost panicked.

"Mom, she's at daycare."

"Daycare?" Her face falls. "What day is it today? Sunday—no, Monday?"

"Yes, mom. It's Monday. I took her to daycare this morning."

Mom lowers her voice and wrings her fingers. "I thought I would see her... it's Monday? She's at daycare?"

I try not to get frustrated with her forgetfulness or consumed with anger that she's just not trying hard enough to remember. I remind myself to tell her she is a good mom.

At Christmas time, just after Zoë turns two, Mom and I sit on the leather sofa in my parents' living room looking through old albums. In the photos, my sister and I are kids; I'm almost one and my sister has just turned three. Mom can't tell the difference. She asks me who is who, every time we turn the page. I remind her every time, trying to calmly come up with different ways of saying the same thing.

"There's something wrong with me." Mom looks down and picks a piece of lint off her red t-shirt. I notice that her shirts droop where they used to hug her round tummy.

"Wrong with you? What do you mean?"

"I don't know," she says quickly. "My head just feels...cloudy."

She can never articulate it more than this, these rare times of quiet confession. Dad tells me that the odd time she admits this to him, she cries. With me, she says, "I don't know, I don't know," and waves her hand in the air and turns the page. She hunches over the album, peering through her glasses at the end of her nose, fiddling with the eyeglass chain around her neck.

I want to put my arm around her. It's easier comforting Zoë, who I can scoop up and put in my lap and wrap my arms around, offering full protection. I wonder if Mom is scared, or sad, or lonely. In the silence, I just place my hand on hers. I don't know what to say.

***

Zoë calls mom Yiayia, Greek for grandmother. Zoë is Yiayia's joy. Mom reminds me of this every phone

conversation; she'll ask, "How's little sweetie pie?" and then before I can answer, she says, "I don't care about you, you know! Just little sweetie pie! She's so cute!!!!" Her voice squeals.

I know Mom doesn't realize that after hearing this so many times, all of the time, it's hurtful, and so I try not to make a big deal.

I hope Zoë will carry memories of her grandmother when she's older. I always intend on taking more pictures of their smiling interactions, capturing the joy on Yiayia's face. Zoë will eventually grow out of their games. But right now, Mom plays well with her granddaughter; she makes faces with her or tickles her with a feather duster or plays peekaboo. Zoë screeches and laughs. I love watching them. But if Zoë fusses or cries, Mom's at a loss. She looks over at me with an open mouth and her hands in the air. And if Zoë wanders too close to the stairs, or too close to the stove, Mom doesn't think about safety. I ignore Mom's obliviousness and jump up and rush to my daughter. Mom just calls her name, waving frantically, saying, "Hi little sweetie pie!! Hi! Hi!" demanding her attention. That's the best either of us can do.

***

I used to play in Mom's closet, dressing up and parading around in her clothes. My favourite was a satiny nightgown she sewed herself, with purple grapes and green leaves. I caressed the material against my cheek. I don't sleep in a nightgown. I sleep in a t-shirt and a pair of blue and pink plaid cotton shorts that I wore in grade seven. My own jewelry box is stuffed with silver skull pendants on black leather necklaces from high school and cheap silver jewelry collected over the years, but rarely worn. None of my things are satiny or shiny and special, and I wonder how anything I own could ever become treasures to Zoë. Until I see her parading around in my blue wool scarf, refusing to take it off and insisting her bib fit over it during dinner. I watch her building her own memories of me and my things, special because they are mine.

***

Zoë can eat an entire pomegranate in one sitting. She first tries one with Yiayia, at my parents' house. Zoë stands on a stool beside her at the kitchen counter. Mom prepares it for her the same way she always has for me: slow, methodically, messy. Zoë grabs chunks and shoves her face into them, not caring about the sticky juice running down her chin.

"Pomaganit!" she squeals.

I've since discovered easier ways to peel them, faster and cleaner. Videos online show me how to do it in ten seconds, cutting the fruit in half and smacking each part with a wooden spoon.

But my hands automatically, habitually, turn to the same way I've observed Mom do it my whole life: slicing the skin, prying apart the sections with my fingers, and collecting the seeds one at a time. I cling to what Mom taught me. I peel it for Zoë, and she watches.

Lori Sebastianutti

Four weeks later, I received a lovely email from Noelle. She was interested, with two conditions: One, that it fit with the overall theme of the spring issue. Two, that she had some edits. I danced around in my kitchen before responding I would be happy to let her hold on to the essay.

As a lifelong Hamiltonian I was excited about the addition to my local literary scene, *Hamilton Review of Books (HRB)*, established two years before I started the Lit Mag Love Course. It quickly moved to the top of my list of journals where I wanted to publish.

After meeting author Terri Favro at the Creative Nonfiction Collective conference in Toronto and reading her brilliant essay in the *HRB*, I asked if I could interview her. She agreed, and I not only made a new friend, but found her positive experience with the editorial team of the *HRB* encouraging.

As an infertility survivor and reproductive health advocate, I read *GUSH: Menstrual Manifestos for Our Times* with great interest. It sparked an idea for an essay.

Before writing a single word, I knew I would send it to *HRB*. After weeks of brainstorming, drafting, and revising an essay that included a moment when I asked myself *Why am I writing a 3000-word essay about getting my first period?*, I felt confident enough to share it with my writing group.

With edits based on the group's helpful suggestions, I closed my eyes and pressed send, putting my words in the hands of Noelle Allen, Essays Editor for the *HRB*.

Four weeks later, I received a lovely email from Noelle. She was interested, with two conditions: One, that it fit with the overall theme of the spring issue. Two, that she had some edits. I danced around in my kitchen before responding I would be happy to let her hold on to the essay.

Then I waited.

By March, I started to wonder if I had dreamt her encouraging email. I reached out to ask if she had any idea if it was a go. She responded immediately that yes, she still wanted to publish the essay. And for two weeks we emailed back and forth, working on edits.

When my story went live on *HRB*, I shared it on social media and received wonderful comments, the sweetest from members of the Lit Mag Love community.

From Signorina to Mamma: GUSH, Menstruation, and Infertility Through the Lens of Culture

By Lori Sebastianutti
First published by *Hamilton Review of Books*

The intricate biological system of menstruation is as complex as the cultures we are born into. I discovered this in my mid-thirties, during a simple lunchroom conversation. A colleague of mine was flabbergasted that her young student had come in to school proudly displaying the gift her grandfather had bought her for getting her first period. This student, like myself, was Italian-Canadian and saw no shame in both announcing to her teacher that she had her first period and that her family was celebrating it.

"I couldn't believe it," my colleague said chuckling.

"I can," I replied. "My mother kissed me and congratulated me when I got mine."

She seemed to hold in even more laughter at my declaration, her lips pursed and her eyes wide in disbelief, but she offered no further commentary on the matter. The memory of this conversation resurfaced recently after reading the anthology *GUSH: Menstrual Manifestos For Our Times*, edited by Rosanna Deerchild, Ariel Gordon, and Tanis MacDonald.

A stunning book which features prose and poetry from over 100 women and nonbinary writers, *GUSH* showcases how a parasympathetic, biological system can affect every aspect of a menstruator's life. After spending an entire decade living by the ebb and flow of my own in my quest to become a mother, the anthology was an affirmation that this subject should be openly explored not whispered about in code, nor discussed in a strictly clinical sense by doctors who have never experienced it. The pieces that resonated with me the most, were the ones that highlighted cultural views on menstruation, and considered how these views stayed with the individuals beyond adolescence, into adulthood and even after menstruation had ceased. Stories of shame and silence, of hiding and humiliation, of curses and catastrophes. On the back cover alone author Jónína Kirton, writes "Fertile or not many of us bleed and not once was I told this was a good thing, no one said it was a gift or something special to cherish." These stories were as fascinating to me as they were foreign. I, on the other hand, had been told that my

period was special, that shedding blood in this way was not bad but an incredible superpower. "A woman bleeds to give life," my mother once told me.

My shame would come much later, when month after month my period would arrive, punctual and punishing. This delicate network of checks and balances, hormones rising and falling, eggs bursting and linings ripening was failing to do the one thing that caused it to exist in the first place.

I would sit and stare, shoulders slumped, holding back tears at the few pink drops in my underwear that meant another cycle had not worked and feel such anger at *her*—this ally who was supposed to be working on my behalf. This partner, whose arrival had come with such celebration and fanfare, who was now deserting me when I was ready for her to work her magic.

It wasn't the immediate need for children that this grief and anger stemmed from. I had a devoted partner in my husband and a thriving teaching career. My life was full of kids between my students and my nieces and nephews. But I felt betrayed and robbed of the gift that had been promised to me decades earlier.

I got my first period two months after turning thirteen. It had been an agonizing wait. Unlike Jen Zoratti who describes reading Judy Blume's *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* and not identifying with Margaret's yearning for her period in her essay "Say Anything" in *GUSH,* I did. I read that book more times than I could count and stored it, like all my other personal belongings, under my twin bed in the room I shared with my older sister. Unlike Margaret, I didn't practice wearing a pad attached to a belt, but I did have an unopened box of maxi pads ready (also under my bed) just in case. I yearned for this rite of passage, this red badge of honour, and when it finally arrived, I felt that I had too.

Contrast this to Revati Upadhya's experience in "Red Alert" where she describes getting her first period, locked up in a bathroom stall in her school in Bangalore, India and feeling "inexplicable shame," while Jen Zoratti experiences "crushing disappointment" when "confronted by the tell-tale red stain" in the crotch of her white underwear. In Upadhya's case, this shame is an unfortunate byproduct of the cultural view in India that girls are considered impure, dirty or contaminated when they menstruate. For Zoratti, advertising and media, as well as sex-ed class, had led her to believe that menstruation made boys laugh, ruined lives and was something that no one ever addressed directly.

Growing up in the east end of Hamilton, Ontario in the eighties and early nineties the majority of my friends and peers were the children of immigrants from Italy, Croatia, and Portugal. We talked about our periods all the time—at recess, after school, or during the twenty-minute walk back from church to school after mass. Conversations ranged from the brands of pads we used, our zits and food cravings and whether or not our mothers would let us wear tampons. (The answer for a resounding majority of us was "No!" as tampons were "designed" for after we got married.) When I saw that first smear of copper in early March of 1988, I knew what it was but I called out to my older sister for confirmation.

"Yep, that's it," she said and went back into the family room to continue watching *Much Music*. When my mother got home from grocery shopping, I barely gave her the chance to put the bags down, showing her my since discarded, stained, underwear. She grasped my shoulders, kissed me on the forehead and said, "Congratulations. You're a woman now." Unlike Jackie Seidel who recalls being confronted by her mother for her deception and secrecy in her essay "some little period pieces: or, how my period, that I hid from my mother, goes missing," mine was a joyful revelation.

I took phone calls from my mother's sisters for the rest of the week. I would twirl the long curly cord on my free hand and listen to them say *auguri.* I relished their best wishes and my newly-appointed title of *Signorina* and if I blushed it was certainly not out of shame. It was more likely out of pride.

There was no confusion about what came next. There weren't any moments akin to what the character in Meags Fitzgerald's comic "Excerpt from Long Red Hair" experienced, like when she, arms crossed and angry, chastises her mother for not telling her about periods.

Since I was a young child, my mother had told my sisters and me not to fear menstrual blood. "I'm not hurt or sick," she would inform us when we followed her into the bathroom as curious children. "A woman needs this blood to make a baby." That's all it took for me to be unafraid of what was to become of me and my body. My mother talked openly to us about pads and how often we would have to change them. She told us to always tell her if we stained our underwear as she would need to soak them in cold water right away and that even though it was uncomfortable to go swimming while on our periods, the water made the bleeding temporarily stop.

The years passed and menstruation became a natural part of my life. With five girls in the house, at least two of us would be menstruating at any given time. We talked about them freely, even in front of our father and younger brother. In high school, my friends and I would shamelessly complain about "being on the rag" while reapplying lip gloss at our lockers. Sometimes we would throw brightly-coloured maxi pads back and forth, not caring if there were boys in between us. We treated them as just another accessory to our femininity, like our hoop earrings, knee socks or Catholic schoolgirl kilts. We had no issues outing ourselves as "normally functioning females," unlike the narrator in Carin Makuz's "How to Attend a Pool Party in the 1970's" who was "the kind of girl who doesn't say *period*." Menstruation did not serve as the butt of our jokes nor did we bully each other for reaching this inevitable milestone. I experienced nothing similar to Zoratti who describes being taunted and humiliated after a slumber party at her home, when a rumour was invented and circulated by her "friends" that a used pad had been found under her bed. Or Upadhya, who witnessed a group of fourteen-year old girls bully a classmate for being the first in their cohort to get her period.

Menstruation among us daughters of Southern European immigrants was not considered a source of incompetence or weakness but an honourable passage from girlhood to womanhood and a source of power. But if our power rested only in our ability to one day gestate offspring, then where did that leave

someone who did not follow through with the big prize? At the age of 30, after I had been married for a year, I discovered what if felt like when menstruation didn't automatically equal fertility. With her arrival every 28 days, my period brought grief, isolation, and a fractured sense of womanhood.

No one in my family or culture made me feel bad for failing to get pregnant month after month. They were my biggest champions. "It will happen," my mother often told me. "I had six children and my mother had twelve, it will happen." Those same aunts who congratulated me twenty years earlier shared previously untold stories of their own difficulties conceiving or miscarriages. "In the Lord's time," they said.

But what if it didn't happen? Would my title of *Signorina* be revoked? What was it then that made you a woman, having a period or giving birth? I know that it is neither of these. But the grief of that long, lonely decade haunted me, even after the arrival of my two children. When I was trying and failing to get pregnant in my thirties I saw how the *signorina* status progressed to *mamma* when my sisters and friends became pregnant and then had their first children. Congratulatory kisses were abundant, bellies were rubbed and favourite foods prepared. Events such as baptisms and first birthday parties, with grandparents grinning widely at the continuation of their legacy in a new country, seemed to celebrate not just the child but the newly minted mother as well.

La mamma è sempre la mamma. "A mother is always a mother." I heard this phrase throughout my childhood and adolescence, not just from my mother, but from many people in my family's immediate circle. Its interpretation is simple—a mother will always forgive and always be there. As long as your mother is alive, you are loved.

The role of the mother in the Italian culture is exalted. Its origin stems perhaps from the ultimate respect and reverence for the mother of Jesus, who is considered the most important of all mothers. Images of the Madonna and child were plastered throughout my home and the homes of many of my Italian-Canadian friends. Paintings depicting the young mother cradling her infant son or the grieving parent clinging to the dead Christ after he is taken down from the cross relayed to us both the inherent joy and suffering that comes with being a mother. I grew up with many Maria's in my classes in elementary and high school. She is the namesake of both my mother and mother-in-law. My mother often utters statements to the effect of "it's a shame parents don't name their daughters after the Blessed Mother anymore."

It seems then, the only mother that Italian children are taught to love as much as their own is the mother of Christ. They crown her in May wearing their white, frilly, First Communion dresses and lay lilies at the base of her statue during mass. At school, every October, they pray decades of the Hail Mary while seated at their desks, clutching rosaries gifted to the school from the local Catholic Women's League and celebrate many of her feasts: the Immaculate Conception, the Annunciation, and The Assumption into Heaven. So it came as no surprise and with no offence when a friend, a Baptist, once said to me, "So what's with you Catholics and Mary?"

I never heard my mom say anything to the effect that being a mother is the most important thing a woman can do with her life. Both she and my father encouraged us to study; go to university and have careers—a dream that was just as vibrant for their five daughters as it was for their one son. What I saw was a mother who worked from home just as hard as any man who worked outside of it. I saw a life of back-breaking work and self-sacrifice, days filled with stomach flu, doctor's appointments, daily home-cooked meals, drop-offs and pick-ups, and piles and piles of laundry.

I certainly didn't aspire to this. My dreams were more of the updated, North American, equal division of labour kind. I wanted to establish my teaching career and then when my husband and I were ready, start a family. Yet month after month, year after year, when pregnancy was not happening, my grief not only persisted but ballooned into something that was at times debilitating. *Why is my body failing me?* became a constant internal refrain.

No one in my family discouraged us from pursuing Assisted Reproductive Technology or adoption to achieve our dreams of parenthood. They were very much in sync with society's overall stance on "doing whatever it takes" to achieve parenthood. After 50 years in Canada, they identify with the idea that all it takes is love and not biology to be a parent. Not so perhaps, in present-day Italy.

In the article, "I'm gay. And like most Italians, I oppose surrogacy," the author, Vincenzo states that he wasn't surprised that a recent survey launched to determine what Italians think about surrogacy indicated that 48 percent of Italians oppose surrogacy in all cases. He points out that in Italy it is illegal to remove a puppy from its mother prior to its 60th day of life. So why then, he asks, does society allow surrogacy, "which requires human babies to lose their mother on day one?" Vincenzo views surrogacy as a form of human trafficking and states that what sets Italy apart from other cultures is that Italians, consider the mother/child bond to be sacred. "The role of the mother is revered in almost a divine sense," he states. "We know that little babies want and need their mum in a way that they do not need their dad." It's not that he considers a father's role to be inferior but that the mother/child bond is "vital." He reiterates the famous phrase I heard growing up, *La mamma è sempre la mamma*, and affirms that even as a gay man, he would never have wanted to be raised by two men. (*Them Before Us. Children's Needs Before Adults' Desires*, 21 Dec. 2017, thembeforeus.com.)

Infertility narratives are lightly sprinkled in *GUSH*. Corinne L. Mason discusses the "million barriers to become pregnant" as well as a subsequent miscarriage that she faced as one half of a queer couple in "Down the Toilet." Pregnancy loss also appears in Kerry Gilbert's "Two Poems," Natalie Zina Walschots' "This Hourglass is Broken," and Paula Eisenstein's "Blood Iron Deficiency." Diseases of the reproductive organs such as endometriosis show up in Jackie Seidel's "some little period pieces: or, how my period, that I hid from my mother, goes missing" as well as Nikki Reimer's "Hysteria."

There were also some positive portrayals of menstruation in *GUSH*, similar to what I experienced. Despite a crippling depression, Monique Polak's mother congratulates her on the "wonderful news" of

getting her period in the piece "Blood Ties" and in "Moon Teachings," Sadie-Phoenix Lavoie, like myself, is congratulated by their mom and aunties for "becoming a woman." They discuss how learning the traditional teachings of moon ceremonies made them feel like being on their moon time was something to be proud of. In Lorri Neilsen Glenn's "Ten Bloody Pieces of Advice" she points out that researcher Alma Gottlieb found, "young girls in some parts of Ghana, West Africa, are given gifts as they sit under ceremonial umbrellas" and that "she is celebrated like a queen." In co-editor Rosanna Deerchild's poem "moontime," she describes this sacred ceremony "when women came to rest" and "celebrate in fire light"; when "it was good" and how colonization and the arrival of "the Hudson Bay" changed everything. In "Life Givers," Roxanne Shuttleworth relates how after a young girl's first Fasting or Vision Quest, which takes place one year after getting her first period, she is "brought back and welcomed back into the family, into the community as a Woman. Her mother, grandmother, sister, aunties would have made her new clothing, new moccasins, new attire to represent her life as a woman, as a life giver."

I feel a compelling companion to the anthology could be a work that explores what happens when a biological system that is often stigmatized can't produce an outcome that is in turn glorified. An anthology that examines where science has taken us in its ability to manipulate this system and all the people within our society and culture who feel that they have a say. What happens on an emotional and psychological level when the reproductive system is flawed, and the human soul is left to deal with the scientific procedures trying to fill in the holes of Mother Nature's glitches?

Now in my mid-forties, my period is beginning to morph and change. She is still punctual, but the punishment she now unleashes is in what she gives—lethargy, anxiety, depression in the week leading up to her arrival—as opposed to what she doesn't.

I'd like to think that I still associate my period with power, but not solely in her power to make a life—instead, in the power of my ever-changing relationship with her. What I thought was going to be a given at age 13 was not. Instead, it was years of bantering, back and forth, compromise and concession. In a decade or so, she will leave me for good, but my power will remain for having endured our troubled relationship and for finally letting go of the once impenetrable hold that she had on my sense of womanhood. Thirty-one years after she first arrived in my life, I see our relationship more accurately reflected in the words of Africa Jackson in her exquisite poem "My Period Be Like."

She is my ever-enduring revival, wrapping me like Chahta tapestry
My exploration of the universe is embedded in her mastery.

Deerchild, Rosanna, Gordon, Ariel, and MacDonald, Tanis. *GUSH: Menstrual Manifestos For Our Times.* 2018, Frontenac House, Calgary.

Tamara Jong

I had no idea if the first readers would like it but I knew I had revised it as best as I could and crafted my cover letter carefully from the advice I received in Lit Mag Love. When I received my acceptance email, I couldn't believe it! It was my *Tin House*.

I published my creative non-fiction piece, "Daddy Doesn't Know" with *Room* after submitting to the magazine about seven times. I first heard of them at the Humber School for Writers, loved the magazine and read it cover to cover. I submitted some very early works of fiction and nonfiction to various contests and calls for submission. The CNF piece had started off as a fiction piece for another lit mag that had a theme on mental health but as I was writing, I realized it was CNF. When my story was rejected by the other lit mag, and then I received an MFA rejection, I stopped writing altogether.

Shortly after this, I decided to take Rachel Thompson's Lit Mag Love class and began writing again with the help of Rachel and the community. I revised this piece in the course and then when *Room* opened submissions for the theme "Family Secrets" with Rachel as its editor, I decided to take another shot because I trusted her and *Room*. I had no idea if the first readers would like it but I knew I had revised it as best as I could and crafted my cover letter carefully from the advice I received in Lit Mag Love. When I received my acceptance email, I couldn't believe it! It was my *Tin House*.

The original didn't take long to write because the story had been masquerading as fiction in a book I had started to write before I switched to CNF. It was a short piece, my preferred way of writing. After my piece was accepted, I was kept up to date on my submission with regards to small *Room* house edits and the edited piece before it went to print. Working with Rachel in her course and with *Room* for this issue was a great experience. With CNF, it's always hard to let a piece go out in the world, but *Room* and Rachel made me feel like I was heard and seen.

Daddy Doesn't Know

By Tamara Jong
First published by *Room Magazine*

You hate the tea in the plastic mugs. No sugar in the world will make it better. Believe me, you have tried. You see why no one can be trusted with knives, razors, even your own pills. You see how quick nothing turns into something. Patrick snapped like a twig that one time in group. Maybe the nurse asked him how this made him feel. For God's sake, you have seen the scars on Elizabeth's neck and wrists. At least you think she is Elizabeth. You forget everyone's name half the time. No one wears name tags here. So, who cares about the tea.

Avril paints you a card that says *Thank God for You*. She looks at you with watery eyes and tells you that you're crazy, pointing her stupid finger in your face and it hurts your feelings, and you say nope, she is in fact, the crazy one. Avril said she lost her temper with her nephew, which is why she is in the belly of the hospital with you. She's been painting her white shaggy slippers red, and now they're leaving streaks of paint down the hall, so you wipe it up behind her. You both get a tongue-lashing when you take the wheelchairs into the parking lot. When Avril falls asleep on the picnic table outside, you say loud enough for the nurses to hear that her meds have been upped too much because she's drooling and sleeping again. Maybe it was the wheelchair stunt, or because at breakfast she almost started a riot when she was yelling and agitated all the patients, and everyone started screaming. You pray that you will not see her again after this.

They put you on suicide watch after you saw your doctor, the nurse, the intake coordinator, and a psychiatrist. That sounds like the beginning of some sad joke. You wonder if this is a "scared straight" tactic, an error in the emergency room interview. Did you laugh a little too much at the nurse's question about whether you were hearing voices?

Spring is when Ma died. It may have been spring when you tried telling your doctor about your depths of sadness, but you were getting worse with your words. She gave you Paxil for anxiety. You called the employee support line. You were stressing from work, and you weren't sleeping much so you would work on weekends and evenings, but you couldn't run away from yourself.

But before that moment, you broke down crying when your best friend Robin freaked out after you told her you tried to hang yourself. Robin wanted you to show her the marks, so you pulled your long brown hair back with your hand as if you were sporting a hickey and wondered why you had to prove

it. You always were a bad liar anyway. Then things start to blur when she says the kids could have found you, so you asked her if you were a sick fuck. Your depression wasn't even a depression anymore. It was beyond that.

You couldn't even hang yourself right. Patrick says this after you say your yellow rope didn't hold. You've been taking walks with him around the hospital and gave him a cookie after you overhear him saying he's stressed about money. Patrick says he probably shouldn't tell you how to tie a knot, but he does anyway. You shrug. You do not remember shit. It is the Paxil or the Ativan. Your memory used to be good. You remember your baby brother coming home from the hospital while you and your sister sat in the back of Daddy's Buick and you were only two, but you were mad. So mad you didn't talk to Ma for two weeks.

Your doctor looks at your file and asks why it doesn't say you're a Jehovah's Witness. You tell her that you do not want to bring shame to your religion. She looks puzzled. God doesn't approve of suicides, and it's an unforgivable sin, but you're afraid she'll think you're one of those religious nutjobs, so you say nothing.

Now that you've settled in a little, you like it here. Your day is simpler than it used to be. You wake up for breakfast, do crafts, group, and talk to the psychiatrist with the big wooden desk full of paper. Expectations are minimal. Outside of this place, demands are insatiable. If you leave, you will have to take responsibility for what you have done. You will feel the need to explain that the world was going to be a better place without you and no one would have to worry ever again. That it wasn't anyone's fault they couldn't see the darkness in you. That it felt like you had a woolly mammoth in your head.

For your turn on the wall phone, you keep telling friends you're fine, but you never call Daddy so you can tell him that you went crazy just like Ma. Maybe Ma screaming out the front door of your apartment got her shipped off to the Jewish General Hospital. You were fourteen when she was in observation, and she wrote on the floor tiles and the Bible, and they sent her up to the hard-case floor. She was receiving shock therapy, and you imagined her strapped in bed, just like Frankenstein's monster, and you think you remember seeing red burn marks. Her face was puffy, and she reminded you a little of your mother, but you were not so sure because she had not been your mother for such a long time.

You only realize that it's your birthday because you get a special placemat and other patients are mad they didn't get one too. You end up staying twelve days, and you never go back. You fax the hospital eighteen years later to get your records because you want to see who you were back then because you cannot seem to remember. The records never come.

Shirley Harshenin

A few days later, I received my thunderclap when *Room* accepted my essay. My first publication in my favourite lit mag! And a story that wouldn't quiet until it was written. My story. I cried a lot of tears that day.

I've been a huge fan of *Room* magazine since it was known as *Room of One's Own*, many moons ago! I dreamed of writing something, anything, worthy of gracing the pages of this treasured magazine.

I wrote "Letters from My Brothers" while taking Nicole Breit's Spark Your Outlier Story course in 2017. My assignment was to write a hermit crab essay and this is not one. But the words, the story, demanded my attention, and cared not one whit what I was "supposed" to be writing.

A month after writing, revising and polishing "Letters," I signed up for Rachel Thompson's fabulous Lit Mag Love course, where I learned the tools to create a workable submissions system and began submitting to literary magazines. I also learned a lot about the submissions process from behind the scenes, which boosted my confidence. Still, I hesitated to submit to the esteemed *Room*, but Nicole nudged me forward, assuring me my essay was a good fit for their Family Secrets submission call.

Since Rachel was editing the issue and many of her students were submitting, she let us know she would not read any of our submissions in the early rounds of decision-making. [They had to pass by our first readers and the assistant issue editors.]

While I waited for *Room*'s response, I read and researched lit mags and heeded Rachel's mantra to Submit! Submit! Submit! But the rejections piled up, and I started to get depressed, so I asked the universe for guidance: *If this is what I'm supposed to be doing, I'm going to need a sign. Something big, like a thunderclap. Now. Please.*

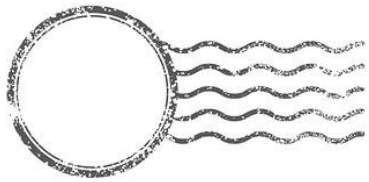
A few days later, I received my thunderclap when *Room* accepted my essay. My first publication in my favourite lit mag! And a story that wouldn't quiet until it was written. My story. I cried a lot of tears that day.

The editorial process at *Room* was seamless. Only a handful of edits were suggested, a few grammatical and other minor changes to conform to their house style.

After two more years of writing, reading, learning, submitting, and being rejected a lot, I am grateful for my experience with "Letters" and that it was accepted on its maiden voyage.

Letters from My Brothers

By Shirley Harshenin
First published by *Room Magazine*



Dear Shirley,

It's been a long time. I've thought about you a lot over the past twenty-five years. About our last phone call. I asked you if you were mad at me. You said, "No, it's not you." But then I never heard from you again. Screwed-up thing to do. But I get it now. Mom's on meltdown. Same time every year. Dad pretends he doesn't remember. I do. So, yeah, Happy Birthday.

I saw you driving once, on the main drag downtown. God, that must have been eighteen years ago. I flew up behind you, almost rammed your bumper. For a split-second, our eyes locked. You in your rear-view mirror. A casual glance at first. Then shock. Maybe fear. The light turned green, and you pulled away. Thought about blasting my horn, making you pull over. I wanted to see you shake. I was still angry then. You dropped a bomb and then fucked off, leaving us all to deal with it.

I was so scared, Shirl. What you said to me that day. Doc had to put me on meds for anxiety and depression. I was at home, in the garage, working on my Rod. You caught me off guard. You never just show up, and never alone. I said I didn't know about Dad abusing you. I said I didn't remember stuff, about us. Then you brought up Laura, too. Zero to sixty, Shirl. No 'chutes. No sand traps. I couldn't deal with it. You know what they do to people like that? A guy in the car club got accused of molesting his kid. They kicked him out. The look in their eyes. Hatred. Disgust. That guy's fucked. His life is over.

Dad told me you went to see him, too. Said he told you he'd rather drive off a cliff than "talk" to someone about it. You wanted him to see a counsellor? He was pretty wasted that day.

Remember when we worked at the Optical, and we'd go to their house for lunch every week? Barb's red kitchen? Red walls, red shelves, red ornaments, red teapot. Dad even painted the fucking ceiling red. They're not there anymore. Moved to one of those fancy gated places after Barb got sick.

I got old, Shirl. Grey, round in the gut. I'm a grandpa. Holy shit, eh? Maybe you wouldn't recognize me. Maybe I wouldn't recognize you. Joanne's been good to me, nothing like Karen. Remember the night I ran

two miles in my socks to Mom's? You opened the door, *like, what the fuck?* I fell into fetal position heaving and bawling. I thought I was a goner that night. Straight out of *Psycho*. Knife and all. Yeah, long time ago.

I quit optometry. After Imperial, I bought my own place, but it wasn't worth the stress. Finally doing what I should've been doing all along. *Never do what you love doing for a career. You'll end up hating it.* Yeah. Bullshit, Dad. Partnered at a shop across the lake, and I fucking love it. Trev plays in the NHL. Cool, eh? Maybe Dan's seen him? Hockey fan and all. Or, he was.

Remember when you and Joanne were pregnant together? "Beached whales," I hollered as you waddled down the road. That was the second trailer park. A nicer one. I laughed, so did Dan. Jo flipped me the bird. So damn funny. Yeah.

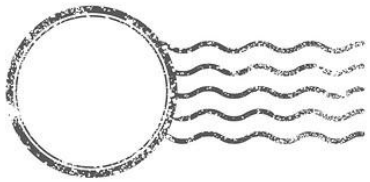
So, Dad disowned you, took you out of the will. "I only have one daughter now," he said. So, if you're still thinking you'll get that piano on your doorstep one day. Yeah. No. He and Barb saw a lawyer a few months after you left. Protecting their assets. Or maybe just a "fuck you" to you. More for me and Laura now. Yeah, not funny. That was a long time ago. You probably don't care anymore.

I doubt you'll reply. Maybe you won't even open this, just write "return to sender" like you did to Mom and Grandma. I dunno. I'm sorry, Shirl. I should've been a better brother. I was too fucking scared. You get it. You were there. I still am, Shirl. Not that I'd admit that to anyone but you. Who you going to tell that would believe you? Uh, yeah, not funny. Sorry.

It's gotta be hard, to walk away from all of us. You got balls, Shirl. I hope your life is good. I really do.

John

~



Hey Shirley,

Don't know if you remember me? Your little brother. Darin.

I saw you yesterday. You and Danielle. It messed me up. Gut-punched me back two and a half decades. All that stuff I packed away. I can't sleep. I can't get it out of my head.

You disappeared one day. And I don't know why. Mom says you're sick, that your therapist put stuff

in your head. Or that friend of yours did. Or you went crazy from the stuff your dad did to you. She said she was so relieved, when you told her about it, that you said, "Dad." Your dad, not my dad.

Why'd you leave? Why didn't you say goodbye? We were so close, Shirley. Remember you and Dan picking me up in your Chevette? Taking me to the park or to your place? Remember the drives across the bridge? I'd say, "My bum's too tight." You'd smile and tell me to wiggle the wedgie out. How I called out to traffic lights, "Turn up!" and like magic, they would. How I impressed you, knowing all the car makes—*that's a Toyota, that one's a Ford, there's a Datsun*. We played card games after school, at your place, when Mom started working. I loved your place. Safe. And warm. And not just from that huge clunker wood stove. I was at your place when Dad phoned to tell us Grandad was having a heart attack, and they were working on him . . . I walked away, to be alone. I was so scared. You grabbed my hand, pulled me in and we both cried.

Remember when Mom and Dad went to Vancouver for the week? I stayed with you and Dan the first half. When it was time for me to go with John and Joanne, I cried. You didn't want to let me go. I didn't want to go. Joanne is loud. Not like you and me. But I had to go. I saw you wiping your eyes as you walked away. That sucked. But nothing like when you left for good.

I'm married now, to a hairdresser. Like Mom. Leah's licensed though. I have two beautiful daughters. Blond like their mother. Got my degree, partnered in a good firm. That's where I saw you and Danielle. In the hall, going back to my office from the washroom. You were in a lineup outside the door to Weight Watchers. Danielle was a little girl last time I saw her. She and I made eye contact, but you looked away. Did you see me? Did you recognize me? I kept walking. I didn't know what to say.

What happened that was so bad you had to leave us? That you had to leave me?

Darin

~

From: david coyote <undisclosed@dcoyote.com>
Date: March 13, 2017 at 9:22:23 AM PDT
To: Nut-Head Productions <undisclosed@nutheadproductions.com>
Subject: Re: you up for a read?

Sis,

Thanks for the message, Sweety. You are so good to this old coyote.

Your handle—ynnhss (your nerdy nuthead sister Shirley)—I love it. You made your fur ball big brother laugh out loud.

I made a few changes to your essay, "Easy" (attached). It's obvious that your experiences are not normal, that you were not a typical teenager. Your stories make me sad, Sis. But write. Get it out. I'll be here to read the other side.

Love. It's all that matters. Love yourself. When I have a rough day, and as you know, this ol' bod gives me one or two of 'em, I kiss all ten fingertips. With Italian cook gusto! You might laugh. It's a sight. Try it. Beats beating yourself up.

I leave Tuesday for the big island. Jascha and Robyn will take care of the koi while I'm gone. Kina needs my help. Maybe I could use hers? It'll take several weeks to sort Richard's estate. If I believed in God and Heaven, I'd say my little brother was with his baby boy now.

Sis, I want you to know how much your "brother and sister by choice" comment means to me. This may have started sixteen years ago with you needing a guidepost through tragic times, but I understood early on that I get as much as I give in this relationship. You are the sister I never knew I needed. I am glad to know you.

I'm enjoying our *renga* exchanges. You're getting it, Sis, removing the "I." Unbiased observation.

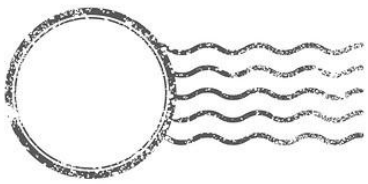
golden butterfly
wings blink, pause on pea tendril,
flies when black cat leaps –

Nice line, Sis. The "wings blink."

I won't be checking in while I'm away, but we'll dance some more when I return.

In response to, "Bro, in all these years you've never said the exact words, 'I believe you.'" *I believe you.*

Love & Hugs,
yfbbbwc (your fur ball big brother wolf coyote)



Dearest Shirley,

Your grief stretched across the ether, curled around my fingers and tugged. The letters reopened long healed wounds, leaving you raw, vulnerable, alone all over again. With questions that have no answers. I know you still have flashbacks and at times question whether I even existed. I did. We only met a few times, but those times I remember with the warmth of safety and innocence. Thank you for that.

Those were messed-up times. Out of our control, absolutely. They wanted you to forget. They took great measures to ensure you would. You'll never piece it all together. Just fragments that provoke more questions. I wish I could fix that for you.

Tireless efforts to extinguish your light, to trick, trip and split you. To make you their puppet. From here in Heaven, I've watched you fight them. For fifty-two years. I felt your many heartaches and losses, none more so than when Constable Johnson closed the case: "Not enough evidence." They exhaled while you sucked in what felt like your last breath. You collapsed, wept, felt the rapid-fire flashbacks implode. They had nowhere else to go. He left you with this: "Just because I can't prove it, doesn't mean it didn't happen." It felt inconsequential.

You felt lost, and that you had lost. Lost the fight to protect Darin. You didn't lose, though. I hope you know that now? To lose would have been succumbing to their years of persistent, invasive phone calls, messages left on your answering machine, letters and parcels, strangers knocking on your door, asking to come in, to "talk about it" but refusing to clarify "it." You fought the triggers to go back, the triggers to end your life, the triggers to come undone and check in to the McNair Unit—over and over you fought it. You did not lose.

Thank you for remembering me. For your tears. For your love. Even when you doubted I existed. Your sketch? I recognized me! Your flashbacks? Rays of light haloing my round cheeks and mussed blond locks. Yes, that's me.

Darin doesn't know about me. He came along much later, long after I was gone and forgotten. I know that leaving him behind, to protect your girls, felt selfish. A fist that resides in your chest cavity. Trigger-happy, ready to squeeze, knock you to your knees. Often you don't see it coming. In the parking lot. Dan beside you. Your young daughters reaching from the back seat, consoling, "What's wrong, Mom-

my?" Lost to them. Tears plopping onto your knees, purse, list—cursive milk, eggs, cheese streaming away. Times, fewer and fewer, when you open that drawer where you keep your memories. When you reach in, caress the tattered yellow blanket that was his knowing that to remove it, to embrace it, would knock you back to the day you watched him and Mom leave for the last time. The click of the gate latch, like the spectre's chain, still haunts.

They have too many years on Darin. Too many lies for you to unspin. Love him as you do, from where you are. We all come Home in the end. Here lies Truth. Here you reunite. As you will with John.

It's difficult to reach behind the horrors to the adventures you shared with John and your little sister. Winter hikes behind your place to skate on frozen ponds and take death-defying rides on a waxed wooden toboggan. Coercing the youngest in front to break trail and the inevitable snow bombing. You could've died dodging trees and twigs and branches! But you didn't care. It was a carefree, innocent fear, unlike at home. It was a joy to watch you three rip around up there, to hear your laughter explode through the woods.

It's been confusing for you. Why did you remember and not he? Or does he remember and can't cope with it? Fear pushes it so far back, over and over again, it disappears? A bit of both, Shirley. When you left, they amped it up. Constant barrage to quash, manipulate, distort. It was easier for him to conform to their reality than live the truth. He isn't as strong as you. Leaving the stability of the family, the abundant gifts, the familiarity—regardless its sick and twisted dynamic—he didn't and doesn't have it in him.

I may have manipulated a little from here, to ensure you connected with the Coyote. He's educated, intuitive, and kind. You've butted heads on occasion—that's what siblings do! He's set in his ways, but his love for his little sister never wavers. Remember when he said to you, "I will never leave you." You scrunched your nose and pushed your finger into your cheek, chew, chew, chew. You didn't believe him. You wanted to. But you didn't. Sixteen years later. Where is he? Do you believe him now?

You accepted a long time ago that justice isn't part of the plan, not in this life. I felt the shift when you quit trying to convince people, quit defending yourself, quit caring what people thought. You chose to let it go, to live your life in such a way that anyone who knew you would not believe the lies said about you. I am so proud of my big sister.

Thank you for loving me, for wrapping my chubby little body close to you, so our heartbeats danced together for a moment that lasted forever.

Michael

Yolande House

I sent it to six journals and received one rejection and one conditional acceptance that I turned down. *PRISM international* sent me a conditional acceptance four months after I submitted it, which I accepted.

I'd first come across *PRISM international* in my research during the Lit Mag Love course and discovered they had a free archive online. I browsed through some issues and found out that one of my old writing buddies had won second place in their CNF contest the year before! Then a friend in Canada sent me a box of lit mags for me to peruse (I live abroad and it is SO different holding the mag in your hand versus reading what you can online) and out of about fifteen journals, *PRISM international* was one of my two favourites. I loved the youthful, quirky yet high-quality tone of the journal. I saw that they published lyric essays like mine, so I submitted. I understood the journal to be open to outlier/hybrid forms, and they had an aesthetic I admired and one that suited my writing.

The editor, Kyla Jamieson, was great. The revision process was streamlined and clearly communicated. We did a few rounds of revision over Google docs, and she made useful suggestions, most of which I accepted. She gave me the opportunity to explain why I didn't want to change a few things, which she either left as-is or suggested a change suitable to us both.

The story of this piece goes back to when I wrote my first essay about my hearing impairment, "Studying the Conversation," which was just published this year with *Joyland Magazine*. I was itching to write a follow-up essay, which I did in Nicole Breit's CNF Outliers course. I was really happy with how it turned out. After the course, I likely exchanged it with 5-7 people for comment. One person had the great idea to take the first bullet point and braid it throughout the others, and I ended up expanding it a bit to do so. There were probably 5-10 significant revisions over 2-3 months before I sent it out. I sent it to six journals and received one rejection and one conditional acceptance that I turned down. *PRISM international* sent me a conditional acceptance four months after I submitted it, which I accepted.

This piece has since been re-printed in the Festival of Literary Diversity's 2019 conference program. *The Lit Mag Love Anthology* will be its second reprint and the first time it's appeared online. I'm eager to share it with more people!

HEAR ME

By Yolande House
First published by *PRISM international*

"Are you deaf?" Mother sits up in bed, red in the face, eyes puffy from sleep.

Things that make me wince:
- The screams of my students.
- The screeching announcements at my school.
- Music that spills onto the street from bars I no longer visit.
- *Noraebangs*, the private karaoke rooms on every city block. There is no way to turn down the ear-splitting volume. I've asked.

At a bar in Canada, a few years before I came to Korea: I beg my friend to leave but she looks at me, brow furrowed, not understanding. Later I stand outside, shivering with the smokers. My ears whine with a high-pitched shrill for weeks afterward.

Alarmed by her guttural howl of my name, I run up the stairs of our townhouse, leaving my cartoons playing to an empty room.

"Every time you hear ringing after an event, you know it was too loud." A hearing specialist confirms what I suspect. "Ringing means you've hurt your ears." This sensitivity has been passed down in my family, an heirloom I don't want. "When will it go away?" I ask. "Never, if you're lucky," he says. "Once it does, it means the follicle is dead and you can't hear that tone anymore."

The cicadas in my ears = my hearing in its death throes.

"What took you so long?" she says, glaring at me. "I didn't hear you," I say, staring at my toes. "I was watching TV."

"Why can't you just *hear* me?" My boyfriend whines, scowling face finally turning to me as we do our shopping. I've just told him what the pamphlet from the audiologist's office recommends: *Look at me when you talk and let me see your mouth.* He marches forward and stops talking to me. Beet-cheeked, I look at the ground. The store is too bright, the aisles packed with choices I don't want to make.

In summer, South Korea perspires. Its heavy and sour sweat hits like you've stepped into a sauna, the cool comfort of AC soon forgotten. A high-pitched hum fills the air, even and never-ending. Suddenly, I hear silence. The drone in my ear is quiet. *Ah, sweet relief.* I savor the silence, but I'm curious. My jaw tightens as I concentrate. I can still hear a hum slightly higher than the summertime bug.

At twelve, I have been answering Mother's howls for more than a year now, running up the stairs to bring her food, tea, or a wake-up call in an hour, two hours, three.

Sometimes co-workers look at me suddenly and I know they've heard something and are wondering if I've heard it too. My mind races, studying them and wondering how to respond like a hearing person, for I've heard nothing over the orchestra in my head.

On hearing aids:

- The ones I considered getting in my 20s. As an unemployed person, I didn't have $3,000 for the expensive aids I needed, and government funding only helped a little.

- The basic model I did get in high school when my hearing impairment was discovered. The cheap ones that were fully covered by the government and my dad's work. They allowed me to "turn up the volume" when people spoke in low tones or turn off the world when it made me wince in pain. In university, I lost and found them, and realized volume control was their only assistance. While handy, it didn't make that much difference in my daily life in exchange for the fuss and maintenance. I put them on the shelf and continued asking people to speak louder, slowly, clearly. Mostly, they did.

She sleeps most of the day now, ever since she got sick when I was ten.

A spiritual friend once told me the ringing means my spirit guides are trying to speak to me and I'm not listening. Or, perhaps: I'm not listening to myself.

Cybernetic earplugs that block out all sound at the push of a button would be handy when my students scream bloody murder at the slightest provocation: saying hello, losing a game, winning a game, getting points in a game, losing points in a game, saying goodbye. I love this job—the expat lifestyle, the long vacation, the paid "deskwarming" time when I can write, the kids who giggle and wave when they see me in the hallway—but I know I can't stay here much longer.

In Korea, my hearing impairment is a secret I pretend I learned from my school-mandated annual health check. Struggling to hear in class is one thing—it could well be a result of my student's pronun-

ciation or my co-teacher's incorrect emphasis, and often is—but wearing any device besides eyeglasses would mark me as damaged goods and give my school a reason to block my annual renewal.

"You didn't hear me over the TV?" she asks, her eyes cold with disbelief. "I called you at least ten times! Are you deaf?

"Minie says she wants a teacher who can hear," my office mate says. It's summer camp time, and we're eating lunch at a restaurant. "She voted against you." My shoulders stiffen; my secret isn't so secret. "But the vice principals said no. You are a good teacher, and they don't want to risk a new teacher who isn't." I put my fork down and stare at my plate. "Can you notice it?" I say. "My hearing trouble?" She doesn't hesitate. "No. Not at all." I believe her. I've adapted well, I know. But the fear is still there every fall when the nurse pokes and prods me like a prized cow. This school has accepted me, but will another?

Voices pierce my eardrums like hot metal rods. Cicadas scream like my mother. My students are sprites shrieking in my ears. The shrill I carry with me everywhere is loudest at night, a disturbance I can't turn off. It's not an unbroken line of sound—tones stop and start, falter and flutter. More so in my left ear, my "bad" ear. The sound in my right ear is lower, steadier. A warning, rather than the left's booming clang.

She often asks me this, and I don't know what to say. I simply absorb it, much as I did her open-handed slaps.

Each morning, my phone alerts me to my daily tarot card. I frown at the collapsing cylinder of fire and screaming people that have decorated my phone screen a few times over the past month. The Tower warns of sudden and devastating change—thunderous energy quakes the foundation of your life, shaking away the debris of anything no longer helpful to you.

If I listen closely, I think I can hear the message. I shrink back: *Mother was right.*

Over the past year, I've become confident my school of five years appreciates me despite my shortcomings. I've begun taking better care of myself in class. I plug my ears when the students are too loud. I step out into the hallway and watch through the windows when the singing pains me. I watch as my main co-teacher frowns at me, but my fear no longer outweighs my regard for myself.

"You know I'm sick. I need you. Make me a cup of tea. Now!" Her face flashes both anger and pleading. "And do it right this time!" I nod and turn.

"You know, this year the school does not want to renew your contract." My office mate translates what my co-teacher has told her in Korean. "Why?" I ask. "It's your hearing sensitivity. The teachers don't like it. Children are loud."

August is eclipse season. In astrological terms, this indicates an intense energy that shakes you to your core, much like The Tower. My options are plenty, I know, but uncertainty swirls in my mind like a raging typhoon as I fail to sleep. This I know: My next step will take me toward people who hear me. I am finally ready to listen to myself.

Julie Hart

Then I submitted it in a new packet to a number of journals. This time it was accepted along with two other poems the very next day by *Anti-Heroin Chic*.

I wrote this poem in a class called Poetic Beasts that I took in Summer 2017. Everyone in the class thought it was great and one member who was then reading for *Tinderbox Poetry Journal* asked me to send it to them. In September 2017 I did, and it was rejected. I was pretty devastated, since I had been taking the Lit Mag Love class and sending my work out like a machine for about ten months at that point.

Then I submitted it in a new packet to a number of journals. This time it was accepted along with two other poems the very next day by *Anti-Heroin Chic*. (Unfortunately, the publication just recently closed down.) The editor, James Diaz wrote, “Truly wonderful work.” I was delighted, to say the least. Since then, I have had the opportunity to post the poem on The Bridge (poetsbridge.org) and it has also been reprinted in a broadside published by my poetry collective, *Sweet Action*.

My Mother is a Tardigrade

By Julie Hart
First published by *Anti-Heroin Chic*

She can withstand such temperatures, pressures, radiations, go without food or water for more than thirty years, then rehydrate, forage, reproduce.

Though not extremophilic, she may as well be. She hangs on. She is still friends with her best friend from high school, with people I consider problematic, people I would have given up on, people I have.

My mother has survived six pregnancies, four live births, two ungrateful daughters who moved far away to live their own lives.

She is directed ventrolaterally, while her hind legs are used primarily for grasping the substrate. Her rhabdomeric pigment-cup eyes are blue, but one has a brown spot on its edge.

Her sensory bristles are sensitive, artificially curled. She and her sisters wish they were parthenogenic. Eggs left inside her shed cuticle attach to nearby moss. Her young are born with their full complement of cells; then by hypertrophy, each cell enlarges. She has molted now at least eleven times.

My mother survived despite her children's colic, croup, crankiness, cruelty even unto laughing at the ball on the end of her nose, her not reading French, her Sears Roebuck modeling pose.

My mother is a tardigrade; she has been reported in hot springs, at the top of the Himalayas, under layers of solid ice, in ocean sediments, at the bottom of bogs. She can suspend her metabolism, entering a state of cryptobiosis. Due to a unique disordered protein which replaces water in her cells, she adopts a glassy vitrification. She becomes a tun.

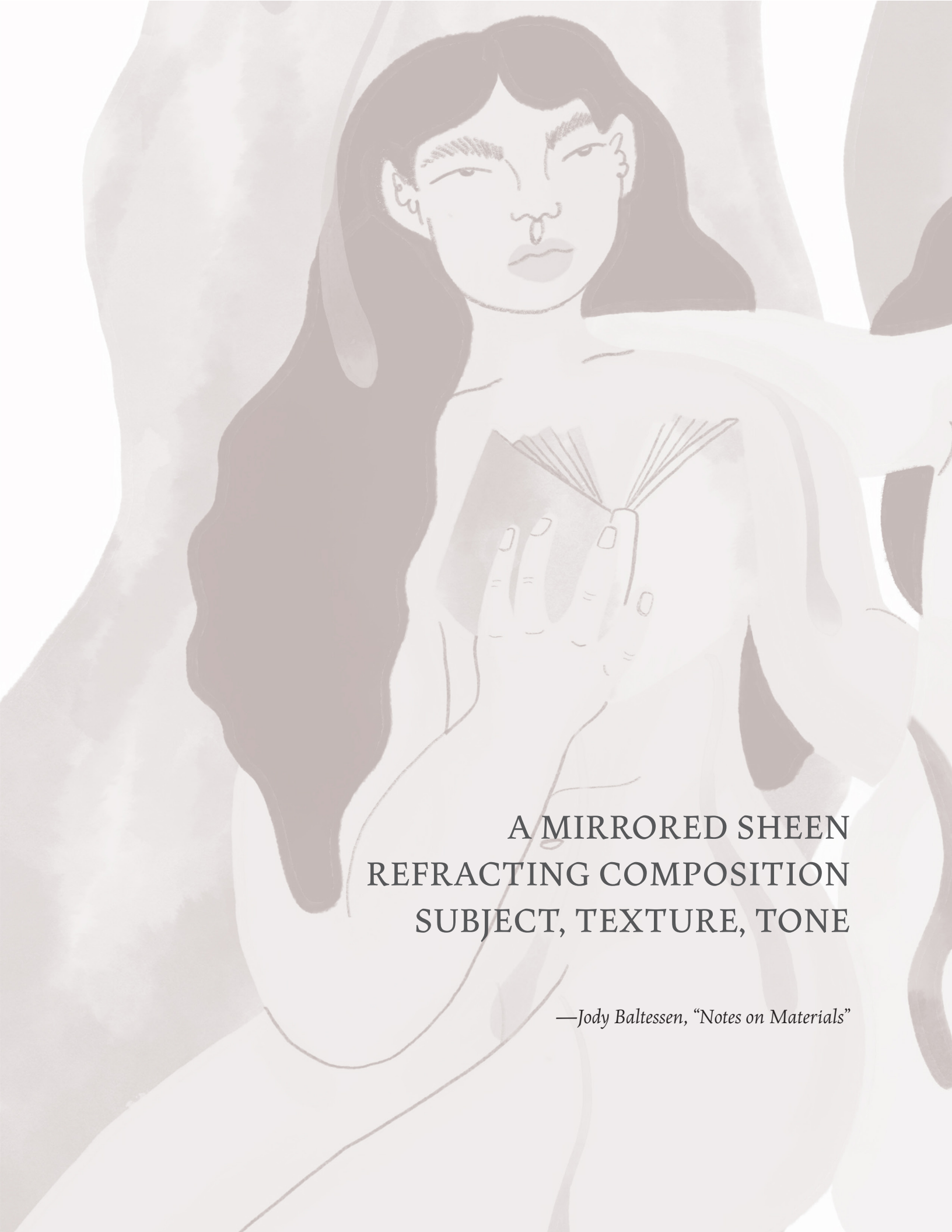
My mother has survived hate mail handed to her at a dinner party she was hosting, from her oldest daughter and quietest critic.

Even in outer space, after exposure to a hard vacuum, my mother can be revived.

Earth's hardiest animal, tardigrade, moss piglet, kleiner Wasserbär.

My mother is a tardigrade, and I am my mother's daughter.

WATER



A MIRRORED SHEEN
REFRACTING COMPOSITION
SUBJECT, TEXTURE, TONE

—Jody Baltessen, "Notes on Materials"

Heather Diamond

I chose *Memoir Magazine* as one of my target publications because as a writer who hadn't yet published CNF, I felt more hopeful submitting to lit mags that specialize in memoir.

This essay, my very first "yes" from a lit mag, had been previously shortlisted for *Room*'s Creative Non-Fiction Contest in 2018. It was then accepted by two lit mags on the same day, both three weeks after submission. I went with the one that contacted me first. I wish I could say that I strategized, but in this first round of submissions after taking Lit Mag Love I was afraid to aim very high, over-eager to get something out there, and still using a scatter approach to submission. Fortunately, the editor of *Memoir Magazine* was very kind and helpful and, aside from some delays in publication, this was a positive experience.

"Waterbabies" was initially three times the length it ended up. I arrived at the final version through an editing challenge in the Revision Love course to cut a longer piece down to 1000 words. Once I pared it down to the most urgent themes, I was left with some scene fragments and chunks of reflection. In the spaces between, I could see the possibility of reworking the central ideas in a lyrical form. Liberated from chronology, I started moving the parts around using juxtaposition and weaving.

I chose *Memoir Magazine* as one of my target publications because as a writer who hadn't yet published CNF, I felt more hopeful submitting to lit mags that specialize in memoir.

Mary McBeth, the editor at *Memoir Magazine*, suggested only one change. Although enthusiastic about the topic of abortion, she asked that I reconsider the wording of my last passage. While I saw the "blood" as a simple statement of physicality and closure, she saw the potential for negative insinuation.

Working with *Memoir Magazine* was a lesson in patience, but ultimately a good experience.

Waterbabies

By Heather Diamond
First published by *Memoir Magazine*

In the Santuario de Chimayo, the Santo Niño de Atocha altar is covered with baby shoes left by pilgrims. I place a blue pair beside the others. The shoes I have hidden in a drawer since I shopped for my pregnant friend—pink for her baby girl, blue for my unbidden glimmer. I don't pray. In my pocket is a vial I will fill with dirt from the sacred well in the chapel anteroom.

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I sit up all night, stroking my flat stomach and talking feverishly to the flipperling within. *I'm thirty-six and broke and a single mother. Your father is a crazy writer who tells me I'm perfect then threatens to put an axe through my forehead. It was one night after months apart.* I rock my empty arms, imagine the sweet tug at my breasts after all these years. *I'm so sorry. Please understand.* Then I read *Alice Through the Looking Glass* all the way through, finishing minutes before he arrives to drive me to the clinic where he drops me at the entrance. It is raining.

When he arrives, I am holding the paper bag (because the woman is always holding the bag) they gave each of us in the recovery room where one brash young woman stood by the window pointing out a rainbow. In the bag is a cookie for blood sugar and a package of condoms for better luck next time. When I get in the car, he will say he ate an entire box of Oreos while he waited, and I will think of planets whose orbits intersected then glanced apart.

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"Western women don't do well with this," says my Jungian therapist who mothers me on credit and knows her world religions.

"I'm fine. Really."

She tells me her Catholic mother revealed her abortion on her deathbed although she intended to take the secret to her grave. "She paid a terrible price for her silence."

"I've made my peace with this," I insist.

"Come talk to me when you are ready," she says. As I leave, she gives me a book on Chinese mythological symbols.

In ten years I will meet my Chinese husband.

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I make a small collage, a fish person carrying a rhinestone beacon. I apply netting, dried flowers, a fish-hook. I write on the back—*little swimmer, our hearts were heavy and dry-docked that summer*—then dip my thumb into the last of the blood to make a seal in place of a footprint. I present my former lover with the collage but months later take it back.

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Thirty-four weeks later, I lie weeping at the lip of a well, inhaling updrafts from a mineshaft dark where stones can never hit bottom. My sixteen-year-old daughter knocks on my bedroom door and asks if she can spend the night with a friend. Do I answer?

In the morning I wake to loud knocking. My daughter's friend is making no sense. *Hospital. Pills. Stomach pump. Saying terrible things about you.* At the hospital (how did I get there?), my daughter says over and over in a baby voice, "Mommy, I'm sorry!"

She is a locked fortress with the therapist. She stares at the wall while I confess, but then she flickers and says, "Oh, Mom, you must have been so miserable!" When the therapist says something about her absorbing my pain, she retreats behind the wall and mutters, "Not everything is about you, Mom."

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On the drive back, my father and I are even more silent than usual. No one mentions the two Oregon doctors my parents located through the Unitarian Church, how we have subverted Washington State laws, how I now have to wait until I am four months along then return to have my womb salted. At seventeen, I am perfecting the art of disconnection.

My mother brings my best friend along on the final trip to Oregon because she doesn't know how to be alone with me, but my friend refuses to visit the hospital where they make me sit in a backless robe in the waiting room with the fathers-to-be, where I miscarry into a bedpan held by a nurse who, when I moan in pain, tells me gruffly that I should have thought about this before I had sex.

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In a Shanghainese restaurant in Hong Kong, between the pork dumplings and the fish, my Chinese mother-in-law announces that she tried to abort my husband's younger brother. My sister-in-law and I meet eyes—*Can you believe she just said that?* The brothers nearly choke, spluttering through food and laughter. My husband says, "No wonder he was such a puny kid!"

"Good thing she didn't succeed!" his brother says. I wonder that there is no blame in his tone.

"Yeah, you're the one paying for everything now!"

She continues and my husband translates, "She had three kids and didn't want any more. She went to the doctor for some herbs, but nothing happened. Grandma finally told her, 'Stop taking those herbs—that baby's not leaving!'"

She starts dissecting the fish.

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At the entrance to the clinic, a group of protesters waves signs displaying dismembered fetuses. I don't meet their eyes when I pass them on my way to my volunteer job as a clinic hand holder. I know the gory pictures are fake because our trainers made us look in the lab trays to make sure we knew what was in the balance. Of course we know. I sit beside patients while the doctor empties their wombs using a small vacuum device. As they grip my hand, I reassure them. *Just a bit more. It won't be long now.* There are sighs, tears, resolute silence. My other job is to talk with patients before they leave. I hear stories of ignorance and betrayals and rapes and parents who abscond with birth control pills. We collect the brands of condoms that break, antibiotics that interact. I warn about anniversary grief, how the body broods over what the mind chooses to forget.

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In Japanese Buddhism, stillborn babies, miscarriages, and aborted fetuses are called *mizuko*, waterbabies. Lost or refused entry, their souls swim between worlds in the realm of liquid life. In the rural past, *mizuko* were buried under floorboards so they could return to their beginnings via underground streams. Sometimes *mizuko* are asked to return at more opportune times. Prayers and offerings are made to Jizo, a monk who transports *mizuko* to the afterlife in the sleeves of his robe.

Candle stubs dot the *mizuko-jizo* shrine near Honolulu. In Kyoto, rows of gray Jizo statues are dressed in bibs, capes, and caps the color of blood. Sun flickers over the stones like a school of minnows.

Prue Rains

Although I have not been as assiduous about submitting as I should be, *Sky Island Journal* has given me incentive to keep going with my submission plans.

"A Planet Called Montana" was published in the Summer 2019 issue of *Sky Island Journal*.

I was drawn to submit to this online journal because it required no cover letter and promised a decision in nine days! They accepted pieces under 1000 words and I had a piece I had never submitted. I also liked the Southwestern U.S. vibe of their art and origin statement.

My experience with the editors Jeff Sommerfeld and Jason Splichal was wonderful. Their acceptance letter was so specific and so generous that I have saved it in case I ever need a supportive blurb. Here is a brief excerpt to give you the flavor of their response:

"A Planet Called Montana is exactly what we look for in creative nonfiction the truth, told well, intimate, yet wildly accessible, it is a journey through interior and exterior landscapes that resonate deeply in our hearts. The emotional transport and intellectual challenge that your writing provides is nothing short of astonishing…" and they went on!

They made no changes, but kept in touch through emails and a postcard as the publication date approached. It has been a wonderful experience. The hardest part was finding a viable photo quickly to add to the story for publication, as I tend to avoid photos now.

I am grateful to comments from Mark Abley, in whose Quebec Writers' Federation workshop I first wrote the piece, and Rachel Thompson, in whose online course Lit Mag Love I learned how to submit. Although I have not been as assiduous about submitting as I should be, *Sky Island Journal* has given me incentive to keep going with my submission plans.

A Planet Called Montana

By Prue Rains
First published by *Sky Island Journal*

I was nine years old and swimming was my life. At home in Wellesley Hills outside Boston, my mother drove my brother and me five miles to Morse's Pond almost every summer day. She brought sandwiches and sat reading in the shade while Chris and I frolicked whole days away. We threw ourselves off the diving board into the brown water churning with children, ventured out past the bobbing rope to the raft, and flopped on the sand to rest in the sun only when our lips turned blue and our skin went crinkly.

In the winter, my father drove us on Sunday afternoon to swim in the indoor pool at Babson Institute where he taught and had the pool key. I knew the rules: put on my bathing suit and white rubber bathing cap, take a shower, and step on the foot decontaminator before entering the pool. We played in the water, floating, doing handstands, and diving through each other's legs. We usually had the place to ourselves and swam so long that our chlorinated eyes saw halos around all the lights.

On occasional summer visits to my grandmother's small Illinois town, we were drawn to the more daunting public outdoor pool in the park across the street. The noise of kids swarming the pool could be heard blocks away, and in the evening bright lights turned the pool teeming with teenagers into an island in the night. Chris and I, at first accompanied by our parents, learned to make our way through the separate male and female locker-rooms, and into the happy chaos of the pool where pods of friends cavorted in the water amid the intermittent screech of the lifeguards' cautionary whistles.

In 1950, my parents took Chris and me on a road trip out West—far from home, much farther then than it is now. There were no interstate highways past the end of the Pennsylvania Turnpike with its string of alluring Howard Johnson restaurants serving 28 flavors of ice cream. And there were no motels. We stayed in tourist homes, in rooms pervaded by other people's noises and smells, and sat imprisoned by politeness on lawn chairs in the gathering dusk and mosquitoes through slideshows of other people's trips. We ate our frugal breakfast—cereal with lukewarm milk and cold toast—by the side of the road. Chris and I idled away our hours in the back seat of the Hudson reading comic books, failing to appreciate the scenery our parents had taken us so far to see. Emerging from our torpor at Yellowstone National Park, we settled with our parents into a cabin, rode horses among the geysers, saw bears and squandered our allowance on "cedar" curios. By the time we hit Montana, home was long ago and far away.

Driving through a small Montana town, Chris and I spotted an outdoor pool through its chain-link fence and clamored for a swim. Obscured from the broad street in the late afternoon by the shade of large trees, it looked like the public pool we knew in Illinois, busy and noisy. With our parents, we entered the separate locker rooms. My mother and I were first out and into the pool. I plunged in.

I knew all about swimming, beaches and pools but as I surfaced for a closer look around, I couldn't believe my eyes. On this normal summer afternoon, in what I had taken for an ordinary, small-town swimming pool, I faced a creature the likes of which I had never seen. I stole a quick look. It stood a few yards away, blue eyes glancing my way under the regulation white bathing cap. I lowered my gaze cautiously onto its bare chest, its bathing trunks just visible at the water line. And it wasn't alone. This was no singular freak. It had company. I froze in shock. These swimmers came from another planet. On my planet, swimmers came in two varieties: those who wore bathing suits and bathing caps (girls), and those who wore trunks and no bathing caps (boys). But here a very noticeable third category had emerged: creatures wearing trunks and bathing caps. This made no sense. I cowered in complete confusion.

And I worried. If girls and boys were different here in Montana, where did I fit in with my bathing cap and bathing suit? What was I, some kind of freak myself? Slinking lower in the water to conceal myself from shame, I sidled across the pool to my mother. What were these creatures? Boys, she said, who probably had long hair and had to wear bathing caps to protect the pool drains. Oh. Sense restored.

But not fully. For a good long moment, I had been ready to doubt the world order as I knew it, as well as the most certain thing I knew about myself, the most certain thing that most people know about themselves—namely, their gender. Since that long-ago moment, I'd made a career out of entering, exploring and describing other people's worlds —teen mothers, maternity homes, hockey referees, reform schools, Inuit teenagers. Looking back on that moment in Montana, I see myself revealed at an early age as a cultural relativist, alive to the possibility of alternate social realities, my sense of certainty dissolved.

Rachel Laverdiere

I heard about *The Nasiona* on Twitter, and after reading their first issue and their mission statement, I was hooked! Within a few weeks, they accepted two of the three pieces I'd sent!

Although published by *The Nasiona* in their October 2018 issue, "Saturday Afternoon: Three Views" is the final version of a flash essay I wrote in 2016. The original title was "Saturday Jam at Bud's" and the mood was very airy and light. It was from the point of view of what outsiders could see. It was rejected by three literary journals.

After taking a course with Nicole Breit that included writing in the triptych form, this essay morphed and delved into what was really going on under the surface. Telling "the truth" of this story was so difficult, so I wrote it in third person to get some distance. While I was switching to my usual first-person point of view, I realized the I liked the effect of keeping the first panel distant. Then, I experimented with the second-person point of view—it was risky, but it made sense to me. The first panel is told in third person and follows a couple from the back alley into a bar. When the husband goes to the washroom, the wife turns to the first person when she sees an old friend who knew her well before she married. As the husband returns, the wife turns to the second person and is determined not to leave the bar the way she entered. The first version was entitled "Saturday Afternoon Triptych." It was rejected by four magazines, but three of those rejections were personalized.

At the time, I was enrolled in a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC), so I submitted this triptych as an assignment. My fellow classmates offered critiques that helped iron out some kinks. The result was "Saturday Afternoon: Three Views," which I submitted to four literary magazines.

I heard about *The Nasiona* on Twitter, and after reading their first issue and their mission statement, I was hooked! Within a few weeks, they accepted two of the three pieces I'd sent! When I withdrew from three journals that were still taking a look, one of the editors commented that they wished they'd snatched up my essay first! Neither of the essays accepted needed any editing—they were both well-polished.

The Nasiona has been a great supporter and promoter of my work ever since. Make sure you check them out because being part of their community is a wonderful benefit of publishing with them!

Saturday Afternoon: Three Views

By Rachel Laverdiere
First published by *The Nasiona*

"Your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you." Genesis 3:16

She began this out-of-body perching months ago, shortly after she married the man whose hand now presses into the hollow above her waist. He propels her past the throng of smokers gathered in the sunlit alley. Never in a million years did she think a man would rule over her. Yet here she is allowing her husband to grind his palm into her back as he nudges her through the door.

When the pressure stops, she comes to a standstill. She used to come to Bud's every Saturday afternoon to listen to the musicians jam the blues. Her feet would hardly hit the floor before the regulars swallowed her into their world. But she stands blinking away sunspots, waiting for—well, she's not sure what she's waiting for.

Years ago, before they got serious, her husband loved how she lit up the room. She was carefree in jeans and a pony-tail. Her crinkled eyes and contagious smile were her only adornments. He caught her off-guard the day he suggested a little lipstick and mascara, saying she'd look prettier. Though hesitant, she complied. Her metamorphosis began.

Over the years, his suggestions grew more demanding. He hinted that bright synthetic dresses suited her better. Each time she cut her hair, he grumped, so she grew it long. He was adamant about her wearing her hair down when they went out. With each small change, she faded.

Shortly after their nuptials, he pouted because she laughed too loudly. When he suggested that maybe he wasn't the only one annoyed by her exuberance, she balked. Ever since she's been paying attention. Hovering has given her a better perspective.

Today, she's decided to come to the jam to see her friends—it's been months since she's seen them. Her breath catches in her throat as the waitress she's somewhat befriended spins past them, loaded tray held high about her mauve head. What if her friends saw her being steered in like a cow? Heat flushes her cheeks.

"I gotta go to the can," her husband says. "Don't wander too far." There is no hint of a smile—a warning? His piercing grey eyes pin her in place until she nods. Her stomach knots up.

Eddy's voice replaces the clash of symbols on the stage, "Let's give it up for Ziggy, Dave and Bryan. Next up, we've got the Byrds, Nick, Brandon and the beautiful Niiiii-ka."

A colony of baby bats has taken up residence in her abdomen. Her roiling stomach has jostled them awake. She winces as their claws dig into her gut as they rearrange their wings.

Her husband schlepps down the narrow hall behind the stage—saggy jeans creeping dangerously low, a pilled polyester t-shirt that's not quite long enough revealing hairy flesh. And those awful rubber shoes! She regrets wearing her electric blue dress—the one he insisted she wear even though it's much too fancy for this place.

He disappears. She exhales, and the baby bats nestle into their wings and settle their little upside-down feet and drift to sleep. Pinpointing her friends shaking it up on the dancefloor, she descends from her roost and heads toward them.

"He determines the number of stars. He gives each one a name." Psalm 147:4

The waitress twirls towards me, her tattooed bicep bulging beneath the loaded tray. Flicking long mauve bangs from her eyes, she says, "Double on the rocks?"

Smiling, I nod, and she juts her chin toward a silver-haired man. She knows where I belong. Draft beer in hand, my old friend leans against our usual table. Sailing on the jammers' notes, I soar past the ladies busting loose on the dancefloor. The musicians are on fire today—the singer croons, and the young kid twiddles the strings and his guitar weeps a raspy exhale.

I scooch up against him and say, "Hey."

His eyes twinkle when he sees me. He swaddles me up in his Old Spice and ink and whispers in my ear, "Hello, Sweetheart. It's been a while." The worn planks creak in time to the beat thumping up through our feet. Closing my eyes, I travel to the library of my first house. Patchouli rises like fog from the mantel, and Norah Jones purrs, "*Come away with me in the night…*" My silver-haired friend and I lie on the scarred hardwood and fix our eyes on the night sky shimmering beyond the window. In that room, the possibilities were as numerous as the stars.

The waitress delivering my drink—the rattle of ice cubes on glass—returns me to the jam. "Pretty dress," she says. I unravel from the past and blink away the bite of tears.

Clearing my throat, I hand her a twenty and say, "Keep the change." Her painted-on brows shoot up. Later, if she asks, I'll tell her that despite the barroom bustle, she made me feel remembered—and less silly in this party dress. That should count for something.

I tilt the glass to my lips. Ice clinks against my teeth before a chilled trickle of whiskey kisses my tongue. That younger me looking out at the stars could never have imagined I'd end up in a situation like this. She would not come to this grungy bar wearing this festive dress. She would have shirked off a man who attempted to change her.

On stage, the young guitarist closes his eyes. He leans into the beat and his fingers unfurl a breath-taking riff.

When the waitress returns, I'll point to the young jammer and tell her, "*See how he lets himself go*?" Or maybe, "*We're all like the jammers and the dancers—we just make it up as we go. Trust your gut, and you'll rarely make mistakes. Life's possibilities are as numerous as the stars*."

Next to me, my old friend clears his throat. The pulling away is subtle. Our eyes fix on my husband barrelling through the crowded bar.

When the waitress returns, I'll say, "*All around us, people are breaking free. What are we waiting for*?"

"*How long will your wrath burn like fire?*" *Psalm 89:46*

Shame—like flames—licks your cheeks and quickens your heart. How dare he insert himself between you and your friend!

Now, he drapes a beefy arm around your shoulders, compressing your vertebrae like the plunger in a syringe.

You take another sip of whiskey and hold the fire on your tongue.

If you open your mouth, the pent-up rage that's accumulated in the past months will burble up and you won't be able to stop until you are shrieking. You aren't the type to make public scenes, so you clamp your teeth. Dark curls are pinned under his arm. You manage to tug a few ringlets free, but they've been crushed, ironed flat, by the hefty heat.

Tears—your internal waterline—rise to the surface. You had such beautiful hair, but now it's threaded through with grey and Velcroed to your electric blue party dress. Even in this somber room, the bright purple and orange flowers catch the light. It used to be you who lit up a room.

It shouldn't be so difficult to breathe around this man. What used to feel protective has grown burdensome. You toss back the whiskey and hold the half-melted ice cubes on your tongue. You're unsure who changed—you, him? Whatever happened, you're suffocating.

Shrugging free, you turn to signal the waitress and point at your glass. Beaming, she nods as applause spreads through the bar like a wildfire. Eddy takes the mic, "Let's give it up for Mike, Cece and the beautiful Victoria Lynne! We've got more jammers in the house, so don't go too far."

The jammers unplug from the amps and the dancers disperse. The friends you came to see flock to the table. Warmth floods your heart as they reach out, preparing to wrap you into their arms. Before they reach you, your husband binds his hand to the small of your back.

Your stomach somersaults.

Don't go too far—he warned earlier, and he meant it. When you walked across the barroom, you could not shirk his handprint. You still carry it like a brand.

Sharon Dale Wexler

Once I sent Moss the revisions, she accepted the story, and it was published two months later.

When it appeared, she shared it on Twitter. Additionally, Fred Beauford, editor-in-chief of the magazine *Neworld Review*, commented as to how much he loved the story.

I submitted this story five times before *Neworld Review* accepted it. “Oysters in the Gowanus” was written in an online course, workshopped at *Catapult*, and refined in Lisa Romero’s setting workshop. Once the setting worked, the story clicked.

I answered a call for unusually written stories on Facebook. I hesitated at first but took a chance and submitted. Two days later I received a response that they would love to publish the story if I agreed to some notes. The edits I made to the work were minor but made a big difference. I changed the tense and added some local knowledge about fishing. When rendered less ambiguous and more humorous, the ending worked better.

The fiction editor, N. West Moss, was great. Her notes were light but intuitive. She told me to take a month with the edits. Once I sent Moss the revisions, she accepted the story, and it was published two months later.

When it appeared, she shared it on Twitter. Additionally, Fred Beauford, editor-in-chief of the magazine *Neworld Review*, commented as to how much he loved the story.

Oysters in the Gowanus

By Sharon Dale Wexler
First published by *Neworld Review*

We begin our journey and head out east of the inlet, after monsters. It is the time of day when the party boat engines coat the air with black smoke, and the rubber boots of mates shake the wooden planks on the dock. We talk how rough the water is. And how it changes. We go out through the Canal into the Harbor and anchor in front of the Statue of Liberty and watch the water turn from green to brown.

Whether we hook up or not we laugh at our luck. While bottom fishing, he holds the line tightly and me loosely, loops his arm around my waist. They are biting. We are a team. He sets the hook, and I reel in a flattie the size of a doormat, a fluke. He scrubs off the blood with dish soap. I rinse off after him. We go home, and he sautés a fish and corn dinner.

The next day we go out again. Although late in the season, we look for keepers. But we keep the shorties too. With nothing more significant biting all day, yet again he brings up going after a monster.

I scrub the teak and sunbathe. He joins me on the bow. Just me laying up against his cool flesh, requires I contemplate his mood turn from sweet to sour. His cold flesh sizzles on the gleaming plastic.

Then he bites my shoulder the way he tests the water with his foot. I yell, "No." but it does not hurt.

"Do not use that word," he says. "No is the unsexiest word."

I smuggle a bunch of bananas in the galley. Around the docks, there is a rule no bananas on the boat. It is bad luck. Despite the contraband, we hook up fish, and people on the docks say we are a blessed couple.

In the morning, I hear him saying, today's the day I get my monster.

We cut loose from the dock, head into the wind. He says, "Steer and watch for birds, we are loose, anything can happen." He runs all over the deck running rigs, setting out the poles, checking the lines. We are trolling, motors quiet. The engine is rigged on remote control. I am controlling the motor with my foot, using my hands for fishing. Then he goes below. He goes below often. I do not particularly care where he goes. I purposely am off course. I am looking for birds. There are none. I feel calm. I do not remember how much time elapses or ever feeling this feeling on land. I see a white cap on the water, and

I ask myself whether instead of white foam crests from breaking waves it may be a big fish, or a pod not ready to separate. And then I realize there is no land and the sky turns black with birds.

He offers to make hot coffee but never moves. Fog forms like steam on the water and the birds leave. We change into rain gear, and he turns on, in the galley, the red whorehouse lights. He asks me again to tell him the story of my lover and me, but my account is so different than he wants, I find my memory failing. He reminds me that at the memorial for my ex-lover I recited a line from the poem. *The death of the poet was kept from his poems.*

"Recited by heart in front of a crowd of strangers," he says.

Then it is time to go out to the galley and get a sandwich. I dream of the peanut butter and banana we shared on the top of Mt. Katahdin. For most of the climb, all I really wanted was scotch, but the whole point of climbing the mountain, he said, was the view. How surprising 6,000 miles up to be greeted on the top by discarded condom wrappers.

When I ask him whether he remembers the sandwich we shared on Mt Katahdin, he says he does, but I can tell he is lying. He does not even remember our anniversary. The fog bounces the same horn back and forth. He wants me to lie down in the bunk next to him. I say, "No." Despite my no, I lie down. He tests the water, leaving teeth marks on my back. He reads me like the birds. To guide us in our search for a monster, we invent names for birds, after a constellation of characters. "Bobbies and frigates, Moby Duck and Wavy Davy," he says.

He asks whether I can turn the boat around so we can follow the birds. "I can," I say. I give the throttle the jelly. The ship rises a few degrees; my chin too. I like moving. I used to love it.

We hear the party boat captains buzzing about monsters at the hole. But when we get fifty miles offshore, there are just porpoises, birds, and garbage bags. The vessel rises higher and higher, then jerks and moves backward like a plastic bag catches in the propeller. He is yelling, then he is screaming. On the boat, he wears these funny hats which go with the water, which go with his eyes, which go with everything. I want to ignore his voice. He wants to do things his way on the water since he is the captain. I like to wander and get lost, so I rarely answer when he calls.

Just then I hear a pop and the pole is bending, stripping the line at top speed. Heart splashing, fist pounding, I reel. He tries to take back the rod. This is my monster. I do not want him to take it away from me. "Keep the tip pointing at the fish," he yells. I point the tip down, "Up," he yells. *Don't let him take your monster fish.* The lines cross and the poles, all of them, bend so much they look like they are going to break. "Do what I say," he yells.

The fin appears next to the boat. He tells me, start the turn slowly, and he will wind up the other lines. The fin disappears under the boat.

"Straighten the line," he says.

I reel furiously and risk tightening the drag a smidgeon, not wanting to stretch it too much or the line will break. Then I see he is about to cut my line also even though I have it under control.

He is wrapping it around his pinky finger and pulling. "Get me the fingernail clippers," he yells. He goes into the microwave where he hides everything from me. He returns with the fingernail clippers—mine, that have been missing for weeks. He cuts my line.

The fin reappears next to the boat and dives in silence, a rainbow blurring through the waters. *And it was a big one, a monster.*

I see his uncapped pinky finger, skin hanging and bleeding.

My stomach jerks, blood-stains his t-shirt, reminding me of the time he took me to the emergency room and dropped me off bleeding.

He dropped me off, "Can you roll her out in a wheelchair, so I don't have to park?" he asks the nurses. So much blood, so little care.

Returned late, picking me up after the abortion. Then dragged me off shopping.

He needed loafers. He tried on many pairs of expensive leather moccasins. He wanted no designs. Impossible to find. There was so much blood coming out of me. I soaked through both pads before we left the store empty-handed. In the car, I noticed a large shopping bag in which I looked and found he had bought himself gifts of one hundred dollar black t-shirts and tubes of male designer face wash.

If I had to do it again, I would have kept the baby.

He is crying about his finger. "You know I hate pain," he says.

"Don't die, suffer," I say.

"Do you have pills," he says, "I'm going to lose my finger. I wish you still drank. I can sure use a drink."

I get the emergency bottle of rum from the microwave he thinks I do not know he has hidden, along with my fingernail clippers. He gulps it down. "I'd offer you some," he says, "but you've had one too many." He never tries to get me drunk. I always buy him liquor. I like him better drunk than sober. But instead of freaking out, I love seeing him bleed. I hope he bleeds out. It is the drunkenness that freaks me out, I fear for my sobriety.

A boat is a small world. Every detail on repeat like a song.

I radio for an ambulance to meet us at the dock.

All the guys from the marina are waiting to see what we caught. In anticipation of a monster, they decorate the bulkhead, with fish heads. It is the tradition. They throw me a line. Wavy Davy and Dennis the Menace wash off the boat into the Brooklyn Riviera. No one cares about the suds or yells as we let out the head – after all, it is the Gowanus.

There are those birds again. Those birds we saw when we first set out. Before we lost the monster. Following us, those same birds.

There are flashing red lights on the dock like the whorehouse lights. Cops. An ambulance. I pass through the crowd of alcohol fumes leaving him to face the cops alone. They won't believe a woman can steer a boat and will give him a BUI because he is drunk. I wish.

I check the black ropes attached to the dock for oysters. I look in the black water and see bubbles. Nothing can explain the presence of oysters. Except oysters are forgiving.

At 6:00 am. I am going back out with him. In a different time, I would not get back on the boat. If I were my seventeen-year-old self, the me who climbed Mt. Katahdin, the one who quit drinking, that self is not on the boat.

But this is the last afternoon as myself. I get back on. I ice the cooler. I roll it across the gravel. I navigate the climb down the ladder noting the condoms swimming in the Gowanus Canal.

He yells, "Careful!!!" throwing me off balance. "I am not careless," I yell back. As I walk the deck beam, I nearly slip at his voice. I grab on, regaining my sea legs, never so lucky on land.

Ellen Chang-Richardson

The poem started with scattered memories of lust and longing, late-night scribbling, patchwork compilation. It went through 70+ revisions, multiple open-mic readings, and four external edits (including two from fellow Lit Mag Love writers; thank you both, you know who you are).

I first came across *Ricepaper Magazine* through fellow poets Manahil Bandukwala, Chuqiao Yang, Phoebe Wang and Puneet Dutt. It was April 30, 2019 and Art Bar Poetry Series, a Toronto-based reading series I happen to frequent, was hosting a curated reading in celebration of Asian Heritage Month. Conversations ensued, research followed, and I thought to myself, "OK, I need to submit to them."

A seminal Canadian publication, *Ricepaper Magazine* is one of the few to proudly embody, support, and promote what it means to be a contemporary Asian-Canadian creator. They have featured artists, writers, and creators such as Kid Koala, Sook-Yin Lee, David Suzuki, Joy Kogawa. To potentially be among their number? Yes, please!

"Meltwater Basin" took two months to reach its final form. The poem started with scattered memories of lust and longing, late-night scribbling, patchwork compilation. It went through 70+ revisions, multiple open-mic readings, and four external edits (including two from fellow Lit Mag Love writers; thank you both, you know who you are). In the end, it was worth it. Allan Cho published "Meltwater Basin," as is, within 17 days of receiving my submission.

Working with *Ricepaper Magazine* was an easy experience.

I am grateful that they chose to trust in my verse, and am stoked that I get to forever be a part of their community.

Meltwater Basin

By Ellen Chang-Richardson
First published by *Ricepaper Magazine*

Have you ever had those dreams
you know, those carbon-dark
sorts of dreams?

Where monsters and men made
of the same fabric move in
and out of each other, amorphic?

I've had; those sorts of dreams.
those lamp-black,
sorts of dreams,

in each one
there you are
on horseback, bareback
from the waist up,

in each one, there you are:
astride your shadow steed
like a legion of Kazakh Kings;

damn them,
these dreams.
These gut-wrenching
teeth-clenching
sweaty sorts of dreams, that
melt in, to each other

profuse and confused, soporific in nature.

It's funny, these
sorts of dreams, these
burnt sienna, lamp flare, cotton-filled dreams.

They remind me of a time, long past
where my seas and your shores met like towers in rain,
they remind me.

Of leafy green, high golden mushroom haze;
where my lips and your limbs met
wrapped, in polyurethane.

Michelle Kelm

I read *Room*'s interview with Sigal Samuel, 2017s fiction judge, and she said she was looking for weird. I knew that was something I could deliver.

I have always wanted to have my writing published in *Room*. "Dead Amy" was a story that didn't seem to be a clear fit anywhere, but I thought I'd submit it to Room's 2017 Fiction Contest in the hopes that they'd be up for something a little different. I read *Room*'s interview with Sigal Samuel, 2017s fiction judge, and she said she was looking for weird. I knew that was something I could deliver.

I was ecstatic when I received an email saying I had made the shortlist, and again when I learned I'd been awarded honourable mention! Some minor edits were made to conform with *Room*'s house style. I was thrilled to be asked to read "Dead Amy" at their launch event!

Dead Amy

By Michelle Kelm
First published by *Room Magazine*

Amy could be heavy-handed with obscure trends like silver hair or emerald green lipstick but when she showed up for brunch that Sunday morning, it was plain as day that she was dead. She was gorgeous but years younger than the rest of us which may have played a part in why we were slow to warm to her when she began dating someone in our group. She had velvet skin and sweet, round cheeks. Her arms were covered in a smattering of tattoos. Arrows and hearts and the outline of a cactus that said 'free hugs' underneath. She wore wide-brimmed felt hats and culotte jumpsuits and had a side business making capes out of old brocade drapes. But this day was different. Ryan gasped as Amy rounded the corner, bloated with a hue of sea foam, her tongue poking through her lips on one side of her mouth.

Nobody knew what to say, so we tried to act natural. After all, she had made it out to meet us for brunch, and we'd been trying to get into this place for weeks. Everyone had been talking about this candied bacon and caramelized shallot French toast crepe casserole with bourbon infused cashew butter that is to die for or…sorry. I guess I shouldn't say that. Anyways, we'd been waiting a long time to eat there.

"Hi Amy," I said, "How are you?"

She tried to discreetly push her tongue back inside her mouth. "It was a rough week." She rolled her eyes, and one came back about two full seconds before the other. "Work has literally been killing me." Amy drove us crazy with her constant hyperbole and grating vocal fry. Everything was always literally killing her. Younger millennials are like that.

She leaned in for a hug, and when I put my hand on her back, she was as cold and hard as a tree stump under her vintage, wool trench coat. "You seem a bit stiff," I said. I don't know what I thought she'd say. If she'd offer up the bad news herself and save us the discomfort. This is one of those brunch places that won't seat you unless your whole party is present so, god, I don't know, maybe she didn't want to let us down.

Amy lowered her head to one shoulder, attempting to stretch her neck. "I've got to get back to Bikram. Sitting at a desk all day is murder on my joints." There were a dozen or so other people scattered outside of the restaurant, also waiting for tables. I could feel them trying not to stare as they carried on their conversations. I'm certain they were hoping we'd have to leave and the wait time would drop.

I thought about saying something but I make a point of pausing at times like this to consider the ethics of a situation. Like whether or not you tell a friend that their partner is cheating on them. There are so many factors to think about and I doubt it's ever cool to tell someone that they are dead with a crowd of strangers standing around. There was this one time when a bunch of us were out, and Alex's fly was down, but I noticed when we were about to leave this brewery tasting we were at. I didn't tell him until later because I thought if I told him right then it would be more embarrassing because the same people were still around. He was confused and angry at first, but when I explained my reasoning, he totally got it. He said so. And I know he did because after that there was this time where he didn't tell me that while I was chatting with this guy I was into my nipple was showing. I was so embarrassed, but I guess it would've been worse if he told me right away. I know this isn't comparable to being dead but I can only draw from the experiences I've had.

None of my options were good. How was I supposed to tell her she was dead? Have you ever delivered news as bad as that? I'm pretty sure there's no hotline for this. It was too late for an ambulance. If I called the police and said, like, hey, my friend is dead, then I'd be the one reporting this dead body. They'd probably take me in for questioning on an empty stomach and you know they'd use some shady cop tactics on me and god knows I'd end up being the focus of some eight part Netflix series. Besides, the brunch place would turn into a crime scene and we'd have to move to another city if we ever wanted to eat brunch again. I've heard of people being brunch-blacklisted for less. I can't drive her anywhere because, first of all, where does an undertaker even live and, second of all, hauling some dead body around in your car has got to be all kinds of criminal. I also just don't believe that Amy would want me to be inconvenienced by her being dead at brunch. Amy has always been chill. Figuratively and then literally.

Inside the restaurant, Amy got foul. The heat was cranked and how quick the body goes when the temperature is high. We ordered a round of these crazy popular Cajun jerky barbeque Caesars and sat for a minute, watching people pass by in horror. "God," Amy said, "this place smells like shit! It doesn't usually smell like rot in here, does it?" She began looking around for our server. "Do you think they'd move us to a different table?"

"I'm sure it's the whole place," Ryan jumped in before Amy flagged anyone down. "It'll probably smell no matter where we sit." Alex hadn't said a word since Amy arrived. He just sort of nodded, his lips so pursed they'd all but disappeared.

At this point I'm so hungry I'm delirious. I'm very sensitive to changes in my blood sugar and I'm starting to feel a bit out of it and I think, shit, what if Amy is nursing a hangover and getting kind of ripe and I've come up with this insane idea that she's dead because she doesn't look flawless, like, once in her life. It's pretty messed up to assume a woman has died just because she looks a bit rough. As a feminist, honestly, it is so unsavoury for me to be jumping to these conclusions based on another woman's physical presentation. So I make the logical decision to wait, to get some food in my stomach and stabilize my blood sugar, and then to re-evaluate whether or not Amy is dead.

When the server arrived with our drinks Amy looked up to say thank you, and her tongue flopped back out of her mouth, hanging off to one side like a dried out old liver from a Thanksgiving turkey. The server left without taking our order, making a beeline right through the kitchen and out the back door. Amy tucked her tongue back in, aware something was wrong but nowhere near knowing how bad it was. "What's her problem?" she said. She took a sip of her Caesar and Clamato juice slid out both of her nostrils.

"Hey, Amy, are you sure you're feeling alright?" I asked. iPhone cameras closed in around us. At that point, it didn't seem like we were going to get to try the candied bacon and caramelized shallot French toast crepe casserole with bourbon infused cashew butter anyways so I thought I'd ask and see what she said.

"Can you not?" she snapped back, "I'm exhausted. I told you, I can't even describe how busy and stressed I am. You'd seriously die. It's just too much."

I leaned back, "Okay, I was just asking." A new server crept towards our table, the rest of the staff huddled across the restaurant. I gave him a sympathetic smile and hoped that if they asked us to leave they'd at least let us get take-out. Brunch places are super weird about takeout when they have a long lineup, but we'd waited for a table, so I don't think it's unreasonable.

Amy made the server run through all of the vegan options on the menu before settling on the beef brisket. It was impressive, the way he got through the entire menu without stopping to inhale. We ordered another round of Caesars and tried to pass the time by commenting on the decor, which I would describe as midcentury-decrepit and an obvious attempt to appeal to hipsters.

I am sure our order was rushed and soon the server was on his way to our table with our food. His hands shook and he kept his eyes up as he approached. I could see the glisten of candied bacon moving towards me. I could fucking taste the cashew butter, the delicate notes of bourbon, the subtle, crisp edges of brioche. I glanced back towards Amy, hoping she could hold it together for a little bit longer. Goddamn Amy. The busy legs of a blowfly wiggled and strained until its fat body popped like a cork out of her ear canal. Champagne would've paired nicely with my meal. For a second I did think about a mimosa. Then I screamed, knocking my chair over as I jumped back. Amy gasped, her body now rigid in her seat. A long, heavy, wheezing came from deep within her torso, and everyone in the restaurant went silent. She looked up at me as if to ask what was happening, and her head snapped clean off. Hit the floor like a fucking sandbag. That was Amy. It was heavy-handed but at least it was clear.

I looked down at her. Her pewter hair slung across my foot. You should've seen the mess it all made. They must've put a quarter pound of candied bacon on my French toast. There was cashew butter everywhere.

Mary Vlooswyk

This is important because I had read an interview where Tyler Johnson, executive editor of the magazine, spoke about the poor quality of photos and bios they receive. Sometimes writing is rejected based on that! Their responses were prompt and very encouraging. It was an enjoyable experience!

I have had many rejections but continue to submit regularly to magazines. Through Rachel's course, Lit Mag Love, I learned about tiered submissions. I definitely continue to aspire toward publication in magazines I consider to be "top tier" but my reality is that I submit to a variety of magazines at various tiers. I believe that gives better odds one of my poems will be in the right place at the right time for publication. This has led to some unexpected and welcome acceptances as well as opportunities to submit to anthologies.

I had the good fortune of having my poem, "An Imp In My Cello," accepted the first time I submitted to *Wild Musette*. This is an independent American literary publisher of books, ebooks and a biannual journal. The journal states it "centers around the themes of music and dance, but along the way ventures very far afield."

I stumbled across the call for submissions for *Wild Musette* when I was looking for information on another magazine. After I read some of the writing from the magazine that is available online, I felt my writing might be a fit and decided to submit five poems, which all related to music, although submission guidelines make it clear the writing does not have to deal specifically with music. One of the five poems was accepted.

The process of working with the editor was very easy. We corresponded by email and no edits were requested. He was happy with my author photo and brief bio. This is important because I had read an interview where Tyler Johnson, executive editor of the magazine, spoke about the poor quality of photos and bios they receive. Sometimes writing is rejected based on that! Their responses were prompt and very encouraging. It was an enjoyable experience!

An Imp In My Cello

By Mary Vlooswyk
First published by *Wild Musette Journal*

at the edge of my black leather chair
spicy orange maple, marmalade stripes
between my knees
on a cool April morning in 2017
next to my desk that sits by windows overlooking the city
pegs slip

my cello, a swan neck and precisely rounded scroll
has flaccid strings lying on her body
drooping off the fingerboard
        my heart sinks
alone to face this curvy, bold instrument
I send Morrigan a quick plea

I sit a moment with this contrary piece of wood
        begin to tighten her strings
A string – tuned
D string – tuned
G string –
        everything unravels

a test of wills between me
and the discordant imp that has entered the room
        I corral my cello between my legs
she brings me to a moment

nothing exists except me and a string

the A string
        energy
a vibration
an entrance to musical essence
        beads of sweat drip off my forehead
I work to expunge the imp
and as the cello slowly regains taut strings
        once again in tune
I realize the cello views me like the imp
a visitor just passing through

Karen Zey

When I finally got the "yes" from Editor-in-Chief Kolleen Carney Hoepfner, I was thrilled. She was so positive in her communication and had only one minor suggested edit, the addition of the phrase "first wave" to "grizzled feminists."

In exploring new lit mags and looking for places to submit CNF, I came across *Drunk Monkeys*. Their mission statement hooked me right away: "Build worlds, break hearts." I liked a couple of the essays I read (strong narrators showing vulnerability but not "bleeding confessionals," a range of voices and topics), and I thought: a lit mag out of Los Angeles with a crazy name. They publish anthologies, too. Why not? When I finally got the "yes" from Editor-in-Chief Kolleen Carney Hoepfner, I was thrilled. She was so positive in her communication and had only one minor suggested edit, the addition of the phrase "first wave" to "grizzled feminists."

This CNF piece was one of my first, starting off as a baggy personal essay at 1500+ words. I actually submitted it to 5 places in 2014: women's pop culture webzines and one random lit mag where a friend had published. I had no idea how bad the writing was, nor how to go about strategically submitting. After many workshops and a lot of group feedback, I learned the basics about craft and revision. And from Lit Mag Love I learned about what editors want and how to go about submitting. With five more deep revisions over 3 years, this piece got polished into its final tight form: 398 words. I felt it was ready to resubmit, so off it went to 10 different lit mags. The response was 8 form rejections and one encouraging note. Nothing from *Drunk Monkeys*. I decided to tweak a line or two, then sent out another 9 submissions.

The *Drunk Monkeys* guidelines had mentioned a response time of 90 days. It had been just over 3 months. I sent a humble inquiry asking if they were still interested. Kolleen Carney Hoepfner apologized for the delay, took a look and gave me an immediate YES. By now, I had tweaked those 2 lines. Did I dare ask about my new improved version? I wrote and admitted I had done some small revisions for subsequent submissions. In the final segment, "Wisdom comes in whispers after 59 years. A small glass jar is tucked away…" had been changed to "A glass counter near the entry of the department store beckons. I carry home a purchase wrapped in self-forgiveness—a small, opaque glass jar…" She agreed it made the piece stronger and in January 2018, the essay I had drafted in 2014 appeared in *Drunk Monkeys*.

Living With Mature Skin

By Karen Zey
First published by *Drunk Monkeys*

A silver-haired woman with still-taut cheekbones smiles from the ad. A pitch for magic potions aimed at women with crow's feet and creases. A woman like me, experienced in flutters of self-doubt and twinges of loss. Vulnerable to the seductive pull of junk science and sly text—serums with proven clinical strength, the latest in anti-wrinkle technology. Sweet-smelling fruit extracts to moisturize, rejuvenate, illuminate. Who doesn't want to glow with renewed vitality?

*

Cheap cold cream releases a greasy, medicinal smell. For years my mother slathered it on her face every night before bed. A beauty regimen scrimped out of grocery money. Now 85, she looks 70. My haphazard routine? Pumping paraben-free, all-purpose lotion for both sets of cheeks. *You should try something new*, my mother tells me. *You're not getting any younger.* Maybe she has a point.

*

Aging celebrities chase youthful beauty. Tabloids thrive on their stumbles. The grotesque masks of failed facelifts. Outlandish puffed-up lips. Brows frozen in Botox confession. The blurred horror of a once famous face displayed at the check-out aisle. Posted as click bait. A public outing of a woman's naked shriveled self.

*

Grizzled first-wave feminists wear age spots as badges of a full life already lived. They take pride in their wrinkles, every furrow and fold a testament to past romances or long-time love. Their weathered faces proof of devoted parenting and passionate pursuits. Sipping fair-trade coffee, buying organic, posing in yoga class. First-wave liberated voices sounding shrill. Is resisting the map of wrinkles on my face such an unenlightened choice?

*

My face reveals bumpy decades of small triumphs and survived hurts. But I want the world to see the smoothness of my self-worth. Take in the fine lines of my understanding. I want to look in the mirror without a wizened reminder of the past. I want to look in the mirror and dream of possibilities.

*

A glass counter near the entry of the department store beckons. I carry home a purchase wrapped in self-forgiveness—a small, opaque glass jar, embossed with silver-lettered promises. I tuck it away in my bathroom cabinet. Every evening, I dip one slightly arthritic finger into the rich, emollient cream and inhale its rosy perfume. I raise my fingertip to my mellowing face and smooth a brilliant white dab into every one of my pores.

Dawn Hurley-Chapman

After taking the Lit Mag Love course, I recognised that "Bingo" had a tone that didn't match the magazines I had been submitting to.

I first discovered *The Feathertale Review* at Word On The Street when D'Artagnan, the monkey featured on each issue's cover page, caught my eye. I skimmed through some samples and loved the mag's offbeat, edgy humour—the opposite of what I expected from a literary magazine.

I wrote the first version of "Bingo" in 2009. I'd say it's a couple tablespoons of CNF mixed with a few cups of fiction. The first version had a lot more 80s and suburban references, which really spoke to my teacher at U of T, Ray Robertson. He suggested I start sending it out. I had a reader at *The Puritan* say they loved it and that it should find a home (not theirs!), but they kindly suggested some changes about the timeline so the story didn't bounce back and forth too much. I took those comments on board, but then put the piece back in the drawer after a couple more rejections.

After taking the Lit Mag Love course, I recognised that "Bingo" had a tone that didn't match the magazines I had been submitting to. I wondered if my story had enough edge and humour to make it into *Feathertale*. So, I was stoked when Corina Milic wrote to say they liked it and wanted to publish my piece in the print edition. The edits Corina suggested were minor, and I approved them all. I signed a contract and all went well. No monkey business.

Getting published in *Feathertale* reignited a belief in myself and my ability to tell an entertaining story that also had depth.

Bingo

By Dawn Hurley-Chapman
First Published by *The Feathertale Review*

Betty leaps up from the plywood table, hip checking me in the face with her red velour leisure pants. She shakes her winning bingo card in the air to a chorus of half-hearted cheering and the thud of daubers thrown down in defeat.

"Way t'go, Betty!" shouts my future-father-in-law as she bounds toward the stage, cutting through the fog of second hand smoke, dodging wheelchairs and the occasional oxygen tank to collect her cash. He points at my glass and nods, "This rounds' on me."

I slurp the last watery dregs of my Jack Daniels n' diet and give him the ok sign.

"That's my girl," he says, hoisting his two hundred and fifty pound frame up using my shoulder as support. "Steve? Another cold gold?"

"Sure, Dad." Steve's eyes dart back to his card. Steve only speaks when spoken to and he won't look me in the eye.

*

There was a time, not long ago, when we would lie down on his dorm room bed, facing each other, knees touching. I liked to trace the line of his lips, the gentle swoops up and the soft dips down, feel the scratch of his stubble on the backs of my fingers. His roommate snored as the central heating hummed. The least romantic symphony you could imagine, but still, our eyes seemed to rest in each other, in the same way fingers lace and linger when you hold hands. Looking in his eyes made me feel restful. I let go of worries about what lay beyond that moment. It was only after Steve fell asleep that I would drift back to myself and the familiar tingle of anxiousness would set in.

I had been a shy kid. In gym class, when the teacher shouted, *"Find a partner!"* I was the one standing frozen, arms pressed to my sides. Everyone else would run around pairing up, their shrieks echoing across the cavernous gym, sneakers squeaking against the rubber floor. It was like they had magnets in their shoes drawing them to a particular someone. I'd turn in circles, looking for a friendly face, hoping to see someone running toward me—but everyone had already teamed up and I was stuck with the teacher and her sympathetic smile. In university, I was less shy, had been on a few dates, but none of

those guys made me feel like I had magnets in my shoes. When Steve offered to buy me a drink one night at the campus pub, I felt an invisible pull. I wanted to lean closer. We found ourselves touching, letting our glances and the pauses in our conversation linger till a beer-scented kiss was inevitable.

*

The grey-haired crowd pop lids back onto their daubers so the ink won't run dry. They whinge that they only needed one more number to make it. They light cigarettes and wave them like symphony conductors. Smoke fills the Lion's Hall. I breathe it in, savouring the acrid pinch in my nostrils and throat. My foot jiggles up and down. I can't think of a thing to say to draw Steve in. We can't talk about the wedding even though it squats in my brain - a tumour of pink meringue. I wonder if Steve is thinking about the wedding; that, or what happened last Saturday night down in Frank and Betty's rec room.

*

Steve had invited a bunch of friends to hang at his parents'. His best friend Tim had just landed home after travelling for a year around Australia. It was Hockey Night in Canada, so the game was on, casting flickering light across the dark wood panelling. Tan and buff from surfing at Bondi, Tim looked entirely different from the pale and pasty tech major he'd been before he left. He described diving with white tipped sharks under a confetti of blood and chum, clinging to coral with his fingertips, hoping the current wouldn't pull him into the scrum.

Tim was on one side of me, Steve on the other. When Tim leaned forward to the Frito-Lays, I caught the scent of coconut oil rising from his chest as his shirt fell back toward his body. It reminded me of summer. I imagined running my tongue along the inside of his elbow, kissing the warm hollow between his shoulder and his neck. I thought his sweat must taste of the sea. I grabbed some chips and shoved them in my mouth, sucking the salt off them till they collapsed across my tongue.

It was the middle of the second period and lifting beer bottles up and down had created a light sheen of sweat across Steve's forehead. Under the fluorescent lights of the basement his skin looked like cheddar cheese left out in the sun. My mind fast-forwarded to what had devolved into our standard operating procedure for Saturday night: post-hockey sex. Him on top, me on top. Approximate play time, five minutes—eight if he'd drunk more than a six pack. He'd come first. I wouldn't come at all. He'd ask if I did and I'd lie. We'd spoon and he'd sleep. Three, five, ten years down the line, would this even bother me? I pictured myself forty and sexless, my curves rounding out into a tube of Pillsbury dough, hair sprouting from my chin. Wearing beige soft-soled shoes and nylon slacks that rub together at the thighs. Playing bingo every Thursday night.

*

'Like A Virgin' plays from the Lion's Hall speakers, the sound scratchy and hollow. I glance toward the stage at Betty, collecting her prize money and chatting with the bingo caller, his hair slicked into a duck tail. He's perched on his haunches with his arms resting on his knees. His legs are spread wide and Betty's face looks like it's nuzzled into the crotch of his black corduroy pants. Betty's crossed her arms under her chest, levitating her tits to just below her chin. Frank, like his son, does not notice the stray. I see it though. Betty smiles at something the bingo caller says, tilting her head to the side, not aware her lipstick has bled through the creases on her lips or that her white bra, frayed at the shoulder, is showing. I recognise that look—the coy lift of the eye and at the corner of the lip.

I'd looked at Tim that way last Saturday night. We were all half in the bag, our friends flopped out on sofas and bean bag chairs, lamenting the Leafs and cheering at every hard check into the boards. A few times Tim caught me staring. I smiled. Travel had made him bold, his loyalties loose. With every beer I drank, I held his gaze a little longer.

I want Steve to be furious. To heave the wooden table over, grab me by the arms and give me a good shake. Instead, all we have are a bunch of empties, a stack of unplayed bingo cards and a lot of things that need to be said just lying there on the table. Steve rips off his used game paper and folds it into an origami hat. When we first met, I was impressed by his artistic sensibilities. But he makes the same thing each time. Just once I wish he'd make me something else, like a dog, a bunny, a longhaired wombat. I stare at him. He keeps his head down, concentrating on each crease.

"Can you not do that?" I ask.

"Why not?"

"It's annoying."

He keeps folding.

"I don't think you're in any position to be annoyed with me."

I want to grab his origami hat and set fire to it with Betty's lighter. Instead, I reach over and put my hand over his. I apply gentle pressure. My engagement ring has spun round and digs into his finger.

"Ouch."

"Just stop," I say, "please."

He stops and I let go of his hand. I'm anxious for my next drink. Betty and Frank have filled in the blanks of our conversation for most of the night. They've chattered away about the rising price of gas, about the crazy cost the neighbours are paying to put in an above ground pool, how the crocuses are starting to show, a bit too early, there might be another frost yet. I want to care, but don't.

Both parents return at the same time, Frank laying the drinks out while Betty shuffles her backside onto the bench like she's getting ready to hatch eggs. I congratulate her and poise my purple blotter for the next game. Steve drinks a good portion of his beer in one swig.

Up on stage, the sound of balls rattling against each other in the see-through barrel hypnotise me. *I 9! N 48*! The sounds in the concrete hall become muted, like when I lay back in the bath with my ears under the warm water, staring at the ceiling. The only thing I can hear is the voice inside my own head. I go through the list of things I'm supposed to do before the wedding:

Bikini / Eyebrow / Leg Wax
Manicure
Highlights
Write vows

I don't know a lot about church. My parents are Universalists—they believe in everything, which I think is a bit of a cop out, like throwing a dart at eternal salvation with your eyes closed and knowing you can't miss. So a couple of months ago, I researched wedding services for Steve's Anglican church. They're identical to the ones actors say when they get married on TV—they actually say *till death do us part*.

I told Steve I didn't want the Grim Reaper's sickle slicing the cake on our wedding day. *Till death do us part* is potentially too far away. I have four grandparents, all in their seventies and three great grandparents, all in their nineties. Most of them smoke and all of them drink. They just keep on living, no matter what they do to themselves. During harvest time, when he was sixty-six, Grandpa Gill fell on a pitchfork jumping from the rafters into a pile of hay. One of the tines went through the front and clean out the back. He walked into the house with it still in him. Gram said "You'll want to put some Dettol on that, kill the germs." Only after she'd dabbed the soaked cotton ball around the wound did she call the ambulance. Doctors couldn't believe the tine missed all his major organs, that there was no infection. My grandparents believe in the power of Dettol. When my dad heard the story he went to Shoppers Drug Mart and cleared off the shelves. Dettol plays a major role in their religious universality.

I've been writing my vows over and over in my head, on cocktail napkins, on the back of receipts. I spill drinks on them, wrap my chewed gum in them, lose them in the bottom of my purse. Steve keeps asking me if I'm done yet. I say, "Almost, almost."

N 42! O 19! B 70!

"Hey, your number's up," says Betty, stamping my card for me. Her velour suit is touching my leg. Normally, I find Betty quite cuddly, but suddenly I can't stand the thought of her red fuzzy trousers brushing against me and I clench my thigh muscle so we won't touch.

*

During *Coach's Corner*, Tim offered to help me carry the two-four of beer from the crawl space back to the rec room. We fumbled around in the dark, our fingers searching for the skate lace attached to the light switch. My arm brushed against his and the rest of my body lit up. I closed my eyes and leaned toward him. Our kiss became a hungry crush of lips and tongues, pressing our hips into each other like it was high school. When the third period started and we hadn't come back, Steve came to find us—both red in the face and his best friend sporting a boner through his jeans.

*

I look across the table at Steve. He runs his hand through his thick hair, pushes his glasses up on his nose even though they don't need pushing up. I can see the scar on his hairline, the one he got two years ago getting hit with a puck playing centre. I remember waiting for him outside the change rooms, jostling with the other puck bunnies. Steve came out of the door, his hair still wet from the shower, hockey bag slung over his shoulder. He headed straight to me, threw his free arm around my neck and kissed me hard on the mouth. It felt like we were in our own little bubble. Later, at the bar hanging out with the rest of the team, I dabbed his stitches with the travel-size Dettol I kept in my purse. He said he liked it when I played nurse. The memory makes me feel tender toward him. My throat constricts on second hand smoke and tears. I look at Betty and Frank and after years of knowing them, see them as strangers. I feel like that guy in the Pink Floyd song, Comfortably Numb. They are receding.

Betty nudges my elbow, leans over and blots all the numbers I've missed out.

"Ya gotta keep up honey, the numbers wait for no one," she says smiling, and goes back to her own card. The numbered balls continue to float. They knock and bounce off each other, spinning and turning till one lone ball pops and rolls down the tube. *N 15!* I try to freeze all the muscles in my face and tilt my head back so the tears resting on the rims of my eyes won't spill. It doesn't work.

I 32! G 26!

Steve looks up, "Abigail, hey, hey...." he reaches over to me, "it's going to be all right." He's looking into my eyes. *Yes*, I think, *it will*, but not in the way we'd planned.

At the same moment, Betty, oblivious to everything but the caller's voice, leans across the table and stamps Steve's card, then looks back at mine.

O 21! G 5!

"Bingo, Abi!" Betty says, "Can you believe your luck?"

Kimberly Peterson

Receiving an offer for publication continues to thrill me as much as it did the first time. After all, my goal is to share my experiences with others.

The idea for the poem "Molluscan Memory" came to me after watching window washers clean my office windows. Their squeegees reminded me of the snails my husband used to keep his aquarium clean. At the heart of the poem is an earlier incident where I crawled under my desk to cry after my boss berated me. It took me three years from idea to publication.

I write creative nonfiction (CNF) and poetry, following different editing processes for each. I can easily count the number of revisions for a CNF piece because I save each one. I edit poetry in a more continuous, incremental fashion. A particular stanza, line or word may sound awkward. While I wash dishes or fold laundry, I ruminate. I recite the poem aloud before going to bed and often wake up around 3:00 a.m. with the beginnings of a solution. It takes me several nights of sleep before a poem feels finished. I put it aside for a few days before reviewing line breaks and space on the page, checking for unnecessary words or lines, and ensuring clarity of pronouns (a particular problem for me). I workshopped this particular poem with two different groups, a year apart.

I usually submit poems to five journals at a time, ensuring the poem fits the journal. I submitted this poem to fourteen journals over two years before *In/Words Magazine & Press* published it in their anonymous "Work" issue. I had published with this journal before and felt my piece would fit well with their theme. The *In/Words* editors did not offer any editorial comments, which I understand is common for poetry.

Receiving an offer for publication continues to thrill me as much as it did the first time. After all, my goal is to share my experiences with others.

Molluscan Memory

By Kimberly Peterson
First published by *In/Words Magazine & Press*

Aquarium existence in an office,
glass walls and window panes.
A parade of people tapping
on an *always open* door.
Window washers claim
the best view.

Hired for radula sharpness,
to rasp against browning
sludge for that clean idea,

without the title I'm a slug
chewing through yesterday's
decayed novelties. Boss milks
anxieties to extract Tyrian
purple ink, regal flourishes
for her mundane briefs.

Clinging to walls, I inch along
to retreat under my desk. Heart
mussel memory pumps saline
through not yet inflated lungs.
Trickles from eyes shed double
helixed pieces of me searching
for a stream that floats to the briny
shores of birth.

But like a hermaphrodite,
I screw myself and remain,
as empty as a washed-up seashell,
selling out far from the seashore.

Margaret Nowaczyk

Three months later, on the morning of the day *The Antigonish Review* accepted it, another lit mag emailed its rejection notice. Two months later it was published by *TAR* without any changes.

"Matisse, the Sea, and Me" began as "Polynésie, la Mer" in the winter of 2016 from a prompt to write an essay about a work of art, comparing our own reaction to it with published critical assessments.

There was no doubt which artist I would choose. My research included *Matisse the Master*, his voluminous biography by Hilary Spurling, and half a dozen albums from my university library discussing his last artistic period—the cutouts. Later, I workshopped the essay during my MFA nonfiction course where a classmate suggested the final title.

I submitted the essay to a CNF contest with a prestigious magazine, but it did not place. I was very upset that it wasn't chosen for publication (if the editor chooses, the magazine does publish pieces submitted to its contests even if they do not make the shortlist). I might have cried when I received the terse form notification thanking me for submitting to their contest.

But I immediately sent it off to three other literary magazines, one of which rejected it within a week. Three months later, on the morning of the day *The Antigonish Review* accepted it, another lit mag emailed its rejection notice. Two months later it was published by *TAR* without any changes.

I was in a major submitting slump before I took Lit Mag Love, and the lessons helped me send out my pieces again.

Matisse, the Sea, and Me

By Margaret Nowaczyk
First published by *The Antigonish Review*

On an April afternoon fragrant with rain-damp chestnut leaves, I visited Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, the smell wafting through the open Plexiglass panels encasing the escalators. In the permanent exhibit on the fifth floor, I drifted from canvas to canvas exhilarated by the kaleidoscopic colours of Kandinsky's circles, Gauguin's bold palette, Cezanne's pure greens and oranges. But when I turned a corner between two halls I froze as if splashed by a cresting wave. I had been plunged into the waves of an ocean.

White shapes, only vaguely reminiscent of live creatures but unquestionably marine, floated on an expanse of alternating azure and indigo rectangles. I recognized a shark and a squid's tentacles groping in the waves. A bird-shape—a frigatebird? an albatross?—soared in the middle of a kelp forest and yet—strangely—it appeared appropriately placed. A smoothly cut, continuous garland of floating seaweed fronds surrounded the edges of the panel. The larger shapes in the middle—the bird, the shark, the island of kelp—had cruder, ragged edges that marked the continuous negative space of the checkered background. The two-metre high, three-metre long panel filled the pure white wall in front of me. I stared, motionless.

It was a place I had always wanted to visit—the South Seas. Suddenly I was wading knee-deep in the warm pellucid waters, my toes squirming in the sugar-white sand, my calves tickled by schools of tiny fish, the sun beating on my back, coconut palms rustling over my head. Surrounded by a turquoise sea I floated and stared at the powder-blue sky as if peering into a shimmering bowl. My childhood dream come true.

In the right bottom corner of the panel, in flowing black letters: Matisse 46. Beside the blond wood frame, on a small white plaque: *Polynésie, la mer*.

I learned the word "lagoon" when the Wilson children's magic bed skidded on the sand of a South Seas island. Seven or eight years old, I was reading Mary Norton's *The Magic Bedknob*. The word "lagoon," *laguna* in Polish, enchanted me—it was foreign yet easy to spell and pronounce but it was the landscape that hijacked my imagination and dreams for years to come: the coral forests in the transparent waters,

the anemones shivering their tentacles as fish darted in and out, the same yet different blues of the sky and the water, the white sand.

Even before I learned to read, I had entertained myself by poring over the thirteen tomes of my parents' *Great Polish Encyclopaedia.* My favourites were the colour plates of coral reefs and deep-sea fauna, and of aquarium fishes. There was even a plate devoted to kelp and seaweed—green, brown, and shades of yellow. I traced my finger along diagrams of anemones, sea cucumbers, starfish, fishes of all shapes and sizes, and of hues unseen in my grey world: turquoise, celadon, cerulean, oranges and pinks of all hues. The waters of faraway lagoons lapped gently in my imagination. From Communist Poland one couldn't travel any farther than the South Pacific, both figuratively and literally: nothing was more devoid of colour than a communist apartment building complex in the 70s. But on the other side of the globe, iridescent violet fishes darted between the fluttering tentacles of pink-orange anemones, and dainty crimson seahorses and yellow sea dragons glimmered among fingers of the coral. A rainbow paradise beneath the impassive surface of the ocean. Ocean. O-ce-an—the susurration of the waves captured in the word itself.

Other words also kept me in thrall. Atoll. Coral reef. Lunar tides. The Gulf Stream. Starfish. Mother-of-pearl. Mollusks. Parrot-fish. And the names of the archipelagos and islands: Tahiti and Moorea. Bora-Bora. Palau. Polynesia.

One early December dusk I stood in front of a bookstore window lit from within like a huge aquarium. I was five or six years old. *A Walk in the Depths*, a marine biology book with a cover photo of a pink-orange sea anemone and a striped hermit crab under the dome of blue waters—just like I had imagined an atoll would look—was displayed right beside the glass pane. I scrunched my nose to the glass, my breath fogging it. The colours glowed magically amongst the grey propaganda pamphlets and school textbooks bound in dull pastels. I demanded my parents buy the book for me. I cajoled and wheedled, possibly threw a tantrum, and then begged until my father finally brought it home a few days later. I flipped through the pages of the slim volume, mesmerized by the pictures of jellyfish with see-through blood, microscopic diatoms, and pink octopuses. Oh, to dive into waters that teemed with such creatures, to have the fish swim between my fingers. To see a real orange hermit crab living inside a spiral whelk shell topped with a violaceous anemone.

I wanted to go to Tahiti.

Matisse visited Tahiti in 1930 at the age of sixty. For years before the trip, he had felt creatively blocked. He believed that his brain and eyes had fallen into a creative rut, and only an infusion of new stimuli—light, colour and shapes—would shake him out.

After visiting New York City and Chicago he set off from San Francisco on March 20. The ship was RMS *Tahiti*—a battered old English mailboat with a surly captain, dismal food, and the dull company of Australian businessmen and sheep traders. He revived only as the ship crossed the equator and the hue of the sea lightened from dark blue to the blue of the morpho butterfly—a hue that Matisse considered his talisman.

At first he seemed irritated with the unchanging beauty of his new surroundings: "It was both superb and boring. [...] the weather is beautiful at sunrise and it does not change until night. Such immutable happiness is tiring." But he was also dazzled, especially by the light, which he compared to gazing into a golden goblet.

He travelled extensively around the island by car and was enchanted by the colours and the bounty of the local markets, the shades and hues and textures of the Tahitian flora, and the never-ending spectacle of the tropical sunsets. Two months into his stay, he sailed to the Fakarava atoll—a strip of coral reef, about three hundred yards wide, enclosing an inland sea eighty miles in diameter. Here, Matisse spent whole days swimming and diving in the lagoon, gazing into the translucent blue waters that shimmered over the banks of coral. He described the waters as grey-green jade shading to absinthe, peppermint green and blue.

He glided among fish "glinting like enamel or Chinese porcelain, minute, jewelled specks and streaks of colour swarming round [his] legs." Diving mask on, he dunked his head in and out of the waters, training his eyes on the different luminosities and saturations of water and of sky. Years later, when he summed up his memories of the atoll, he wrote of its waters, the soughing of the trade winds, the silk-like coconut palms and of "the overall impression it gave of power, youth, fullness and completion." He revered the austere simplicity of the outports: "the sky and sea, coconut palms and fish—that's all there is to see—with a pure radiance that makes them incomparably precious."

But it would be almost a decade and a half before Polynesian fauna and flora, and the sea itself flooded onto his canvases.

The first sea I experienced was the Baltic. A memory of holding onto somebody's sinewy broad back—my grandfather's?—as he swam, or maybe waded, in salty water. Pale beige dunes traced the horizon behind a wooden pier. Gulls cawed over waves topped with silvery foam. Far from tropical, the cold Baltic was more grey than blue—gunmetal-blue. Dark gold sand layered upon a bed of tiny pebbles about six inches below the surface. Those pebbles provided a perfect substrate for paving the courtyards of the sandcastles and the streets in the mud cities the kids erected, every single one surrounded by a moat. Brown, reddish, maroon, pearly white, and yellow, rough and gritty between the child's fingertips digging wells, and against the tiny palms smoothing out the stones. The beach cut a wide swath between

the sea-line and out-of-bounds dunes. Signs forbade entrance to the dunes every fifty metres; the only access to the beach was by means of trails that led perpendicularly across the sandy ridge from the tall pine forests.

Few shells dotted the Baltic beach, all of them those of bivalves: bulbous mussels and thin tellins. Ivory-coloured, fluted ovals the size of my thumbnail, with a pinkish hue on their inner surface. The prize find were two tellin shells still hinged together, like butterfly wings; the larger the better. But I wanted whelk shells with inner coils enamelled a vivid pink-orange. I wanted spiky sea urchins, and crabs, and sea anemones. Starfish and coral. Conch.

The Baltic offered jellyfish and amber. The Baltic moon jellies—translucent domes of quivering goo—swarmed the waves by the thousand every August; their four horseshoe-shaped gonads turning more and more brilliant as they reached maturity. Neon blue, vivid violet, hot pink. We caught them in our cupped hands and our mothers would yank our elbows, shouting "You'll get stung!" as they beat them out of our grip, the poor creatures pulverized.

"They grow their bodies back," my father said when, in tears, I brought a tattered fragment to him. "You get more that way." I think he confused them with earthworms, but at the time I accepted this as an example of eternal life.

And amber. The gold of the sea. The petrified resin of the evergreen trees that blanketed the Baltic region forty-five million years ago. Children and adults alike scoured the pebbles along the beach in search of the buttery yellow and light orange nuggets: semi-transparent, they glowed with an inner fire when lifted to the sun. Lighter than stones, they had a smooth, almost yielding, surface that fingertips slid off. In the seaside museum I admired honey-hued pieces the size of my child's fist, a perfect beetle or fly preserved in their centres, but I never found any myself. I was either unlucky or not patient enough.

Pictorially speaking, Matisse returned empty-handed from his two-month sojourn in Tahiti. His entire output while there comprised one oil sketch and about twenty pen-and-ink drawings of views from his hotel room, coconut palms, lagoons, and a few people. For almost fifteen years, before he transformed the walls of his Paris apartment with the designs for *Océanie, la mer* and *Océanie, le ciel*, the two designs that preceded *Polynésie*, Matisse's creative use of Tahitian memories was sporadic. The ink-and-pen drawings inspired illustrations for *Pasiphaë,* and two Tahiti-themed sculptures. It was as if the radiance, the hues, and the textures had to be digested by his subconscious, and only when metabolized into their primary elements and colours—what Matisse called 'essences'—could they find their way into his art. Not unlike the way I am now unearthing experiences from my past to populate these pages.

In 1945, Matisse was commissioned to design two tapestries for the famed Gobelins Manufactory. By this time, he had written to his daughter that he had gone as far as he could with oil painting. Visitors to

his apartment found him seated in his wheelchair—after two surgeries during the Second World War, he was left with an abdominal hernia that made walking difficult—a huge pair of scissors in his hand, carving boldly into sheets of paper painted in bright primary colours. The switch to cutouts might have been dictated partly by his deteriorating state of health: standing by an easel was out of the question.

For *Océanie, la mer,* he cut white shapes from a block of writing paper, the only material available in Paris in 1946. Beginning with a paper swallow, he asked his night nurse to pin it over a stain on the wall. The apartment had not been redecorated for twenty years, and was covered by a pale lining fabric that had darkened over time to a warm sandy brown. A fish followed. Whenever he suffered from insomnia he would cut out a new shape and direct the nurse to pin it to the wall. The design spread and spilled over the doorway, rounded the corner to flood the adjacent wall.

Marine life teemed in the room as if in an aquarium: loops and trailing fronds of seaweed surrounded swooping birds, dolphins, sharks, jellyfish, and starfish. Elements were moved around, sometimes removed altogether, to achieve a balance, a final aesthetic that satisfied his sense of composition.

The cutouts, while appearing fragile and ethereal, were at the same time tangible, palpable. Once pinned onto the wall or the canvas they trembled with the breeze, shook with footsteps or the rolling of his wheelchair, as if buoyed by waves stoked by a gentle breeze across an atoll.

Was Matisse remembering the Tahitian twilight during those sleepless nights in Paris? Maybe the colours of the tropics saturated his charcoal nights the way they filled my grey childhood days. Did he hear the breeze tousling the palm fronds, and the waves lapping the coral reefs under the starry equatorial sky? Maybe the stiff paper reminded him of the rough edges of coral he fingered in Tahiti, the crunch of scissors, of the crunch of shells under his feet on the beach. Memories rising up from the deep crevices of the subconscious like strings of air bubbles racing to the surface of the sea.

I can sit for hours watching waves pulsate on a beach. Rocky, sandy, pebbly, white, coral-pink, or lava-black—it doesn't matter as long as the water is salty and the air tangy. And even though I do enjoy luxuriating on Caribbean sands, I prefer the colder beaches of the temperate zones—Tofino on Vancouver Island or Cape Ann in Massachusetts—where the sea is greyer, the waves higher, the breeze cooler and saltier, the beige sand more earthy, more primal. The whisper of the waves induces a calm that eludes me in the city, which I search for in vain on a mountain hike or wading through waist-high meadow grasses. It is the combination of the sound and of the scent of briny seawater—the iodine, the microelements—and the breeze, which brings those scents into my olfactory system that resonates in my limbic system, in the deep emotional pathways of the brain.

Why do I love the sea so much?

Does the lull of the waves calm just me or does it affect all human beings this way? Does it remind

me of the sounds I heard while in my mother's womb? Swooshes of borborygmi in my mother's gut? Not rhythmic enough. Her heartbeat? Too fast. It must be her breathing I heard from inside her body. During prenatal life is the only time that we hear somebody else's breath from within. We can hear others' breaths transmitted through air that separates us, but it is only in the womb that our developing ears—the snail-like cochlea of the inner ear—are exposed to the incessant murmuring of our mothers' lungs. Solid tissues like the liver and the muscles of the diaphragm and the uterus transmit sound beautifully, faithfully, much better than air in the negative spaces between us and other humans after we are born. Air dulls, dissipates sounds. Sound transmitted through solid tissue has a lower timbre, lower frequencies, it is deeper, softer, and yet more powerful, resonating in the fetus's bones and heart. Maybe our mother's breath resonates within our 'gut brain'—the two layers of neurons filigreed throughout the wall of the digestive tract from the mouth to the anus through the esophagus, stomach, small and large intestines. Does this continuous plexus of nervous tissue remember these primordial sounds, encoding our mother's breathing into our beings? Do we find that rhythm again in the sounds of the sea waves?

And that wondrous internal sea of amniotic fluid, in which we float for forty weeks. The fluid that dulls the sounds of our mothers' bodies and the hubbub of life beyond their boundaries, that protects us from bumps and bounces of external life. Warm, buoyant, it lulls us; its smell fecund, luxuriant, earthy when it splashes onto the hospital room floor during labor. Seawater smells differently—of tangy, biting iodine salts and saltwater creatures' last days alive—but maybe in both we recognize the similar primal forces of nature and life. When I get off the plane on Hispaniola or Guadeloupe, when I walk the beach in Pacifica at sunset or on Naxos at sunrise, I fill my lungs with this smell, suck it into all the crevices of my body.

I wonder if Matisse felt that, sitting on the sandy slip of Fakarava atoll.

The designs for *Océanie, la mer* and *Océanie, le ciel* were rejected by the Gobelins as being too difficult for their weavers. They claimed the sandy-brown background was impossible to match and Matisse began work on a pair of alternate designs. The new order requested a blue colour scheme. The turquoise and verdigris sheets his assistant found after scouring stationery stores in Paris became the checkerboard backgrounds for *Polynésie, la mer* and *Polynésie, le ciel*.

Was it the colour scheme of *Polynésie, la mer* that affected me that day in Paris? The calm background in alternating shades of blue carved into a continuous negative space by the white shapes? The white was not uniform; not all the life forms were cut from single sheets of paper—I noticed blotches of pale celadon, varied pinks, and a coffee-stain beige in the larger shapes. For those, Matisse glued paper sheets together, and as they aged they acquired different hues, their whiteness becoming less stark, more natural.

In Matisse's later artwork the organic and aquatic images from his trip appeared in a series of 'signs'—increasingly summary outlines of the objects, a distillation down to an 'essence' of the object.

Whatever he was working on—a leaf, a snail—he drew numerous times until the 'essence' became apparent, until he was satisfied with its meaning. Only then did he pick up the scissors and free the image from the paper—the scissors held wide-open, carving, never clipping—through the sheet of pure colour. "Cutting straight into colour reminds me of the direct carving of the sculptor," he wrote. The medium was more physical than painting—the resistance of the painted paper pushed against the shears.

On the *Polynésie, la mer* panels, to mark the ocean surface, he arranged the fronds of seaweed beneath long, thin rectangles of white paper. There were four such figures in the panel: three close to the top and the fourth—illogically—almost in the centre of the composition. Equally illogically, a fish hovered above a diving bird. The sea was vast, had many surfaces; space was warped in the ocean; life there existed on many levels. But the seaweed hung down vertically, not pulled by currents or battered by waves. The waters were calm and, in turn, I was soothed.

While my retinas feasted on the white shapes hovering amid turquoise and indigo waters my visual cortex processed neural impulses. Deep down inside the sulci of my limbic system they met my memories and, deep in my gut, they sparked a remembrance of smells and sounds—a near-physical experience.

Three years after I saw *Polynésie, la mer,* I snorkelled in a reef in the Caribbean archipelago of Turks and Caicos. After a lifetime of waiting, a quarter of a century after the word "lagoon" floated into my consciousness, I snapped on a diving mask and waded toward the coral reef that abutted the beach. Thirty metres from the shore, snorkel between my teeth, I dove in.

The silence surprised me: had I thought about it I would have known that there would be no sounds under water. The rumble of the waves, the calls of the pelicans patrolling the beach disappeared the moment the shells of my ears submerged. Inside, the sea was serious, quiet, thoughtful. Sunlight, scattered by the surface waves, dappled the sandy bottom as if with a shimmering of coins. Madrepores and brain coral, staghorns and tubes of pillar coral shadowed the sand in irregular splotches about three meters below me. As I floated, clouds of silvery fish the size of my little finger darted around me; larger solitary fish flew in and out of crevices: bright yellow and striped beige and tan, some with a brilliant double violet stripe, some pitch black with bright green eyes. I spotted a green sea turtle. As it slowly paddled away, its underbelly a dull yellow, it resembled a graceful, if somewhat stout, angel.

But where were the hues of those old *Encyclopaedia* plates? The pinks, oranges and purples? The brilliant rubies and turquoises and emeralds? Everything looked as if wrapped in a bluish-green mist. The coral clusters were various shades of grey, as if washed too many times, no red or pink in sight; if it weren't for the sun, they would have been the colours of the housing projects of my childhood. Were those old illustrations only an artist's vision? Or did the brilliant colours of the underwater live only in my and Matisse's imaginations?

When I surfaced, the waters *were* jade and turquoise under the brilliant blue sky; the sand of the beach glared in the sun. Floating on my back with the gentle wind brushing my face I rediscovered the atolls and lagoons I had dreamed of in my childhood. Two days later, when I dove in the cerulean blue of the deeper waters on the other side of the island, I found an empty conch shell the size of a football. Its thick, wide, salmon-tinted lip, rough on the outside and smooth and glassy where it coiled into an internal staircase, invited my imagination to roam again.

Polynésie, la mer, 1946.
Glued paper enhanced with gouche and mounted on canvas.
196 x 314 cm.
Centre Pompidou, Paris.

Patricia Sandberg

Simon Webster, editor and publisher, contacted me within a week of receiving my submission. My short story would be published and would include my photograph. I was thrilled.

I wrote this piece for a competition that required a strong connection between a story and an image. I chose a photograph I had taken of pots of pigment in a Peruvian market. Colour is very emotive, and I thought it would be interesting to use changing colour to reflect an evolving relationship.

Having taken Rachel Thompson's Lit Mag Love course, I knew I should send this story to multiple sources. *The Cabinet of Heed* was one of the literary journals I reviewed. I liked the journal's format, the quality and variety of the work it publishes, the receptiveness to both seasoned and new writers, and the fact that it is published monthly online. Simon Webster, editor and publisher, contacted me within a week of receiving my submission. My short story would be published and would include my photograph. I was thrilled.

The submission process is very simple and there were no fees. Simon Webster reviews every submission and responds very quickly.

The Colour of Us

By Patricia Sandberg
First published by *The Cabinet of Heed*

I hold the postcard in my hand. Pots of pigment in a South American market array on a worn blanket spread on hard ground. Vessels of intensity.

And I think of you, how I might paint who we were.

Carmine, the red of crushed cochineal insects. Yellow, like puree, the pigment made from urine of India's cattle starved on mango leaves. Lapis lazuli blue, a mineral inlaid into Tutankhamun's funeral mask. White of powdered chalk, a void of colour. Black of charcoal, burned matter.

Pigment cupped for protection or to prevent escape.

...

I see us as the painting begins, take up a pencil, its sides rough against my fingers, its point blunt.

Emerald burns with jealousy. Gold turns to sulphur. Ruby catches fire. Essences lose distinction when blended, fade when diluted and bleed when they run. Canvas is a material for display or cover.

I sketch, rough and hurried with lines crossing yet unconnected – the edges of us are yet to be determined. We can't get enough of one another. Flesh is electric. Lightning and storm. A thicker brush mixes the paint, creates tone. This is for the underpainting. The part that lies beneath what comes next. We move in together.

Calm. An image. The beach, water sky blue. My head is resting on the warmth of your belly, feeling it rise with your breath. The sun is like the hands of a healer over us. *I am your life*, you say. *And your life is mine.*

The painting evolves. I lay a wash of yellow's harmony over the canvas but the rushed lines of us push through, jar against the soft glow, against my hand that directs the brush to fill in the lines and round out edges. I try to paint a memory of comfort in our world but elements unbidden emerge and interject into the scene I am creating. Darker hues insert themselves. Lines thicken and harden. Edges fall down cliffs.

Random script, a cacography that's hard to read, appears in the corners of the canvas. Questions. Small things. *What time did you come home from the office? Who did you eat lunch with? Where are you going*? At first, bright—jokey, like your face.

You code your words but I'm learning.

I want us to be together more, you say.

Dove becomes cloud, and silver, slate. Your shape reveals in small distinct strokes of the brush while mine begins to dissolve.

You're finally home. Slow bus?

I pretend it is jest though your eyes don't laugh. Your words decipher.

Don't dress like that. Don't act like that. Don't be you.

I protest and you storm out. I wait for hours in the dark for the door to open so I can apologize. No dress is worth fighting over. I become beige.

Graffiti scrawls across the painting. Lavender and lilac yield to the bruise of mahogany.

Who was that calling?

You don't believe it was my friend, my mother, work. I try rearranging your colours, examining the painting through your eyes but find myself sinking into your pot of pigment.

Don't you fucking look at me that way.

I adopt shadow, look away.

Coral and watermelon convert to garnet and brick, and my pot has a rim that prevents flight.

...

A postcard is something you send from a distance.

I push aside the pots of paint. Lift a broader brush. Swish its bristles in a cup of water, start at the centre of the canvas and work outwards in slow, swimming strokes unwinding the vortex that drew me in.

And flush away the harsh colour, the bully lines of you.

Jody Baltessen

Lit Mag Love helped me to map a way forward. Though I am not as deliberate as I might be, I continue to apply the strategies I learned in that course because periodic submissions bring work to a certain kind of closure. With two acceptances now, I am beginning to trust myself, my writing, and more importantly, all the wonderful readers so open to receiving our work.

Sometimes my work as an archivist and my call to write coalesce. When this happens, as it did for this piece, my writing takes a critical view of the archive, its cachet as a cultural institution, the presumption of order, permanence and control so often associated with the archive, and parallel ideas of memory and forgetting.

This poem arrived because the archive I work in lacks proper storage conditions. The records it houses have long been exposed to daily dips and spikes in temperature and humidity—a process that slowly breaks down the integrity of recordkeeping media. As I worked on a plan to deal with these deficiencies, ideas about the fragile nature of materials in the archive began to surface in my writing.

I loved the writerly content on the *The New Quarterly (TNQ)* website and felt that my work might fit in well, so I submitted the piece to *TNQ* as part of the final exercise for Lit Mag Love. Just before hitting send, I changed the title because I thought I needed to explain the poem by adding a qualifying note. Later, when *TNQ* contacted me to ask if the piece was available for publication, they asked if I would be willing to simplify the title. Barbara Carter, the lead poetry editor, said the poetry editors felt I should trust my readers. This advice echoed an earlier response to a series of poems on matters archival, one that encouraged me to use the vernacular of archival theory for the richness that specific languages convey.

I have to say that this piece would likely not have been submitted if not for Lit Mag Love. Until I took the course, I did not have a routine or process for drafting, editing and doing something with a piece of writing. Lit Mag Love helped me to map a way forward. Though I am not as deliberate as I might be, I continue to apply the strategies I learned in that course because periodic submissions bring work to a certain kind of closure. With two acceptances now, I am beginning to trust myself, my writing, and more importantly, all the wonderful readers so open to receiving our work.

Notes on Materials

By Jody Baltessen
First published by *The New Quarterly*

I.

wedged tight on shelves in dry back rooms
our leather-bound volumes sigh

flakes of their skin – defatted dehaired – fall to the floor
stain the broom, red brown

heedless we wrestle them free, press open their brittle boards, crack

their spines

to savour the supple paper within

we want the words, their invocation, the in-drawn breath preceding
their commitment to the page

II.

likewise our letters on their oxidized paper
suffer – their losses incremental

embrittled
they shed corners, split mid-cursive along fold lines

leave us hanging, our discourse

disjointed

we insert
our words
here

our thoughts
impose

there

III.

and in their mylar sleeves our photographs demise

their silver salts unbound

migrate upward

rearrange to blue, a mirrored sheen
refracting composition
subject, texture, tone

that cherished countenance

all vanish before our eyes

Bios

Jody Baltessen

Jody Baltessen is a Winnipeg archivist and poet. As an archivist, she has worked with both private and government record collections. Her writing involves these records – their character, organization, materiality, and layered meanings – as well as their placement in the archive, and the history of the archive itself. Her work appears in *Prairie Fire* and *The New Quarterly*, and was shortlisted for the 2016-2017 Gwendolyn MacEwen/Exile Poetry Prize.

Monica Calderon

Monica was born in the Philippines and moved to Canada in 2008. After graduating from the University of Santo Tomas in Manila with a BFA, she worked in animation, publishing and editing, and as a graphic designer and trainer. Currently she is working for a financial technology company and has a side hustle as a graphic designer and web developer. She also dabbles in photography. Check out her portfolio at monicadesigns.ca.

Ellen Chang-Richardson

Ellen Chang-Richardson is a writer and poet of Taiwanese/Cambodian-Chinese descent. Her work has appeared in *Ricepaper Magazine*, *my (small press) writing day*, and she has chapbook of poems forthcoming with Anstruther Press (Spring 2020). Formerly the Events Manager and Assistant Curator at Barbara Edwards Contemporary in Toronto, Ellen is a technical writer at the University of Ottawa and the founder of Little Birds Poetry, an editing workshop series based in Ottawa and Toronto. You can find out more about her at ehjchang.com.

Elizabeth Cone

Bruce Springsteen says, "We all have stories we're living and telling ourselves. There's a time when that narrative has to be broken because you've run out of freedom, you've run out of places to go." Elizabeth Cone writes essays and memoirs, and has a particular interest in the power of narrative and memory, and what happens when you change your own narrative. She teaches writing at Suffolk County Community College on Long Island. Her work is forthcoming or has appeared in *RiverSedge and The Doctor T.J. Eckleburg Review*.

Heather Diamond

Heather Diamond is an American expat living in Hong Kong where she writes memoir and creative non-fiction. Originally from Washington State, she has also lived in Arkansas, Texas, and Hawaii. A recovering academic with degrees in art, English, and American Studies, she has worked as a bookseller, folklorist, college teacher and museum curator. Her creative non-fiction has been shortlisted in the *Room* Magazine Creative Non-Fiction Contest, received honorable mention in the Solas Best Travel Writing Awards, and can be found in *Memoir Magazine* and *Sky Island Journal*. She is working on two memoirs: one about her intercultural marriage in Hong Kong and the other about alternative living in Arkansas during the 1970s. She blogs about writing and life in Hong Kong at heatherdiamondwriter.com

Shirley Harshenin

Shirley Harshenin writes from her home in the Okanagan Valley, British Columbia. She believes in angels, caffeine, and the human spirit's extraordinary resilience. Her work has been published in *Canadian Writer's Journal*, *Room Magazine*, *Contrary Magazine*, *The Journal of Compressed Creative Arts*, *Entropy: Woven*, and *Haiku Journal*, and is forthcoming in *Unlost Journal*.

Julie Hart

Originally from Minnesota, Julie Hart has lived in London, Zurich and Tokyo and now, New York City. Her work can be found in *Brooklyn Poets Anthology (Volume 1)*, *Anti-Heroin Chic, Beautiful Losers*, *Juniper, Rogue Agent*, *Noble/Gas Qtrly*, *Thimble* and at juliehartwrites.com. She is a founder of the poetry collective, Sweet Action, with Mirielle Clifford and Emily Blair.

Yolande House

Yolande House's creative writing has appeared in or is forthcoming from literary magazines such as *The Rumpus*, *Joyland*, *PRISM international*, and *Grain*. Her *Entropy* essay was selected as one of the magazine's "Best of 2018," and she was a finalist for *Creative Nonfiction*'s "Sex" issue. She teaches Healing Through Writing workshops online, based on her *Hippocampus* Magazine craft article on writing about trauma in a safe(r) way. She can be reached at yolandehouse.com or on Twitter @herstorian. Currently, she's revising a completed childhood memoir.

Dawn Hurley-Chapman

Dawn Hurley-Chapman writes in between serving up coffee and homemade soup at her cafe in Toronto's east end. She draws inspiration from her world travels, her documentary film work, and the inspiring, off-beat people she has met along the way.

She recently studied Creative Writing at the University of Toronto and has published in *Understorey Magazine*, *Cargo Literary*, *The Feathertale Review*, *Women Travel: A Rough Guide Special,* and *Quality Women's Fiction* (UK). In 2017 she was awarded a Toronto Arts Council grant for her historical novel in progress, *The Orphan's Edict*, concerning the Yemeni-Jewish exodus from Sana'a to Israel.

Tamara Jong

Tamara Jong is a Montreal-born mixed-race writer of Chinese and European ancestry. Her work has appeared in *Ricepaper Magazine*, *Room*, *Carte Blanche*, *The New Quarterly*, Invisible Publishing and *Body & Soul; Stories for Skeptics and Seekers*. She is a graduate of The Writer's Studio (Simon Fraser University). You can find her on Twitter @bokchoygurl.

Michelle Kelm

Michelle Kelm is a Vancouver-based writer. She has an MFA in creative writing from the University of British Columbia and is currently working on a collection of flash fiction and prose poetry. If the big one hits Vancouver anytime soon she will die underneath an excess of books and plants, alongside an old dog with a bad ticker and a badass attitude. You can find her at michellekelm.com

Lina Lau

Lina Lau is a creative non-fiction writer from Toronto, Canada. Her work can be seen in *Hippocampus* Magazine, *carte blanche*, *Little Fiction Big Truths* and *Skirt Quarterly*. Her story, "High Tension Line" was longlisted for the 2019 CNFC/*Humber Literary Review* creative nonfiction contest. She writes when she can in between the moments of parenting her two young daughters.

Rachel Laverdiere

Inspired by the vast skies of Saskatchewan, Rachel Laverdiere anticipates that calm will erupt into thunderstorms, flocking geese will disappear into the sunset, and northern lights will traipse across the blackened stage. When pastures bloom into bouquets of crocus and sage, she forgets the chaos of a world that spins too quickly and remembers the pleasure of breathing. Published in journals such as *The New Quarterly, Filling Station* and *Blank Spaces*, Rachel's writing often incorporates birds. To learn more about what she's up to, visit rachellaverdiere.com.

Ludi Leiva

Ludi Leiva is a multidisciplinary artist. Born in Toronto, Canada to a Guatemalan mother and a Slovak-Canadian father, she currently lives in Berlin, Germany. Her previous illustration clients include Tumblr, Coachella, *Vice*, Planned Parenthood, and Condé Nast. In addition to her visual art, Ludmila is also a writer and a past Lambda Literary fellow. She is currently working on a collection of short stories that explore many of the themes she interrogates in her visual work.

Hege A. Jakobsen Lepri

Hege A. Jakobsen Lepri is Norwegian-Canadian translator and writer living in Toronto. She had her first story published in English in 2013 and has since chosen that as her writing language. She writes fiction, CNF and poetry and her writing has been featured in *J Journal*, *Sycamore Review*, *subTerrain Magazine*, *Agnes and True*, *Forge Literary Magazine*, *Fjords Review*, *Gone Lawn*, *Grain Magazine*, *Typehouse Literary Review*, *Hobart*, *Crack the Spine*, *Carve Magazine*, *The New Quarterly*, *Prism international* and elsewhere. Find more of her writing on her website: hegeajlepri.ca

Rowan McCandless

Long-listed for The Journey Prize, Rowan McCandless has won awards for her fiction and CNF; most recently The Constance Rooke Creative Nonfiction Prize. Her work has appeared in literary journals such as *The Fiddlehead*, *The Malahat Review*, *Prairie Fire*, *Room*, *Skin Deep: Race and Culture Magazine*, and the anthology, *Black Writers Matter*. Writing from Treaty One territory, Rowan likes to spend time with family and friends, and explore nature with her dog, Toby. Daughter of the African diaspora, she is writing a hybrid memoir-in-essay, and a short story collection in which readers can expect the unexpected.

Margaret Nowaczyk

Margaret Nowaczyk's short stories appear in *Numero Cinq*, *Broken Pencil*, *Prairie Fire*, and *The New Quarterly*; her award-winning non-fiction is published in *Geist*, *The Antigonish Review*, and *Grain Magazine* as well as in American and, in translation, in German and Polish magazines. A professor at McMaster University, she works as an academic pediatric geneticist. She is completing a collection of short stories and a memoir, and lives in Hamilton, ON, with her husband and two sons.

Deanna Partridge-David

Deanna Partridge-David is an emerging writer of mixed European and Secwépemc ancestry. She lives in the suburbs of what is now known as Vancouver as a guest on unceded Kwikwetlem Territory with her husband and two children. When she's not writing or playing with her family, she can be found stop-motion animating adorable puppets for children's television.

Kimberly Peterson

Kimberly Peterson's experience as a nurse working with chronically ill and palliative patients informs the grief, loss, resilience, and joy of daily life she explores in the manuscript of poetry she's working on. Read more of her work on kimberlypeterson.ca

Prue Rains

Prue Rains is a retired sociology professor living in Montreal. After years of academic writing, she now paints and writes creative nonfiction. She is completing a memoir about her 10,000-mile trip across America in the summer of 2001. "A Planet Called Montana" is an excerpt.

Patricia Sandberg

Patricia Sandberg escaped a law career and became a writer. Her short stories have been shortlisted and longlisted in literary competitions. She is also writing a novel. Her nonfiction book *Sun Dogs and Yellowcake* about a uranium mine won two awards in the United States and was a finalist twice in Canada.

Lori Sebastianutti

Lori is a writer and teacher from Stoney Creek, Ontario. She has been published in *Savvy Mom*, *The Mabelhood*, *Moms and Stories* and most recently, *The Hamilton Review of Books*. She is the managing editor of the *Fertility Matters Canada* blog. You can read more of her work at lorisebastianutti.com.

A.K. Shakour

A.K. Shakour is a 4th year university student studying English Literature, with a minor in creative writing. She has self-published a book of poetry, called *Exposed Bones & Broken Poems*. She has a poem published in UBC Slam Poetry's Third Annual Chapbook, *The Year We Became*. In addition, her work can be found on *The Garden Statuary* and *The Foundationalist Journal*. She has one dog. Her favorite food is banana pancakes and she lives in Vancouver, Canada.

Rachel Thompson

Rachel Thompson is an author, editor, and online instructor, but you might call her a creative connector. Her courses prepare writers to publish their most luminous writing. She's the creator of the Lit Mag Love course, podcast, and (forthcoming) book. Rachel is a former Managing Editor with *Room*, where she remains on the editorial collective (and will edit upcoming issue 43.3, *Neurodivergence*). She's a graduate of the Writer's Studio at Simon Fraser University (SFU) in Vancouver. Her book of poetry, *Galaxy*, was published by Anvil Press in 2011, when it won SFU's First Book Competition.

Mary Vlooswyk

Mary has been writing for five years. Her poetry was shortlisted for Quattro Books' inaugural "Best New Poet in Canada" contest in March 2018. She placed third in a Canada 150 poetry contest. Her writing has appeared in *Asahi Shimbun, Mothers Always Write*, *FreeFall*, *GUSTS*, *Moonbathing*, and *The Wild Musette*, as well as *Haiku Canada* anthologies, *A NeverEnding Story Anthology*, *Started By Joy Anthology* and *Gift of Silence: A Haiku Tribute to Leonard Cohen*. Mary loves and is inspired by the outdoors. She is a student of cello but has an eclectic playlist.

Sharon Dale Wexler

Sharon Dale Wexler's teaching and writing have won fellowships from The Cullman Center Institute for Teachers, New Visions, and *The New York Times*. Her fiction is published in *Promethean*, *Neworld Review* and the *Addiction/Recovery Anthology* from Madness Muse Press. She is a graduate of the MA Writing Program at City College of New York, The University of Florida and has studied with Gordon Lish. She has completed a manuscript.

Andrea Schwenke Wyile

Andrea Schwenke Wyile is a first-generation born Canadian Settler, east coast bibliophile and writer. Being nearly emerged from academic bindweed, she is committed to slowness and growing roots and awareness in the greater web of relations. Her first publications are in volume 28/29 of *The Nashwaak Review*, *The Hilt Magazine*, issues 1 & 3 online: issuu.com/*thehilt*, *In/Words Magazine* 13.3, and *Vallum Contemporary Poetry* 16:1. After studying and teaching Children's Literature for nearly 30 years, she is launching a character who rhymes wisdom with nonsense at widowwyile.com in late fall 2019.

Karen Zey

Karen Zey is a Canadian writer of CNF, committed to polishing her craft and submitting persistently to lit mags. A former special needs teacher, she writes about heartbeat moments of school and family life. Her work appears in *Brevity*'s Nonfiction Blog, *Crack the Spine*, *Hippocampus*, *Memoir* Magazine and other places. Karen is grateful to be part of the Lit Mag Love community and for the ongoing support of her Montreal writing group. She is currently working on a memoir about her years teaching and consulting in Quebec schools. You can read more of her writing at karenzey.com.

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—Rowan McCandless (page 41 in this anthology)