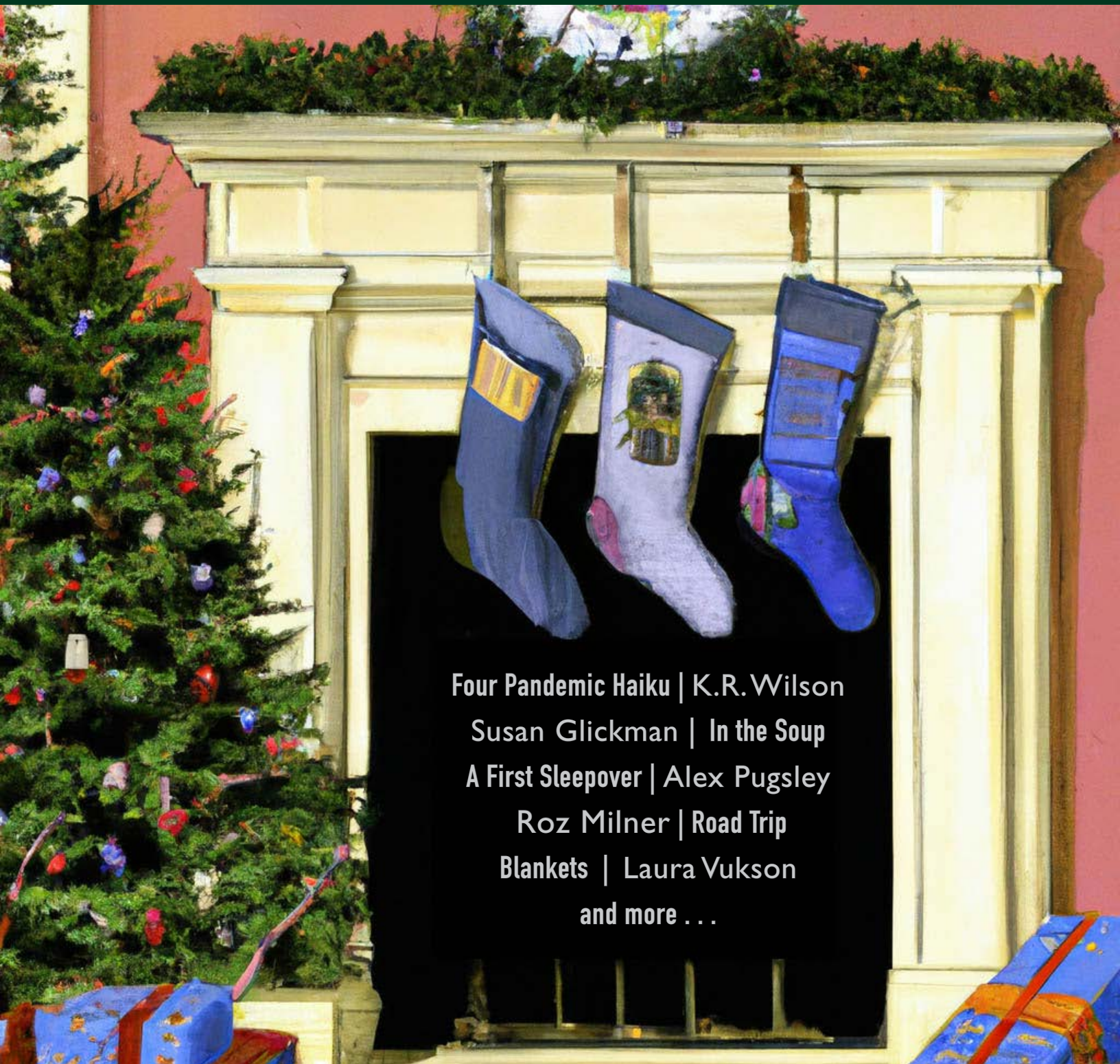


THE QUARANTINE REVIEW

Issue 14



Four Pandemic Haiku | K.R. Wilson
Susan Glickman | In the Soup
A First Sleepover | Alex Pugsley
Roz Milner | Road Trip
Blankets | Laura Vukson
and more . . .

THE QUARANTINE REVIEW

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FRANCES BOYLE's latest book, *Openwork and Limestone* (2022), is her third poetry collection. She has also written *Seeking Shade* (2020), short stories, and *Tower* (2018), a novella. Boyle's work has been published in *Grain*, *JMWW*, *Gone Lawn*, and *Rogue Agent*. Originally from Regina, Frances lives in Ottawa.

ARIEL GORDON is a Winnipeg/Treaty 1 territory-based writer, editor, and enthusiast. She is the ringleader of *Writes of Spring*, a National Poetry Month project with the Winnipeg International Writers Festival that appears in the Winnipeg Free Press. Her most recent book is *TreTalk* (2020).

ALEX PUGSLEY's first novel, *Aubrey McKee*, was published in 2020 by Biblioasis. His first story collection, *Shimmer*, was published this summer and appeared on *The Hamilton Review of Books*'s Independently Published Bestsellers List.

KIM FAHNER lives and writes in Sudbury, Ontario. Her latest book of poems is *Emptying the Ocean* (2022). Kim is a member of the League of Canadian Poets, the Ontario Representative of The Writers' Union of Canada (2020-24), and a supporting member of The Playwrights Guild of Canada. www.kimfahner.com

DEBRA MARTENS has published short stories in *The New Quarterly*, *Grain*, *Room*, and *Agnes and True*. Her story collection, *In Her Element*, seeks a publisher. She is working on a novel set in pre-WWI Toronto. In her free time, she edits *Canadian Writers Abroad*.

LAURA VUKSON is a Tlicho Dene mother, writer, and Executive Director at ArtsCan Circle. Her non-fiction work has been published in *The Globe and Mail*, *The Malahat Review*, shortlisted for *Prism International's* CNF contest and longlisted for *The Fiddlehead's* CNF contest. She lives in West Grey, Ontario.

SUSAN GLICKMAN is the author of seven books of poetry, seven books of fiction for adults and kids, and two works of non-fiction prose, the second of which is a selection of essays titled *Artful Flight* (2022). She grew up in Montreal and lives in Toronto, working as a freelance editor and learning how to paint.

ROZ MILNER is a freelance writer and critic who lives and works in the Greater Toronto Area. Her work has previously appeared in *Xtra*, *The Temz Review*, *Exclaim* magazine, and elsewhere.

K. R. WILSON's work has appeared in *The Temz Review*, *Syncopation Literary Journal*, *DarkWinter Literary Magazine*, and the flash fiction anthology *This Will Only Take a Minute*. His novel *Call Me Stan: A Tragedy in Three Millennia* (2021) was longlisted for the 2022 Leacock Medal for Humour.

A bien tot

The winter solstice is upon us and we celebrate the end of another year while looking forward to the birth of a new one. *The Quarantine Review*, like many woodland mammals here in Canada, will be entering its own form of hibernation. After this issue, we will be going on hiatus.

With heavy hearts, we have decided that we can no longer continue the magazine without paying our writers. *The Quarantine Review* started as a way to promote writers and build community while we were all locked down and isolated. Times have changed, the virus has changed, and we must change.

As we explored different funding models, we will continue producing online content and podcasts. We hope to plan more events like the *QR Re:Launch* that took place in Toronto in October. You will continue to see our presence on social media, shouting from the digital rooftops about great books and writers.

Finding a community with our readers and writers helped us manage our own pandemic anxieties, and gave us a sense of belonging in a chaotic and untethered world. We hope that we were able to provide that sense to others.

Working on the magazine has been an incredible experience and a joyous journey. It was unimaginable to us, in the very early days of the pandemic, that we could end up working with and showcasing such a breadth of talent. From trailblazers who've been influencing Canadian writing for decades to emerging writers taking the CanLit scene by storm, we've been fortunate to shine a spotlight on their talent. It has been a real honour, and something we hope we can continue in the future.

This has never been about money for us, and we will continue to produce a quality magazine as cost-effectively as possible. Any funding we receive, whether that be through grants or donations, will go entirely toward paying

contributors and covering costs. *The Quarantine Review*, after all, is a labour of love.

We are grateful for the support of our contributors and readers, and hope we can count on you all again when the *QR* makes its return. Thank you to all those contributors and supporters that have made the *QR* something special. We were honoured to go through the pandemic with you and hope to be back again to accompany you all to a brighter tomorrow.

— Jeffrey Dupuis and Sheeza Sarfraz

EDITORS

Jeffrey Dupuis | Sheeza Sarfraz

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We would love to hear from you. Write to us at thequarantinereview@gmail.com or connect with us online.

 @quarantinemag

 @quarantine_review

Flu lines

Kim Fahner and Ariel Gordon

The woman on the phone says "Positive"
and I think "No," but I know it's _____ "Yes."

Fever says yes. Headache says yes.
Cough says yes. _____ and head say no.

*

A text at 3:34 am from _____ health: "Negative."
As if my results had been out clubbing,

& hugging its friends goodbye or were hunkered
in the deep dark, having been broken open, stained

_____, by northern lights. The lymph nodes under
my chin inflamed, my _____ full, I snore through:

I wake up with last _____ cherry cough drop
still tucked in my cheek, *relief Relief RELIEF*

_____ like menthol. Five tests so far, five nurses
counting _____ the COVID hours.

*

Web sites that don't work, so I wonder how
to _____ get the test—drive through chaos,

unless I crash the line, the _____, all nervous like.
Phone calls that _____ me listening to canned hotel music,

"You are caller 60 in _____ for assistance." A slow burn,
a deep breath— _____ up in my throat. Covid tickle-torture.

*

_____ got the flu shot the first day
it was available, fifteen minutes in a

folding chair. I had a convention-centre
mixed-marriage of COVID vaccines:

Astro-Zenica & Pfizer, booked the _____ day
I was eligible. We will be boosted

in the new _____. The nurse at my last test
said "I haven't been sick for _____ years!"

But she's misplaced her face behind the mask
& shield. "I'm _____ good at getting sick," I said,

wrapping myself like a _____ before
heading out into the cold.

*

The man who comes to the _____
wears a mask, a helmet. No fussing.

This is serious stuff. Take: oxygen _____, pulse,
blood pressure, temp. Above 94 is good. Remember.

_____, when scent of "orange" disappears, I meet the floor on my knees,
_____ if citrus will return. Buy clove and lemon oil _____,

essentials for trying to _____ my senses. Jumpstart my brain,
olfactory epithelium. Absence _____ into present, tumbling madly.

*

Friday night. I have a headache.
I _____ nauseous. Do I go for another test?

Saturday morning, my sister texts:
"Can you _____ Brussels sprouts for 14 adults?"

Xmas dinner. My stomach _____.
It's legal, but is it safe? The forecast calls

for 1,000 new cases a _____. My cautious mother-in-law
calls. I nibble an Xmas orange—

we're not eligible for _____ til January.

*

Orange is only a memory. Coffee is a _____ love
who lingers—handsome—in _____ memories.

Water in pot on stove: rolling _____, rolling boil—
fierce, so the clove oil and cedar branches dance

wildly, turn _____ and over, throwing themselves
dramatically to the surface. Deep breath. _____ scent.

*

I am nose-blind. Allergies plus physiology
equals _____, which is to say: *sniffling*.

On Facebook, you asked people for _____
& tastes. And a _____ friends dumped pot-pourri

on your post. You were pot-lucked, people licking
the _____ of their senses. Left to _____ own devices,

I would mostly go on & on about _____, golden hour
& fall sun, but I _____ in transcriptions

of birdsong for balance. I want my days to be _____
of jam—raspberry chock full of seeds—

that someone else _____.

*

I buy strawberry jam online, coughing as I cash out,
hoping that maybe if I _____ it on morning toast, I'll know

when my taste buds _____ themselves after crucifixion.
Surely redemption should be on the _____ at some point.

Back online, buy: essential oils—clove, lavender, lemon,

eucalyptus—to _____ twice a day, at morning and night.

Some study in England says _____ training will help, that many _____
patients have also been impatient, trying to will their senses back.

Nonsensical, sniffing oils at _____ and dinner, but desperation
is a companion who holds my hand through recovery— _____ me softly.

*

Today I was AZ-Pfizer-Pfizer-ed.
Booking our boosters was more _____

than online dating.
_____ heard that the Shoppers

in the Village was offering _____
without appointments, so we drove through

a _____ of fresh snow, fish-tailing,
& finally _____ got our jabs.

I also picked up a bag of _____ peas
& cookies + cream ice cream. Later,

_____ asked Mike what the snow-filled air outside
the pharmacy smelled like.

_____, he said, "Exhaust or nothing."

*

Can't _____, so don't know what exhaust smells like
anymore. Everything is _____ scent: in absentia.

Five weeks _____, five Saturdays gone. Each
morning, turning my head into the pillow, praying for a

_____ of _____ softener, or even a bit of the dog's bad breath.
Smell training and reading about how often to smell lilac,

_____, clove, and lemon. Not a holy _____, but a square
of tiny _____. *Step we gaily, on we go, heel for heel and _____ for toe.*

I sniff someone's shaving lotion—straight from the can—thinking

I _____ imagine it. I am smart enough to _____ him pushing my open palm

_____ into my face. I roll my eyes. He _____. I ask to smell bathroom cleaner, but not with bleach. I know that's toxic.

*

_____ spent New Year's Day like it was change
_____ out of a pocket & stolen by the child

I _____. My _____ used to stand
at the top of the stairs & _____: "I need change

for paaaaaarking today!"
And my _____ would skulk back & surrender

the heads & tails of his _____, the gleam
of his loonies. All of which is to say:

I'm _____ & congested, tired
& irritable. I haven't been sleeping.

Last night I punished _____:
no phone before bed. Instead, I _____

into a book about immunization,
written during the H1N1 _____. I remember

waiting in line with my blonde toddler
for our needles, caressing the outlines

of her soft skull. And _____, I turned over
& _____. Later, furnace groaning

at -30 C, tufts of cat fur aloft, I can't smell
anything. _____ that's normal.

*

Normal: I can't remember what that is anymore.
It's a _____ on a _____ that's been

folded over too often, stuffed in a glove compartment,

roads _____ yellow to show where you go next.

_____ which foods are best, for recovery. I guess—
_____ them off in my head—salmon, spinach, and...

...maybe soya sauce? For flavour? (Even though _____
is a train that left the station when I wasn't _____.)

Booster _____. New Year's Day and what's left is still just absence,
erasure of senses. Fatigue swells up like flood water when

you're least expecting it to rise, blooming mold in your body's basement.
Booster, and public health says *No, not yet*, but doctor says *Yes. At risk.*
Now.

*

Nothing is normal now. I told my family
I couldn't come for dinner. I didn't feel bad,

but I should have. For a while,
you were the only person I _____ with COVID;

now half my contacts are confirmed.
Bonafide. I find myself unwilling to cook

or do any real work. My lizard brain, forked
tongue flicking, _____, "Isn't this enough already?"

*

Enough. Already. Yes. Covid is the _____ boyfriend
from your 20s who _____ instead of sharing, who

thinks first of himself before he considers your needs;
who has _____ ideas of what women circa 1993

might explore for career options; who has already named
his imaginary kids and sort of suggested how your future

as a couple might go. Covid is an overwhelming, _____ asshole.
It's (officially) done, now, but my body still moves between worlds—

not yet _____ enough to hike very far in amidst the trees, out
in northern bush, and not yet able to taste or _____. My body

is a country that _____ and is foreign to me. I try, _____
into downward dog, taking Vitamin C, sleeping when it tells

me to, and _____ softly to it, through tears, when we go
to _____ at night.

*

My body is a suitcase I've _____
on the bed in mediocre hotels.

I like looking for cracks in the façade
at hotels, it makes sure

I'm not overawed by a bit of guilt
but I'm less sure about the _____

of my own face. I died in my pants
every month. I had to _____ go

of my body, start describing
it with a _____ line. I came through

the hormone storm just
as the _____ set in. After years

of pushing it, not sleeping enough,
I am _____ rested. My plan

is to take the world like medicine.

*

"Smell _____" from England
is about the scent of _____,

_____ for a pill that will solve it all,
with _____ cajoling me to 'join in a group.'

Of what? Survivors. Long haulers. Breath
_____ and I think "not me, not yet."

If the world is my medicine, then I will
chop up garlic and red _____ flakes,

imagine a spicier place that could burn
my tongue—all passion and _____ of life.

*

You want proof? _____ your hand
in my jacket pocket, full of tissues,

cold making my _____ run
like a wrenched faucet. On the coldest

days, I arrive home with frozen wads
of my pocket. Today, I ran up

& slid down a snowplow hill
on my butt, _____ my snot-pocket

with snow. You can't _____ your nose
on snow but sleeves _____ do. My friend fell

backwards into a snowbank
because I asked _____ to. I laughed so hard,

hiccupping, I took blurry pictures. It tasted
like the _____ of a good cup of tea.

*

August: still no _____, no smell. Just temperature,
texture. Sometimes dizzy, often headaches,

breathless _____ not expected. Three weeks ago, _____ of fresh fish
being filleted in my living room. For _____ minutes—fish out of
water.

Big, gulping breaths of air in, to _____ if the fish are real. They aren't,
don't exist—ghost fish. Precursor to a return?

Puffer. Slow _____. Shorter swims. More meditation. Breath _____.
Squirrel rustles leaves in a Norway maple. Watch. Breath out, _____.

Still _____, breathing:

worn down

stubborn

& grateful.

*

_____ things: noses,
mouths, chins, restaurants
(_____ and take-out), concerts,
vacations, friends with second & third
bouts of COVID (_____), beer,
gardens, beer gardens, lake swims,
pool noodles, water _____ in the cups
of my bathing suit, on my _____ _____,
black masks looped around the gear shift.

*

Forgotten things: _____, names,
house keys, confessions,
stories (told and _____),
water spouts, stone paths,
_____, egg(shells),
inherited _____ _____,
coffee mugs, library books,
ripped nylons, memories,
half-dead ferns, broken glosas
and _____ ghazals.

*

_____ words
really heart sweaty down green sinuses night's radiating down even
party have line hitched I drugstore first year two just before house sats
wonder online resurrect somersaults feel bring clenches day boosters
lost photographed boil over no not-much smells my jam spoonfuls cooks
try resurrect table sniff smell COVID breakfast seducing complex I'd
shots foot FINALLY frozen I scowling smell without now whiff fabric
lavender trinity bottles toe can avoid up laughs I dug was quarters achy
myself dipped epidemic then slept but place map highlighted research
checking flavor looking questions knew snaps bad gropes stereotypical

overbearing strong smell rebels bending murmuring sleep thrown
upholstery let dotted pandemic fully training despair longing emails
catches world pepper proof put nose filling can't will him dregs still
when scent five see ghost walks in hitched remembered dine-in post-
vacation white breasts titles untold breadcrumbs holly hock seeds drunk

Holiday Hotlist

Jeff Dupuis

Here are *The Quarantine Review's* hottest picks for late-year book releases. Whether shopping for the reader in your life or making sure you haven't missed out on any great titles, we have you covered. From ghost stories to true crime, memoirs to murder mysteries, the hotlist has it all.

Seth's Christmas Ghost Stories

Biblioasis

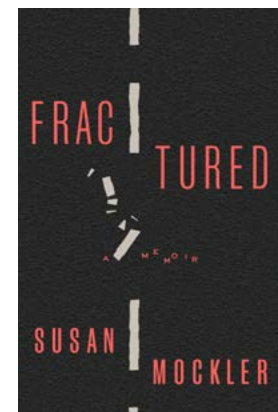
Biblioasis continues its annual tradition of combining classic ghost stories with the artistic talents of Guelph, Ontario's Seth. This year's crop consists of "A Visit" by Shirley Jackson, "The Dead and the Countess" by Gertrude Atherton, and "The Corner Shop" by Lady Asquith. These slim volumes make great gifts; they are beautiful to behold and satisfying to read. Seth's Christmas Ghost Stories are a great tradition for book lovers to adopt.

The slow-burning nature of older ghost stories, which makes them perhaps too tame for Halloween, makes them perfect for the winter holidays. Curl up in a cozy chair with a warm beverage, watch the snow collect on the window, and enjoy a classic story with a wonderful new design.

Fractured: A Memoir by Susan Mockler

Second Story Press

A powerful memoir that has a lasting impact on a reader's worldview. Susan Mockler skillfully weaves a sophisticated narrative that brings us inside her struggle with a severe spinal cord injury, not just showing us her fight for mobility, acceptance, and understanding, but allowing us to feel it in some part. After a collision with a moose that caused an incomplete spinal injury, Mockler wakes up in a body that was not the one she was used to, in a world that no longer



treated her in the way she was accustomed. The depth of that disorientation is portrayed with such explicit detail. It would be naïve and perhaps ignorant to think that any single book can cure us of ableist biases and assumptions, but *Fractured* peels back some of those layers and biases, communicating important truths about a world that needs to be more understanding, inclusive and accessible.

There are moments that are absolutely heartbreaking, as well as moments that made me laugh out loud, for Mockler injects humor, and all the emotion in between. It can be a difficult read for those of us who have experienced or lost people to car accidents, but it's an important read. Boiled down, *Fractured* is a story of courage and perseverance and I absolutely recommend it for everyone.

Welcome to the Weird America: Three Novellas

by A.G. Pasquella

Wolsak & Wynn

What a wild ride through the back roads of Americana! Pasquella's collection of satirical novellas will make you think about popular culture in entirely new ways, that is, when you're not laughing out loud. *Welcome to the Weird America* is a complete 180 from Pasquella's hard-boiled Jack Palace crime novels, but is definitely a welcome treat. It's not easy to pull off this level of satire skillfully, as it is tempting to either reign oneself in or go too far, but Pasquella handles it perfectly. Strap in and go on a road trip through the wackiest, weirdest America in fiction. You won't regret it!



Wan: A novel by Dawn Promislow

Freehand Books

Wan is an experience—something to be felt and absorbed, rather than just "read." Dawn Promislow's novel about a painter living in apartheid South Africa is constructed very much like the paintings it describes, brushstroke by brushstroke, allowing the reader to step back and see the artist's vision as the book progresses.

It's remarkable how, from a first-person narration, Promislow shows us the narrator's privilege, how much they understand, and how much they don't. She manages to create certain boundaries that we as readers can see, even if Jacqueline, the protagonist, is unaware of them. This is just one of the brilliantly-executed facets of *Wan* that demonstrate Promislow's skill and talent. The prose is beautiful and poetic

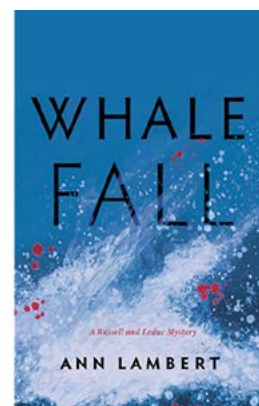


and the story lingers in the mind like a memory after the book is done. If I didn't know that this was a debut novel, I'd have bet that the author was a master at the height of their powers. But knowing what I know, I look forward to seeing what Promislow gives us next.

Whale Fall by Ann Lambert

Second Story Press

Lambert violates what some call a “rule” of the genre by not giving us a body in the first 50 pages of *Whale Fall*. But what she gives us instead more than makes up for it. Although the book opens with a wedding, it feels like a high school reunion, the reader being invited to join old friends and old rivals. Even if you have never read any of the other books in the Russell and Leduc series, you'll feel like you know these characters. Lambert, through the characterizations and the intimate moments the reader is privy to, dials up the tension. We care deeply about these characters, and knowing the kind of book we're reading, anticipate the worst. What comes next is a satisfying tale of the uncovering of secrets and the pursuit of justice.

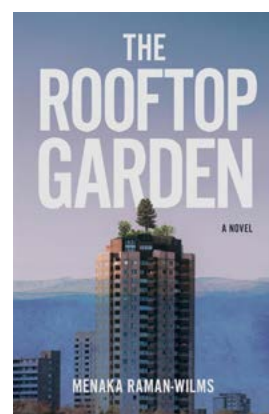


The Rooftop Garden by Menaka Raman-Wilms

Nightwood Editions

The Rooftop Garden is an interesting exploration of the white male radicalization that we've witnessed all too frequently in today's headlines. The book is about two childhood friends, Nabila and Matthew, who imagine they are survivors in a flooded, post-climate-collapse world. Nabila is studious and science-minded, Matthew is lonely, impressionable, and an only boy from a broken home. They grow distant as they grow older, Nabila still feeling responsible for Matthew, who is prone to falling in with bad crowds and making bad choices.

The beautiful characterization gives weight to Matthew's descent into the toxic world of far-right macho terrorism. It's a subject that could be handled two-dimensionally, but Raman-Wilms builds character and story with so much care that we can see how a lonely figure from a broken family can be sucked into a deplorable organization even though his intentions are not evil. The story defies cliché and expectations, while giving us a powerful story about friendship and the duty that comes along with it. *The Rooftop Garden* reminds the readers of the Mark Twain quote “no man is a failure who has friends.” A sleek-yet-wonderfully-descriptive prose style makes the novel a quick and fulfilling read.



Ordinary Wonder Tales: Essays by Emily Urquhart

Biblioasis

Folklorist Emily Urquhart lives up to the promise of her book's title, injecting wonder into to subject matter that may seem “ordinary.” Her collection of essays, which form a memoir of sorts, juxtapose Urquhart's personal experiences with ghost stories and other legends and folktales. This marriage of theme and form creates a reading experience that goes beyond simple essays, broadening the audience of the book.

For many readers who might chose fiction over essays, Urquhart's collection provides a satisfying compromise. These tales are wondrous and haunting, written in a beautifully descriptive style, drawing upon centuries' worth of storytelling traditions.



Everything You Dream is Real by Lisa de Nikolits

Inanna Publishing

This book is a trip like no other. This journey into the fantastic is a follow up to *The Rage Room*, but operates on its own level and is satisfying in its own right. An acid trip of a novel like this could easily fall off the rails in less-skilled hands, but Lisa de Nikolits is a spec fiction master and handles the plot and characters expertly.

This novel defies genre and presents a whacky reality that, at first, sounds disorienting to the casual reader, but what works best about it is how rooted the book is in human desire. The wild machinations of the characters seem far-out on the surface, but de Nikolits excels in characterization and even the craziest plot points are grounded in motivations and intentions that resonate with readers who may never reach for the spec fiction shelf.



In the Spirit of 13 by the Mesdames of Mayhem

Carrick Publishing

This anthology, from the collective known as the Mesdames of Mayhem, delivers on its promise of spooky stories by a who's who of Canadian writers. There's plenty of humour and intrigue mixed in with the supernatural, achieving the right kind of balance to satisfy any kind of reader. The collective is celebrating its 10th anniversary, and this collection shows they are all at the top of their game. Lynne Murphy delivers that haunting unease that plagues the reader after her story “The Trespassers” is long over. Lisa de Nikolits brings humour and



brilliant characterization to her story “In a Land of Fear and Denial.” There’s plenty in the collection for fans of mystery as well as horror, and a guarantee of mayhem.

The Castleton Massacre by Sharon Anne Cook & Margaret Carson

Dundurn Press

True crime books, especially those replete with female victims, have too often been sensationalist and exploitative. They make bogeymen out of the perpetrator while reducing the victims to cadavers. It is rare to see a testament to honour the victims, but that is what Cook and Carson have created with *The Castleton Massacre*. Their unique perspective, that of being related to those involved, offers a different take, that of the family memoir.

The Castleton Massacre avoids the clichés of the genre, offering us a look into the lives of those whose lives were brutally taken. We get a rare look into the family dynamics and history that led to the tragedy, a former scholar and minister taking the lives of four women, two of who were pregnant. Oral histories combine with sociology to offer the reader deeper insights into the incident and the mindset of those involved. *The Castleton Massacre* makes a great gift for true crime lovers.

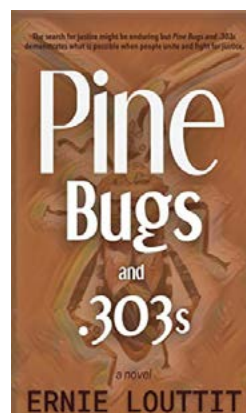


Pine Bugs and .303s by Ernie Louttit

Latitude 46 Publishing

The debut novel by Ernie Louttit takes readers back to the end of World War Two, and the lives of two soldiers returning home to northern Ontario. *Pine Bugs and .303s* follows Elmer Wabason and Gilbert Bertrand, a Cree man and white man respectively, exploring the gulf between them. With the physical and cultural barriers that had stood between these men all their lives, though they lived only three miles apart, threaten to separate them again. However, the brotherhood they had forged in the war proves to be an unbreakable bond. The novel, a first by the former police officer known for writing books about his time on the force and blowing the whistle on the Saskatoon police’s “starlight tours” practice, is a story of resilience in a tough world.

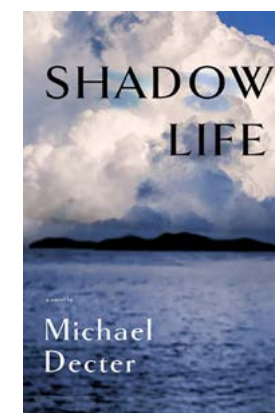
Louttit’s debut shows promise, and he takes us back to a past we’ve seen many times, but rarely through both a Cree and white perspective. The book covers some dark material, showing the ugliness of a hard life, but offers a glimpse of a Canadian history not glamorized by quaint, CBC period programs.



Shadow Life by Michael Decter

Cormorant Books

Michael Decter is known as an economist, a political advisor, and an author of non-fiction works, from political memoirs to books on finance and healthcare policy. *Shadow Life* is his first novel. Decter stretches his storytelling muscles with this tale of a man delivering a verdict of not guilty on a child killing case, and how his life subsequently falls apart. What starts as a legal thriller undergoes a strange metamorphosis, after another child is murdered weeks after the trial and the protagonist, Matthew, seeks sanctuary in Georgian Bay. Before long, Matthew, learns that his past is not what he thought, and that his present, his identity, his not the certainty he thought. This begins another journey, one of self-discovering. *Shadow Life* is the first in a planned trilogy.



In the Soup

Susan Glickman

Making soup is pretty much the opposite to baking a cake. It is interpretive dance to baking's minuet; abstract impressionism to baking's photorealism; free jazz to baking's string quartet. In my kitchen, no two soups are ever exactly the same because I don't measure anything, just scoop up those ingredients inspiring me that day—usually whatever is wilting in the vegetable drawer or whispering from the back of the fridge—and add water or vegetable bouillon, maybe some orange juice, tomato juice, or even milk, and loads of spices.

Lots of spices. All the spices. And whenever possible, fresh herbs from the garden.

How do I know which herbs and spices will work best with which vegetables? I don't. I just make educated guesses, then taste and adjust.

Why am I so confident with soup and yet hesitant to improvise with baking? Because soup is so malleable, so generous, and usually so easy to fix. You can leave it bubbling gently on the stove while you keep fiddling with it until it pleases your tastebuds or at least doesn't offend them. Too bland? Add more salt. Too salty? Add some potatoes too soak up the salt and remove it from the broth. Too thick? Add some liquid. Not thick enough? Purée it.

It is really really hard to wreck soup as long as your pot is large enough that you can keep adding stuff indefinitely. Soup is like a novel. People will tolerate almost anything in it as long as it is filling and full of interesting flavours.

Baking, alas, is much less accommodating. It is a very precise art, more like writing poems. And there are multiple potential causes for every possible problem, which makes subservience to

recipes essential, at least until one reaches Paul Hollywood-level expertise. If you put in too much sugar, your cake will become too dense. But it will also become dense if you didn't wait until your oven reached the right temperature, or if your baking powder is past its best-before date, or if you didn't cream your butter and sugar together long enough, or if you overmixed the batter after adding the flour. However, if you *undermixed* the batter, the cake will be full of holes. If you added too much flour it will be dry but it could also be dry because you didn't add enough liquid. Take it out of the oven too soon and it will sink, although it will also sink if you didn't use enough eggs, or if your oven's temperature isn't calibrated properly, or if you checked its readiness too often by opening the oven door. Of course, if you leave the cake in *too* long, it will burn.

Sometimes I think the glass pane in my oven is not there so that I can watch my cake's progress. It is there so that the cake can stare back at me balefully and judge my inadequate efforts.

But soup is so forgiving! It is even possible to satisfy contradictory tastes in the very same pot of soup! For example, my son likes his vegetable soup creamy but my husband prefers his broth full of chunky vegetables, so I compromise, pureeing some of it but also leaving nice solid bits floating around. My daughter and I love putting a handful of Swiss chard or kale or spinach into our soup at the last minute, but my son hates wilted greens and picks them out of his bowl. I just give these to the dog and then everyone's happy.

To satisfy my family's divergent tastes in chocolate chip cookies is considerably more

difficult. Papa likes them rock-hard like biscotti; our kids prefer theirs bendy and soft. On the Moh's Scale of Mineral Hardness, the offspring's biscuits rate a 1 and their progenitor's a 10 (you could practically scratch your name on that oven window with them). To satisfy the kids, I take half of the batch out as soon as it is done and put it into a container while still hot. This ensures Cirque de Soleil suppleness. But to keep my husband happy, I leave his treats in the oven an extra ten minutes and then cool them on a rack, ensuring tooth-breaking toughness.

By the way, we have the same dilemma with matzoh balls which are, while not technically soup (according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* "a liquid dish, typically made by boiling meat, fish, or vegetables, etc., in stock or water"), definitely soup adjacent. In this situation, the children vote for feather-light dumplings while their dad insists on cannonballs that sink to the bottom of the pot like the *kneidlach* of his youth. Once again timing is key but here longer cooking leads to lighter and fluffier results, so I take my husband's portion out of the boiling water early.

Probably there is a metaphor lurking in this essay about the flexibility of youth and the rigidity of age, and I could ride that out for another page or two. But I'll just wrap things up with a funny anecdote. When our daughter—a gymnast and dancer whose flexibility makes my most pliant cookies look stiff—gave her father a yoga class and instructed him to start by lying down on his back, my unbending husband's response was "Could we start with something easier?" In his case, at least, it appears that anatomy is destiny.



Don't Worry About That Shit

Debra Martens

Because you spent more than you have, didn't you? I told you that a long time ago, make a budget for every two weeks and stick to it. Make sure you got your payments covered and stick to your budget, but you didn't do that, did you, and now you're in deep shit. No, I can't. Yeah, I'm on the bus. No, I'm going to the lake tonight. That's right, I'm going to the lake for the weekend to relax. Because I can, I stick to my budget, I told you that, that's why I got a house in the Glebe and a place on the lake. You bought a what? A corvette? What the fuck did you do that for? You stupid jerk, you need a corvette like you need a second a-hole. What'd ya pay for it, I bet you paid full price, look, I told you a long time ago, you ever need a car, you buy it from me, I get them ten cents on the dollar in the States. Ten cents on the dollar and I import them, now that's cheap. Yeah, that's right. And what'd you do, brother of mine, you bought a corvette full price and now you can't make the payments and you are in deep shit, that's right isn't it, you are in deep shit. Fucking new laptop fucking new car and I'm talking to you still on the first cell-phone I ever bought. No, I'm going to the lake. Might make a pit stop on the way, stop for a haircut. No way, a cut in the Glebe costs twice as much as downtown. Never spend a fucking penny there if I can help it. Wait a sec, this is my stop. I'm getting off, dropping by my place to pick up a couple of things, lose these jeans for my old ones, change shirts. Your kids want a festival t-shirt, I got plenty left. Oh, the caps, sure I got those. Yeah, on my feet all day, good shoes, now there's

an investment, good shoes. Not today, I told you already, I'm heading out to the lake. I want to wake up there, it's quiet early in the morning, not even the ducks are awake when I get up. Yeah it is nice. What're you gonna work for? You work every weekend and for what? What'd you make this year, \$85,000? What've you been doing with your time, I made that in my first quarter. And for that you work weekends? That sucks. This eight-day work week sucks. She's right. You gotta give your wife your time, you can't push her away like that. Jennifer's a good sweet woman, she needs your attention. You know what you should do, throw that laptop out and give her a good weekend. Fuck the weekend, give her a vacation, treat her right. No, those packages suck. You just fly down there and get something there. Yeah, take her on a trip. You know what I did, I bought a car when I was in Mexico, an old wreck, and when I was done with it, I tossed the keys to some poor sap on the sidewalk, yeah, that's right. No point renting, those cars get stolen. Went all over Mexico in that old wreck, old car like that helps you fit in, ya gotta fit in, me and the boys had a blast. Lots of tequila and beer. Yeah, I do spend a lot of money on my vacation, that's what they're for, to have fun. Who doesn't spend a lot of money on a vacation? Yeah, I know I didn't used to. "So tight that I squeaked when I walked"—she said that, did she? That's why she fucking left, isn't it? Changed the way I do things now she's gone. Still stick to my budget, but a holiday, and the lake house. No I'm not a cheapskate. Just because money runs through

your fingers like water. Okay, I'm home. Yeah, she got fed up. Yeah, divorce next month. I did, in Mexico I bought a car right off, and when I was done with it, I pulled up to the curb, tossed the keys to some poor sap sitting there, and said, Here, keep it. Listen to me, Jennifer will be doing like her, filing for divorce, you don't want that, man, I know. Oh don't worry about that shit, you worry too much. No, I'm going to the lake alone. I like the quiet.

Blankets

Laura Vukson

I lie in bed, still sleepy. My three-year-old, Tibaa, giggles in dream world. His warm breath tickles my nose. On my other side, his older brother Dezeh wraps his arms around my belly. The three of us share the same pillow. I reach for their baby quilts—patchwork, embroidered—and cover their little bodies. This is when I feel the most content: before the sun rises above the cliff across Mill Lake, a couple miles from the eastern shores of Georgian Bay.

I stretch my legs in our gigantic bed, unable to move my upper body from under the force of their need to be close, unwilling to disturb their sleep. When our youngest no longer wanted to sleep alone, Joseph, my partner, had the idea to drag two queen beds together and sleep like a wolf pack. I thought co-sleeping would be frowned upon by my parents but when I nervously mentioned it to my Tlicho Dene mom, a mother of four, her only response was, “Good, safer that way.”

Another giggle. I stare at Tibaa. Two dimples pucker his cheeks. His heart-shaped face seems lit from within. Tibaa has been giggling in his sleep since he was four days old. Ancestors like to visit, Mom says.

I snuggle closer to my babies and close my eyes.

The sun rises above the treetops and melts the last snow patches. A strong wind off Mill Lake wraps itself around our old rambling house. Even the land is awakening from its long slumber, and the smell of rotted leaves and wet earth touches my nose. I hear a truck at the top of the driveway. My parents have arrived for a visit.

The boys, dressed in a mixture of brand names and second-hand sweaters and knitted hats and mitts, hop around on the deck, squealing in delight. When I was a girl, I, too, wore second-hand clothes. I begged Mom to let me sit in the car and wait while she cruised the racks at Value Village and the Salvation Army along with my sister Julianna. The smell of the clothes burned my eyes, I’d say, though embarrassed is what I was. Now they send gently-used treasures for our boys, and as I open the boxes, my eyes sting for an entirely different reason.

I watch Dad walk down the steep hill, lugging a sewing machine. A few steps behind, Mom carries a cloth bag stuffed to its seams. She shifts her weight from side to side, favouring her right leg, just like her mom used to do. She looks down and sees us waving. A smile spreads across her face. “Laura, I brought fabric!”

Hours later, I visit the guest bedroom and watch Mom peer over her glasses, her pretty brown eyes staring down at her stitches. Her hair is streaked with grey and pulled back in a bun. She sits on a bed. A needle dangles from the corner of her mouth as she cuts the thread with scissors. Two tiny quilts—baby blankets for my sons’ dollies—lie beside her. “In the residential school, it was always so cold,” she says, rubbing the bone that sticks out on her dainty wrist.

Piles of blankets and pillows fill this room. Brand new sheets lie untouched on a chair, a gift from Mom. Another baby quilt, protected in a Ziploc bag, lies on the dresser, ready to be shipped to the far north. Baby Hailey has arrived, my brother’s baby girl.

I want to ask if her wrist hurts but don’t. I already know the answer. “No surgery can fix it.” Sometimes she says it’s an old basketball wound from her school years. Sometimes she must have misremembered and says it was from volleyball. What’s the same is that she always changes the subject when her wrist comes up. Now, arthritis has taken hold of it. Wherever she goes, she puts a plastic water bottle in the freezer, then, hours later, she rolls the bottle gently over the ache.

My mom is one of the 150,000 children who were taken from their parents, grandparents, aunties, and uncles to attend residential schools across Canada. They weren’t allowed to speak their language, practice their culture, or go home.

I can’t fathom my children stolen from me. My grannie Julie’s mind cracked. She was found wandering around Bechoko, a Dene community on the northwest cusp of Great Slave Lake in the Northwest Territories, in her nightgown. It was the dead of winter. Subarctic temperature. All 10 of her children were taken to those schools.

Mom has only shared three or four stories from her residential and day-school years. When she does talk, I know not to ask questions, only to listen. Those are not my stories to write, but I remember how those stories made me feel: sick to my stomach, angry, overcome by the urge to storm the place, pick little Celine up and carry her back to her family.

Instead, I pick up her iPhone, fiddle with the camera, then zoom in on her. She doesn’t miss a beat with her sewing but straightens her back and exhales.

I snap the photo.

“I never had dolls as a kid,” Mom said to me as she folded a sweater and placed it on the dresser. I sat cross-legged on my bed. I was maybe five years old, my favorite doll, Jane, tucked into my nightgown. Four other dolls sat at my feet. I didn’t ask why, only leaned down to pull my own dolls closer. She’d given me all these dolls, and without her telling me, I knew to keep them happy, safe, and warm.

On the other bed, Julianna purred in her sleep, her arm dangling off. Cradling my dolls, I crawled in beside her and shared the same

pillow—pink and cross-stitched with ruffles.

I pulled out Jane from my nightgown, placed her with her friends, and covered them with their blankets. Mom didn’t mind that we slept in the same bed. It seemed to make her happy.

Mom pressed her lips to my forehead. I don’t remember now when the kisses and the hugs stopped. Maybe I got too old. But that one kiss each evening was magic.

Hours later, I was startled out of my dreams.

Chukka, Chukka, Chukka.

The sound of the sewing machine drilled through the wooden beams of the ceiling then sped up with a steady hum. Mom was back sewing again.

Without even looking, I could see her hunched over the machine, peering over her glasses at each stitch, tearing out the ones that weren’t perfect and sewing them again. The tips of her fingers were tough and raw from the needle and seam ripper.

I checked to see if my dollies were still covered, then curled up to Julianna, and closed my eyes.

“Laura! Did you get them a scarf?” Mom’s voice rises with concern.

“Yes, I did.” I point to Dezeh and Tibaa. They’re so bundled up that only their eyes and little noses can be seen. A cold front has blown in from Georgian Bay, spiraling the mercury so low we can hardly see the thin red line at the bottom of the thermometer.

In my family, we walk. Sunshine. Rain. Snow. My dad, of Serbian and Irish descent, swears that fresh air is the best thing for a child. It strikes me that even though I grew up in Northern Ontario, I was never cold. Mom made sure of it. Brisk walks on winter trails or frozen lakes, all bundled up, getting the blood flowing, the joints moving, the cheeks rosy as we walked into our home and peeled off the layers to sip hot milk with chocolate sprinkles.

The boys fidget as I race around the house, grabbing diaper bags, water bottles, blankets, extra mittens.

“Good. My dad always said that children should never have cold hands. Gets into the bones. Bad arthritis when they get older.” Mom

pulls on a wool hat and zips her coat up to her chin. “Hands are to be treasured. That’s what my grannie and aunties always told me when I was little.” She tells me this every chance she gets. For good measure, I wave an extra blanket in the air, a gently-used quilt, and stuff it into a cloth bag.

We drive into town to walk along the Georgian Bay trail. On the winding drive, I glance in my review mirror. Both boys are strapped in their car seats, blankets covering their little bodies. Some say I baby them. I don’t care. No child of mine will ever be cold.

I watch Mom kiss Tibaa’s hands and cheeks as he squirms in her lap. He settles, then wraps his thin, long arms around her neck and gives her a loud, sloppy kiss on her cheek. It’s summer now, and the windows are wide open, inviting the breeze off the lake into the dining room, offering relief from the sweltering heat. The plastic we stretched across the windows in an attempt to keep out the cold last winter have left marks on the frames.

My parents, my sister, and her children gather at our home one last time before Joseph and I move our little family to the southern tip of Georgian Bay. We spend our days walking, boating, swimming, and fishing off the dock. A pile of towels and blankets on the Muskoka chair waiting for chilly little bodies that must eventually leave the lake.

Julianna adjusts her glasses and sighs deep into her belly. Her youngest runs by and stops for a squeeze and a kiss from his mommy then races off. “Mom, how many kisses do you think we give the *babias* a day? Maybe a thousand?”

Mom pauses, lost in thought. “I’d say close to it.” She gets up to head to the guest room.

Hours later, my turn playing lifeguard on the dock, Julianna comes down to the water, her face etched with worry, her words tumbling out. “Mom and Dad are on the floor in their room. Something happened. I went to check on her. Mom’s been in her room most of this trip. She rarely comes out.”

My thoughts race to the worst possible thing. Someone has died. But then I remember that Mom has been working on her Indian Day

Schools Class Action Settlement application, due in a few days. Since 1920, the federal government forced Indigenous children to attend Indian Day Schools. Until recently, I’d never heard of them. Residential schools I knew about, but Day Schools were different. When I asked, Mom explained that where she grew up in NWT, the residential school was where she and her siblings would spend their nights and weekends after they finished their “learning day” in the Indian Day School. Mom was one of the unlucky ones who was forced into both.

For weeks, the deadline was blasted on our local rez radio station. Survivors who attended the Indian Day Schools and who suffered abuse and harm were urged to send in their claim by July 13th. The application asked Mom to identify herself and the years she attended. It also asked her, on a scale from one to five, to choose the level of abuse she faced. She had to write the story of as many events as she remembered, providing documentation to back it up. All spring and summer the application sat on her kitchen table as she eked out 16 pages of memories she’d buried long ago. Not only was she forced to relive it all, but she had to prove it was true.

Why did the government give Elders a summer deadline? Any deadline? A deadline alone can be stressful, let alone writing out the trauma from your childhood, rating it, and finding a way to prove it. Mom had wanted to stay home and complete it, but I insisted that she come to our home, surrounded by her grandbabias, to put the final touches to her application. I had no idea what I was asking of her.

I head downstairs to the guest room that faces the water and birch trees. I hover at the door, then hear Dad’s voice, soft and soothing. He tries to console. I turn and run up the stairs to the main floor. The smell of garlic and butter greets me. Beyond the bay windows, I can see the sun shining on the boulder and the spruce trees that line the water’s edge.

Children’s laughter erupts from the living room.

I walk into the kitchen. Joseph is standing at the stove. His ball cap backwards, he splashes spices into the steaming spinach—garlic powder, nutmeg, chili flakes—the hummingbird tattoo

on his large palm flicking in and out of view like it’s dancing. I wrap my arms around his middle and breathe in his fire smoke and patchouli scent.

“They would whip my hands in front of the whole class for speaking my language. They broke my wrist trying to break me,” Mom says calmly. She holds up her hand. Tonight, the lump looks even more painful, as if it grew—came alive—insisting on being seen, being heard.

I’m sitting on my gigantic bed, folding laundry. Outside, I can see purple lilies and white daisies standing tall on the Canadian Shield a few feet from the window. When she came to my room a little while ago, I thought it was to tell me something about one of the little ones or to ask me for a fresh towel or some soap. She’s never spoken to me of this before.

I suddenly become aware that my mouth is hanging open. I close it, my breathing rigid and sharp. I never knew. I thought she was one of the lucky ones, untouched by the physical abuse.

Later, I will read a blank application online and see that under the five levels are multiple rows of descriptions of the abuse: from shaming due to identity, to threats of violence, to loss of consciousness, to broken bones, to disfigurement, to graphic descriptions of sexual abuse. Repeat as many times as necessary to document your experiences.

The bulging wrist bone. Mom’s insistence on keeping her children and grandchildren protected and warm—and never letting anyone inadvertently hurt their hands. How her linen closets burst with the fluffiest towels, facecloths, and quality linen and cotton bedsheets. How her beds are graced with bed pads, sheets and duvets with extra quilts neatly folded at the foot. How we have endless hats and mitts and scarves stuffed into the bench by our front door.

I keep folding laundry on the bed and listen to Mom.

“They did other stuff to me. I had to document all of it. I let your dad read my application, and I watched his face. It would tell me everything,” she says almost with pride. After 50 years, these two knew each other so well.

I nod, numb.

“The first question your dad asked me was, is he still alive? That teacher?” Mom continues, snapping me out of numbness.

I turn and stare at her. Dad is a gentle man. It takes me a moment to realize why he asks this question, what he would do if he came face to face with the monster.

I want to cry, but I know she will not appreciate my tears. Dene people don’t cry, she told me once. I bite the insides of my mouth to keep my face from crumpling. One of my nephews calls out, “*Etsi, Etsi*,” the Dene word for grandma. She turns and heads out of the room as if we’ve been talking about the weather.

I stand up and walk to the closet. Opening the doors, I reach into the back shelf, pull out a bottle of Shiraz and pour myself a glass. Neither of my parents drink alcohol, and they don’t like to be around it, so out of respect or guilt or both, whenever they visit, I revert to being a teen again and hide the wine.

Days later, when the house is quiet, and our nieces and nephews and my parents and sister have long gone home, I walk around this place where we’ve lived for almost four years. I touch the banister and the blankets that are draped over it.

I feel a deep sense of calm. Strength, even.

I head to the bedroom to hand my youngest his favorite—the bumpy blanket that Mom made for him. It’s soft and warm and Tibaa loves to run his fingers over the contours that are its namesake. He squeezes it and lies back down next to his brother. I crawl in between them and raise my arms for their heads to rest on. They settle in and throw their own arms around my belly, chattering about their day. I’ve been doing this nightly routine long before I had babies. Many years ago, Mom used to get me to lie down with my baby brother till he fell asleep.

Outside the window, the last of the sun rays shine through the maple and spruce. I know that there are no strange hands that come at night for Tibaa and Dezeh. They’re with me, tucked up beside me. Safe, just like I was with my sister, and my brother with me, Mom hovering nearby. Our boys will never know what it feels like to be cold all night. Or to be so frightened of what

approaches. My mother, my sister and me, my sons, our partners, we have so much warmth around us now, and we will continue to add to it, one blanket at a time.

Limited View

Frances Boyle

I spy a nest in my spruce tree, as near
the peak as a pair of crows can build
—tangle of twigs, string and old grass.

I raise binoculars. A shape, glossy
black, flings across my merging view.
What mother-instinct, or telegraphed

sound, spurs her before the squirrel
encroaches? Comical corkscrew chase
down, along the trunk, the rodent

in retreat. One clarion caw; one flap
to the nest. She settles. I see wingtips,
lift of tail. My view now obscured

by branch fuzz, I hope for fledglings
to show themselves. In the meantime
I settle for flashes of beak and wing.

Four Pandemic Haiku

K. R. Wilson

Though less obvious
than bubonic or smallpox,
'tis enough, 'twill serve.

We watch Zoom readings
as we crop our beards to fit
our N95s.

The anxious tickle
of the antigen test stick
in the nasal dark.

When will we know if
our agoraphobias
have become chronic?

Road Trip

Roz Milner

Saturday morning, we loaded the hatchback and hit the road. Across the 401, then pointing north on the 400 for a two-hour drive. With Meg at the wheel, I realized I'd better actually call my folks to let them know what's coming. I dialed and spoke:

"Hey, mom! It's me! How's things?"

"Oh! Oh, one second," she replied, her voice hushed. "Oh, hey. How are you doing?"

"I'm doing pretty good. Hey guess what? I'm coming up to visit! I think it's time you met Meg. And mom, you're going to love her." I shot Meg a smile and she stuck her tongue out at me.

"This isn't a good time." Mom's voice lowered. "Your grandma's here. Someone in her building caught COVID and she didn't want to stay."

I turned to Meg while still talking to my mom: "No, it's okay, we're staying in a hotel!" But I wasn't sure if it really was. I hung up and looked at Meg.

"A hotel, eh?" she said, one eyebrow raised.

The thing about Grandma Lorraine is she's a big-C conservative. The last time we spoke, she complained about people who use they or them as pronouns.

"I don't get it," she told me. "What are these people, objects? And they want to say I'm cis-gender?"

She drew the word out, full of disdain.

"Who are they trying to fool?"

A few days later I wore a dress out in public for the first time. It was one of the most empowering moments of my life until then. That was three years ago. I don't even know if she knows about me now.

About 30 minutes outside town, Meg and I stopped for coffee and doughnuts. I figured it was as good a time as any to break the news.

"Hey, girlfriend? I've got good news and bad news."

"What's the bad news?"

"My grandma's with my parents and she doesn't know I'm trans, or that I'm dating you or that you are too."

Meg looked anxious as she bit into an apple fritter. "Kate, you know I hate surprises. And how it went when you met my parents."

"That's different! My parents are cool."

"That's what I thought too, and instead my Dad called you sir for an entire evening just to watch me squirm." Her hands shook as she took a sip of coffee. "Listen, Kate. Listen. Okay? I love you, and I want this to go well. I really do. But if it starts to go sideways, I'm leaving, okay." She took another sip. "Okay, what's the good news?"

"I love you!"

She took another bite from the fritter and rolled her eyes. "That's not news, Kate."

I left her with her doughnut, got up and called my mom. She picked up on the third ring.

“Are you still coming?” she asked, less hushed this time, “Because I haven’t said anything to grandma yet.”

“I want to. I want you to meet Meg, and we’ll stay in the hotel. Unless...you don’t want me to come. I wasn’t sure after the way we spoke earlier.”

“You know you’re always welcome here.” Mom took a deep breath and sighed. “I just wish you’d give us a little notice for once. I feel like you’re putting me in a bad spot.”

“You won’t be,” I replied, “I’ve got Meg here. She’ll be my rock.” I looked back at her. “She’ll know what to do if things go sideways.”

“It’s not you I’m worried about, Kate. It’s Lorraine. I don’t know how she’ll react.” She hung up and I lingered for a moment, holding my phone and thinking.

I went back to Meg, who was just finishing up her drink. “Is everything okay?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“What do you mean, you’re not taking any more people?”

“Sorry, but we’re booked solid.” The clerk looked up from his computer and held his hands up. “You should have called ahead if you needed a room this bad.” He shrugged.

I rubbed my face. “Every room in this hotel is booked.”

“That’s what I said. I’m very sorry. But if you had phoned...” He gestured towards the groups of people walking through the busy lobby, sitting on the black leather couches and pushing carts of luggage.

“Every room?!”

The entire weekend I’d planned was going sideways. I was too—Meg was taking me by the elbow and dragging me out of the lobby.

“Come on, girl, it’s not worth it. Calm down, we’ll figure something out. C’mon.” She was leading me back to our car. “Calm down, it’ll be okay.”

“But it’s all falling apart,” I said, “I just wanted you to meet Mom and Dad, and now everything is happening. It’s not fair.” I broke down as we got to the car, sitting in the passenger seat and sobbed.

Meg closed the door and kept outside, leaning on the car. I could see her on the phone with someone. I made out words here and there, but nothing made sense. After a few minutes, Meg hung up and knocked on the window.

“That was your mom. I explained the situation, and she said we can stay at her place tonight.”

I looked at her, started to say thanks but instead I started crying. I just couldn’t focus. Meg crawled into the driver’s seat and put her arm around me, and I leaned into her shoulder. She started to cry, too, and soon we were almost in sync. I looked up, tried to pull myself together, but all I could manage was a choked-up “Thank you.”

I could see Mom as we pulled into the driveway. Meg took a moment, breathed deep, got out and talked to her. I tried to focus on calming down. I looked up again. It took me a moment, but I felt a rush of emotion seeing Mom and Meg embrace. Maybe things wouldn’t be so bad after all.

But then I thought about Lorraine, and I just couldn’t anymore. As Meg opened the door, tears welled to my eyes. I could barely hear mom ask if I was okay. I got out and ran inside to my old bedroom, crying all the way. I left Mom and Meg standing there, the car door ajar.

“She’ll be okay, she’s just sensitive.”

“I know, I know, I just wish she wouldn’t

spring stuff on me like this.”

“I just hate surprises. I mean, I’m anxious enough already, taking a trip to meet two people I don’t even know, and then she throws me a curveball...”

“Heh, welcome to the family. You wouldn’t believe the stunts she’s pulled on me over the years. One time in high school...”

I could hear Meg and Mom talking outside my door. I looked around the old bedroom; it’d changed a lot since I moved out. My mom had turned it into a spare bedroom, with a fancy dresser off to one side, and a futon. It looked hurriedly made up for us.

I got up, looked in the mirror and smoothed out my hair. My eyes were red and puffy, and my makeup was all smudged. I took a deep breath and opened the door.

“Well, look who’s here,” Mom smiled and handed me a cup of tea. “I was just telling Megan here about that time in high school when you...”

“Yes, yes,” I cut in, “I’m sure we all remember that one.” I smiled, glad my mom and Meg were talking. “You two getting along? It sounds like you’re fast friends already.”

“Yes, we’ve been talking since you arrived. Megan is a lovely woman.” She turned to Meg and exchanged smiles. “It was nice to finally meet her.”

I smiled back. “Uh, where’s Dad?”

“Oh,” replied Mom, “Him and your grandmother are off getting dinner. I think they’re getting a roasted chicken? Shouldn’t be too long now.”

I looked at the clock: shortly before six. I guess it was time to bring our stuff in from the car while Meg and Mom bonded over drinks.

At dinner, Meg and I sat across from each other, with Dad at the head of the table and Grandma Lorraine at the other end. Dinner was mostly silent, with my parents occasionally

asking Meg questions about herself, and me occasionally asking for more potato wedges. Lorraine, was, spent the dinner quiet. She only briefly acknowledged my existence when I passed her the gravy, and with a steely “Thank you.” where you could practically hear the period.

After we’d all finished dinner, Mom put a pot of coffee on and started tidying up, and Dad got the evening going by bringing up politics.

“How about that Horwath,” he said, knowing her name would set my grandma’s teeth on edge. “I think I’m going to vote NDP this fall.”

At this, I turned to Meg and we caught each other’s eyes. Her started to widen and I could feel her anxiety rise from across the table.

“That dreadful woman,” said Lorraine, “I don’t know, how can you even stand her!” Her face scrunched up and turned red. “I mean the way she carries on,” she continued, “She acts like she’s better than all of us.”

“Paul,” asks Mom, “How’s the coffee?”

Dad doesn’t reply—he cuts into Lorraine. “The Conservatives won’t make your bills any cheaper, and you know that!”

“With an attitude like that, Paul, no wonder your children turned out this way.”

The room fell silent. I stuck my feet out under the table, catching Meg’s leg. I could see her hand tightly gripping the edge of her chair. We briefly entwined our feet as I shot her a look trying to say “I’m so sorry.” Mom, meanwhile, reached across the table to refill my coffee. As she did, her hands shook, and she spilled some on the tablecloth.

“What’s wrong with my kids, Mom? Are Kate and Phil not subservient enough to the glorious leader?”

At that Lorraine abruptly stands up. “Paul, June. I think this dinner has finished. If you need me, I’ll be in my room reading.” She turned, walked away and up the stairs, putting a final finish to the dinner.

“Where’d Meg get off to?” I asked Mom while we did the dishes.

“Oh, she’s off with your dad, looking at his vinyl records.” She looked at the clock: quarter after eight. “I bet in a few minutes your dad and her will be best friends and he’ll break out the Steely Dan DVD.”

“Yeah, that sounds like him, all right.” I paused, drying a plate. “So, uh. What do ya think of her?”

Mom paused a moment too, lingering while she scrubbed a glass. “She seems nice.” She rinsed and handed it to me. “She really likes you, you know. When you were crying earlier, we talked. She just raved about you.”

“Yeah, she’s great, I’ve never felt like I do when I’m with her before.”

“Hold onto that feeling,” sighed Mom. She kept scrubbing the glass, even though it’d been scoured clean. “I’m just happy you’ve found someone. Someone, you know. Like you.”

I didn’t know what to say, so I just said thanks and reached out for the glass. She handed it to me and unplugged the sink. Together, we listened to it drain. Meg and Dad came up from the basement, Meg carrying a record. She shot me a wink.

It was getting late, and time for me to brush my teeth and take my evening meds. It took some digging to find the toothpaste, and once I’d started brushing my teeth the door opened.

“Oh!” It was Lorraine, who entered without knocking. She was in a nightgown, with a sheet mask covering her face. “I’m sorry, but up here, we lock doors when we use the bathroom.” She turned to leave but paused and turned back around, looking in my direction but avoiding eye contact.

“It’s Kate, right? That’s a pretty name. Well, listen Kate, if you’re going to do this, you’ll have

to do it right. The whole house could hear you crying earlier before dinner. I truly hope you’re not always that emotional. Nobody likes a woman who’s melodramatic and carries on like that.”

She cleared her throat and left without saying good night.

“Up late, kids?” Dad greeted us as Meg and I walked into the kitchen the next morning.

“Oh, you know, just taking the opportunity to spend a lazy Sunday in,” said Meg. We smiled as Dad handed us coffee. “I liked listening to records with you, Paul,” she added. “You’ve got some great music.”

“You’ve got good taste, too, Meg. Some of the people Kate used to drag home, they wouldn’t even know what a 45 is. It was nice seeing someone who can appreciate what goes into a good collection of singles.”

I smiled, listening to them talk about vinyl records while I sipped my coffee. Mom walked in from the other room, still wearing her terry cloth robe. She looked like she hadn’t slept well, and knowing her, was already on her second coffee of the day. While Dad and Meg talked about records, and Mom was getting a refill, I ventured a question about Lorraine. “What time does Her Highness get up?”

Mom signed and took another sip. “I wish you wouldn’t call her that, Kate. I remember when you two were a lot closer...”

“I know, I know. I’m only kidding. But when does she get up? I’d like to say goodbye before we leave today.”

Mom brushed her hair back and took another sip, slower this time. “I’m not sure. She likes to read in the mornings. Maybe it’d be better if you left before she got up?”

“I think she’s got a point,” added Meg. “Dinner last night got pretty tense. Maybe we should pack up. We’ll get one of those doughnuts you like.”

I sighed, and brushed my hair back, away from my face. “Okay, let’s.”

There wasn’t much to pack up—some clothing, toiletries, that sort of thing—and after a few minutes I told Meg I had to use the bathroom and snuck out. I walked down the hall and to the guest bedroom where Lorraine was staying. I hesitated, took a deep breath and knocked on the door. “It’s me,” I said. I could hear movement then the sound of a lock opening. She opened the door and took a step back. “Yes, it’s you, alright.”

“I see one of us knows how to lock a door,” I said with a grin. She just nodded and went back to her desk, closed her laptop and turned to face me.

“Here to say your goodbyes? Better be leaving soon if you want to beat traffic. But you know all about making people stop in their tracks, wouldn’t you?”

I sighed. “Why have you got to be like this?”

“I’ve always had to be hard on you, Kate.” She sat down on the bed and leaned forward. “You’ve always been sensitive. I had to toughen you up. Do you remember that summer you spent at my house? I made you chop wood and hike every day. I wanted to make a man out of you. And now...”

I stood up, bracing myself against the doorframe. “I’m an adult. I think I turned out pretty good. I don’t care if you think otherwise.”

“I just never thought you’d turn out.” She took a deep breath and held out a hand. “Well, like this. I never saw it coming.”

“Nobody did, Grandma. I spent so many years hiding it became second nature. And now that I don’t, I can’t explain how free I feel. Now naturally I’ve slipped into the role I was meant to play.”

“No, I expect you couldn’t. I know I can’t, either. It’s a big change, you know.” She looked up, making eye contact. “But it’s better than losing you. I’m glad you came.” She turned and

opened her laptop. “And there’s hope for you yet, Kate. It says here that Jenner person, she’s also like you, and she’s a Republican.”

I smiled, walked over and put my hand on her shoulder. “Good bye, Lorraine.”

“Goodbye Kate.”

We were all packed up and loading the car when Dad came out to help. “It’s been a slice,” he said with a grin. “Meg, next time you come up, we gotta go to the record store here, you’ll love it.” He laughed. “And Kate, don’t stay away for so long. There’s always a bed for you here.”

“How’s your mom taking our exit?” I asked.

He scratched his neck. “Well, about as good as I guess we thought she would. Before I came outside, she asked for your address. I guess that’s progress.”

Mom opened the door, and still clad in a housecoat, came outside with her coffee. She joined us, resting it on the roof of our car.

“Call me when you get home so I know you’re okay.”

I took the cup off the car and handed it back to her as Meg slammed the trunk shut. “I will, mom. Take care.” I reached in and hugged her. “I love you, Mom.” Meg reached over and leaned into the hug. We stood there, the three of us pressed together like doughnuts in a box. Dad leaned over and put his hand on my shoulder.

“Okay,” I said. “Time to go.”

Meg opened the passenger door for me, I climbed in and she got in on the other side. We started the car and pulled out. By the time we got onto the highway, the weekend had faded into my memory.



Photo: Muhammad Abdullah / Pixabay.

A First Sleepover

Alex Pugsley

hey a
i just had the most delicious sleep in the whole history of hu-
man sleeps. perhaps there are people in your laboratory who
are ready to see a movie now. call me when u get this?
x g

“Aubry McKee,” she said, picking up. “What are you doing working till eight o’clock on a Tuesday night?”

“Just going through some anomalies in the absorption spectra of methylene. You?”

“I just opened a bottle of wine.”

“I feel compelled to ask, at this juncture, is it red wine?”

“It is, yes. At this juncture. Shall I pour you a glass?”

I wrote down the specifics—Apartment 903, 170 West Lodge Avenue—and took the Queen streetcar further west than ever before, getting off at Lansdowne in the softest drizzle imaginable.

Her building was a twenty-storey fortress, its directory crowded with the names Bishundo, Castillo, Thamarajah, Gopalakrishnan, Chanthavong, Lu, and Kukushkin. Beside 903 was a blank label. I rang its buzzer.

“Hey—” It was Gudrun’s voice. “Who’s there?”

“Hello,” I said. “Would you tell Gudrun it’s her friend Clifford calling.”

“Oh, hello, Clifford Calling. I’ll be right down. This apartment’s a little hard to find with the elevator busted.”

Gudrun met me at the front door, her hair in braided pig tails. As she led me to a far stairwell, I noticed the building was a maze of corridors and defunct elevators and stained carpets. She was in a paint-stippled t-shirt, faded corduroys, socked feet, and going up the cement stairs, she had an undeodorized smell, as if she’d spent the last four days in grubby clothes. Most of the hem

of one trouser-cuff had come loose and a wet flap kept catching beneath her heel, leaving a smudge on every other step. I was sort of semi-affronted, thinking she had dressed casually on purpose, choosing not to sanction our meeting with dressing up. But there was a gravity and charm about her thrift store bohemia and, as she paused to see I was following her on the stairs, dipping her shoulder and smiling, I felt that beyond her odd clothes there was in Gudrun’s company a tacit conferral of respect for you as an autonomous thinking person.

“Hello again,” she said when we were inside her apartment. She kissed my cheek. “Hmm. Cold nose.”

“Really?”

“Little bit.” One of her pigtails was beginning to unravel and, as she looked at me, she fingered away some wisps of hair. “Hey there, Freckly Man. You look Scandinavian today.”

“I’ll settle for that.”

“Sort of Nordic. But you must take off your shoes.”

“And let my feet go bare?”

“Because they’re wet. And sit down?”

I complied, sitting on a dilapidated velvet sofa, and took in my surroundings. It was reassuring to be within the intimacy of a woman’s rooms, filled with so many moods and effects. The lingering smell of unknown perfume. Klimt and Chagall prints on the wall. A bouquet of upside-down roses in a window. Stacks of Penguin paperbacks piled on the floor. Through passages were other

rooms—a kitchen, a small serving pantry, a door which led to the bedroom. The obscure, engaging femaleness of it all quietly thrilled me.

“So what happened today?” she asked from the kitchen. “Do you want a drink? I’ve already polished off half a bottle of wine.”

“Sure I’d love some wine. Today?”

“Yeah. What’s up with methylene?”

“Very unstable. Free radical. Crazy spectra.”

“What does that mean?”

“It’s sort of the key to a lot of theories of chemical structure. But this kind of spectroscopy, it’s actually what people use to identify methylene in distant nebulae. I don’t know if you know Gerhard Herzberg, but he kind of pioneered the chemical analysis of interstellar molecules and—”

“Interstellar molecules? Like in outer space?”

“Yup. Methylene predominantly.”

“Is this true?”

“Where else would they be? Now Gerhard won the Nobel for this stuff, so if you’ve ever wondered how many molecules there are between Jupiter and Pluto—”

She appeared in the kitchen doorway. “People study this? There are molecules in outer space? Is this really real?”

“Like I’m going to lie about molecules in outer space. What kind of monster do you think I am?”

“I like you,” she said, returning to the kitchen.

“Excuse me?”

“When you talk like this. When you talk about what you’re doing. I’m glad you have a brain and aren’t just another pretty face.”

“I sure ain’t that. What about you? How’ve you been?”

“Oh?” She walked in with two glasses of wine. “The same probably.” She passed me a glass. “I had to clear the decks and so forth.” She smiled, a dimple flashing, then raised her glass. “I got that job by the way.”

“Congratulations.” I clinked her glass. “Cheers.”

“It’s Framboise.”

“Sounds French. You trying to get me drunk?”

“That’s my goal.” She sat in an armchair next to a brass floor lamp. “Because you got to have goals.”

I crossed my legs, my foot by chance knocking over a pile of paperbacks. I started restacking them and, after skimming the titles, asked if she’d ever read *War and Peace*.

“Well, you see,” said Gudrun, pulling on the switch-chain of the floor lamp, “it’s thick and it’s

good. So that’s a bad combination for me. I have kind of an extreme relationship to reading anyway. I start reading and can’t do anything else. I read on the train, the subway, the bus going off the road. I think I’ve read *War and Peace* twice? And *Anna Karenina* three times. Which is weird because I don’t really like the novel. But I love Anna.” She sipped her wine. “Anna Akhmatova has this theory about Tolstoy punishing Anna, actually. I don’t really follow her with all the Pushkin idolatry but the Tolstoy family gossip is wonderful.”

I nodded, as if I knew who Anna Akhmatova was, but really I was observing her as I could, noticing how her expressions revealed her to be beautiful.

“I was thinking this week,” continued Gudrun, “that I should be one of those people who doesn’t have books. Because you sort of have to take care of them. And I hate the idea they’re just sitting around unread. I feel like I should give them away.”

I said I’d read whatever she had.

“McKee—” Gudrun shivered. “Thank you for being so nice to me. When I arrived like a freak at your place.”

“Gudrun,” I said, “why else am I alive?”

She tilted her head to one side, exposing the smoothness of her throat, and I was aware of the possibility of kissing her—that of course the whole evening was a prelude to kissing her—when she set her wineglass on the floor and moved to me. “That’s romantic,” she whispered, kissing me, her lips soft on my own.

Rain was battering the windows, it was three in the morning, an ambulance siren wailed somewhere in the streets below, and I was in Gudrun’s bathroom in a tizzy of half-thoughts. After we had sex, I was not able to sleep and I was worried I would snore. As I lay on my back, Gudrun’s sleeping head on my shoulder, I kept my mouth closed because I had an idea I wouldn’t snore this way. I began to fall asleep, actually starting to dream—bizarre dreams of searching for Gudrun’s name in lower case letters in the telephone book and finding my own name five times—and I remember touching my tongue to the parched roof of my mouth, a connection which twitched me out of sleep. After three of four twitches, I eased myself out of bed and went to the bathroom where I was now staring at everything—a smeared Q-tip, a red Altoids

tin, a damp facecloth in the sink, Control Top Pantyhose on the showerhead, and, in the wicker wastebasket, our used condom, speckled with rust-coloured blood. I was full of neurotic ideas—if I was going to mess up this relationship by being too available, if she wanted me to put her finger in my ass—just quirky, ridiculous ideas mostly inappropriate to everything but they occupied me nonetheless, along with some unstable queasiness which ebbed and swelled so unstably I was kind of convinced I was having some sort of nervous breakdown—

Gudrun was lazing on the sofa under a child’s blanket, watching television, softly humming to herself. Beside her on the floor was a bottle of Orangina. “Hey, naked man,” she said.

“Hey yourself.”

“You all right?” She studied me. “Did we fuck until you puked?”

“Not yet.”

“But did you sleep?”

“No, I did not.”

“Why not?”

“I felt weird,” I said. “I was worried about my pelvic floor.”

“Hmm-mmm.” She changed the channel. “You’re having a panic attack, I can tell. That’s all right. I had mine this morning. Now I’m just having separation anxiety.”

“But I don’t have panic attacks.”

“Of course you don’t.” She flicked to another channel. “Ooh! *Law and Order*. I like the ones with Sam Waterson. I like Michael Moriarty, too. And I love Stephen Hill.” There was a burst of rain outside and Gudrun drew the blanket around her bare shoulders. Then she looked up at me. “I can’t really describe you,” she said, both gladdened and bewildered. “You’re sort of charming. You’re one of the few people I know who could be described as charming.”

“I’m actually flattered when someone likes me.”

“I do like you. As soon as I heard your voice on my answering machine, I knew I was going to like you. But I don’t know. I must seek you guys out. British guys with brown hair parted on the side. You guys have been haunting me since junior high. But why were you in the bathroom for so long, may I ask? Was it my period underwear soaking in the tub?”

“I had a weird dream and couldn’t sleep.”

“Oh my God so did I!” Gudrun reached for the Orangina. “I had two dreams actually. The first was the normal stuff where I’m driving a car from the backseat and my head falls off and you kick it out the window. That old chestnut. But the second one! I dreamt I had a second bathroom somewhere in this apartment. I was so happy to find it. There was like a secret passageway to another bathroom.”

“Sort of like Narnia. Except to a bathroom.”

“Yes,” she said. “Sort of. Like Narnia.” Gudrun examined the Orangina label. “I was trying to finish a sentence again. Which one was it?”

“Having two dreams?”

“No, I think it was about why aren’t you kissing me anymore is what I want to know.”

I leaned down and softly kissed her mouth.

“Oh—” she said. “I hope you always kiss me like that.” She made room for me on the sofa. “It’s hard to sleep on the first night. But I don’t think we should worry. We don’t have to figure it all out tonight.” She offered the Orangina to me.

I drank from the bottle. It tasted wonderful. I would forever associate its sparkling taste with this night, this apartment, the rain outside.

“So you’re okay?” asked Gudrun. “You sure it wasn’t the period underwear?”

“No, I was just having a premonition we’d fall in love and our lives would turn upside down.”

“We won’t fall in love. My socks are too stinky for that.” She gazed at me. “Uh-oh. I’m having it again.”

“What?”

“Separation anxiety.”

“But I’m sitting right beside you.”

“I know—” She lightly kicked my foot. “I’m just making sure you’re here.”

I laid back and Gudrun twisted on the sofa to rest against my chest. As I pulled her close, I was sort of amazed at our comfortableness and by the unexpected turn of circumstance—as if it wasn’t extraordinary to start the day in my own apartment and, quite unexpectedly, end up in someone else’s life.

“Mmm,” said Gudrun. “I might keep you, naked man. Even with your clicky jaw.” We stood up. Taking my hand, she placed it over her stomach and led me to the bedroom. “God,” she said, “it’s so nice just to be touched.”

In the bedroom, she wanted me to hold down her hands and bite her, not softly, but so my teeth catch and press on her skin. As I moved to kiss the tender inward of her thigh, she pushed her head back into the mattress, the smell of her unperfumed body in the bed, her fingers grabbing at my hair. Then she wanted me behind her, that stunning moment when she reached between her legs to hold and guide my cock within her and I remember wondering was there a verb for this? Then how foolish to think in words at all and the gorgeous bewilderment of being inside her overwhelming me and what I recollect best were her sighs as she later moved to touch herself, her head in profile on the futon, her words dissolving into nonsense swearing, the quick movements of her fingers below and how wet she was, drawing me toward her as she came, her face warm with blushing and then, the murmurs of our bodies subsiding, I collapsed on top of her, a trace of semen, like a melted pearl, gathered in her belly button.

Clemency

Frances Boyle

The sun is a gentle
jailor I can't escape.
If I wanted to, tilting
my head, I acquiesce
bound to vigil, mercy,

prayer. I couldn't
escape if I wanted
to shiver; its warm
entreaty. I'm bound
to vigil, mercy-prayers,

lightning strikes
thunder. Shiver from
warm I feel like.
I win when I lose
to lightning strikes,

and thunder shapes
clouds to my bidding.
I feel if I win,
I'll lose the sun.

Gentle jailor,
shape the clouds
to my bidding. I'll
tilt my head as
they acquiesce.

Note: the phrases "couldn't escape if I wanted to" and "I feel like I win when I lose" are borrowed from ABBA's song "Waterloo."

