

# FATHOM



A DALHOUSIE AND KINGS' CREATIVE WRITING JOURNAL

**EDITORIAL BOARD**

**Editors-in-Chief**

Meg Collins

**Contributing Artists**

Hayley Anne McStay

Claudia Ferraro

Emmy Sharples

**Managing Editor**

Sarah Carruthers

**Social Media Executives**

Nelly Bateman

Hayley Anne McStay

**Faculty Advisor**

Sue Goyette

**Editors**

Alexandre Affonso

Phoebe Knight

Chantal Adrusevich

Kavita Krueger

Nelly Bateman

Mark Leung

Sarah Carruthers

Hayley Anne McStay

Sophie Lawall

Samantha Michalczyk

Meg Collins

Pedro Montoya

Leah Douglas

Amy Nieforth

Taylor Dunne

Emmy Sharples

Claudia Ferraro

Leah Simonot

Tarini Fernando

Molly Sutherland

Elizabeth Foster

Anne-Marie Turenne

Anna Jewers

*The publication of this journal took place on the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq. Dalhousie University and the University of King's College are located in K'jipuktuk. The Peace and Friendship treaties in 1725 established the relationship between the Mi'kmaq and Wolastoqiyik and the British Crown. The treaties did not include the surrender of lands. These treaties are the guide and rules for the ongoing relationship for all nations living in Mi'kma'ki. We stand in solidarity with Mi'kmaq fishers.*

*The whole Fathom team wishes to extend a thank you to Sue Goyette and Mary Beth MacIsaac for their help and guidance in the creation of this journal.*

## NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

### *Meg Collins: co-Editor-in-Chief 2019/2020*

Quarantining and social distancing has been an unbelievably difficult time so far. I'm sure everyone else working on Fathom this year can say the same, but it's been especially hard to find the energy, patience, space or calm to do any editorial work, or even just complete a simple task. We can't work the way we used to, or communicate in the same ways. Many of us don't have the time we used to have, and there is so much more suspended anxiety than before. That is very, very real. But regardless, throughout this tumultuous year, we have still done our best to give you a complete printed copy of Fathom 2019/2020.

I'm happy to say that we've reached a landing full of beautiful pieces, as well as thoughtful editing and collaboration. I wish I could say this in person, but I really appreciate all of our editors who stuck around or even just started the year with us. Thank you, as well, to our contributors for their beautiful words, to Mary Beth McIsaac and the English Department for its support, as well as our wonderful Faculty Advisor, Sue Goyette, who gave us more support than we could ever repay. To everyone who's currently reading our journal: thank you for taking the time. We all deeply appreciate your time with us.

### *Sarah Carruthers: Managing Editor 2019/2020*

When Dalhousie closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic in March, there was much uncertainty about every aspect of university life. Fathom was no exception, and as a creative writing journal, it posed extra challenges. Everything was slower than before, we played lots of email tag, and like everyone else during the pandemic, there were many Zoom meetings. What did not change, however, was the dedication of our whole team. Our editors continued to edit and contribute, and the pieces in the journal from our authors were still amazing. Although Fathom's launch is late this year, I never for a moment doubted our whole team's ability to complete the publishing process.

With or without the pandemic, there are people I must thank in what has been a yearlong process. The English department for its financial and institutional support. Mary Beth MacIsaac, the department secretary, who always made sure we had everything we needed, big or small, and a smile to go with it. Our faculty advisor, Sue Goyette, was never without wise advice for us, or a gentle push in the right direction. Our editors who provided countless eyes, experiences, and thoughts as the journal took shape. Each person who bravely submitted their work to Fathom and the authors included whose voices you will encounter as you read the journal. And most of all, Meg and Pedro, whom I can say taught me much about working together and have become dear friends. Thank you all once again for what has been a strange, extraordinary year.

## CONTEXT

### POETRY

Nellianne Bateman .....	1
Evie Bennet.....	3
Hannah Van Den Bosch.....	4
Catherine Charlton.....	6
Meg Collins.....	8
Olivia Hanson.....	9
Anna Jewers.....	13
Liam Kennedy-Finner.....	17
Alison Kitt.....	18
Kavita Krueger.....	20
Madeleine McIvor.....	22
Colton Morris.....	24
Eilidh Ram.....	25
Emmy Sharples.....	27
Corrie Watt.....	29
Jack Williams.....	30

### FICTION

Alex Affonso.....	32
Nellianne Bateman.....	34
Andrew Burroughs.....	36
Tarini Fernando.....	38
Elizabeth Foster.....	41

Lindsay Godbout.....44

Oyinda Laguniu.....47

Sophie Lawall.....51

**NON-FICTION**

Jeanine Brandt.....53

Michael Ciccia.....56

Brooklyn Connolly.....57

Anya Deady.....59

Audrey Green.....62

Katie Lawrence.....65

Sabina Wilmott.....66





# POETRY

NELLIANNE BATEMAN

*'Lungs'*

Lungs are what grow

When saplings

Nuzzle supple skin,

And slip through

The rib cage,

Locked so tightly

Against the winter air.

Trees are what grow

When the earth is

Sliced open,

When fingers puncture

Sleeping soil

To reveal branches,

With membranous

Leaves that are so young,

So young that they

Have not known

The winter air.

*'Sunflowertoos'*

Sunflowers have toes  
at the bottom of their roots,  
you know.

In the moonlight,  
they tap dance with the moles  
and the worms and the snails,  
and this is why some people  
cannot sleep.

We call them Lunatics  
because we think  
they are in love with the moon,  
but really, they are in love  
with a sleepily blank gaze  
and tender petals  
that refuse to flutter shut.

These lunatics -- these insomniacs,  
share the secret of clandestine  
cantos with these Sun  
(moon?)  
flowers, because they too, refuse  
to flutter their eyelids shut.

These flowers,  
they would rather stay awake  
and dance with the moles  
and the worms and the snails  
and the owls.

Most especially the owls.

The very best kind of lunatics.



EVIE BENNETT

*portrait of annihilation*

bones torn and

tugged

heavenward

in

violent

yawn of colour, body dis

placed, ripped open

opera-balcony-torso

bloodless

holding

memories of white trees

& sprays of plant life

as if

in starbirth

re:

birth

here,

under monstrous-alien-halo

a pool of deadwater, guns

rotting in ground, minds cancerous,

devoured--

refracted souls

flowering.

**HANNAH VAN DEN BOSCH**

*Anyango-Sanyu*

I know where she has been.

Mama Atim says so,

and she is always right.

She says

She can no longer look at her Jambula tree

Anyango – Sanyu she says

they have ruined it.

dust hits the lamplight,

when I am reading my letters,

when I am cooking my dinner,

always dust.

Anyango, you belong to me

as I yell and yell

you belong to me

Anyango

you burn my lungs, my eyes

why you do this to me Anyango

*Eh fire, burns mama,*

*Eh fire, burns. It is burning in Tororo, It is burning, It is burning, It is burning.*

We do the right things, Mama Atim says,

Anyango – Sanyu

We do right.

We only love them,

We only love our daughters.

CATHERINE CHARLTON

*Duck! Duck! Duck!*

I hear a cry

I turn, I look, I seek

Is it a mallard?

Perhaps a loon?

That'd really be a treat!

I gaze across the landscape,

I look across the pond,

Alas, I see no darling ducks

Of which I am so fond

And then at last I realize,

It was not a duck at all,

It was in fact a bullet,

A fast-approaching leaden ball

It is too bad I misunderstood

The command that had been given

It wasn't a call to go bird-watching

It was a warning to do as bidden

Alas, this does not matter now

As I rest six feet under,

I should have ducked, I shouldn't have looked,

What a stupid, stupid blunder!

MEG COLLINS

*Surrender Sensual Images*

Lay myself down for you

Kissed under your nails

Back to back, you trickle into my spine,

Your fingertips soft—

What if I could push you down

On a solid stream of instructions

Instead, I'll fit to you, limp-doll,

Promise me my body back at the end of night,

A sequence of bones rattling when I return,

Hungering for my bed,

Now lonely for discipline,

Some parts still under you.



## OLIVIA HANSON

### *May Diatribes*

Isle of Flightless Birds

what do you do

in the early dawn

when your isle sinks

deeper?

Behind the Sea

you see scrambling limbs

soaked from murky water and sweat.

Youth

half spent on land,

half spent kayaking above that land.

Time disappears alongside

shrinking land.

Panic sets in before

mud slicked knees.

This mess is mine

*all these things*

gone to rushing water.

A week of mess

equates to a year of work;

this mess does not clean itself.

Almost

the water is calm.

You are left stranded upon driftwood.

Almost as if the mess never existed,

almost as if the water was not bone chilling;

you are no longer swept out

*to the riptide.*

Be

all you have to be.

Take it all at once,

sift through and organize.

In the Light

lay out your earthly possessions,

lay out your waterlogged body.

Let the light fix you,  
warm you up.

As It Was,  
the world is as it was.

*Primrose*

It is incomprehensible that place,  
tiny and out-dated by technology.  
Alone, separated by long stretches of dirt and sand.  
Wildflowers flourish there.  
Grasshoppers, bees, and peacocks all reside there.  
And when exhaustion is embedded into your bones,  
when your hips ache and your hair is piled high  
held up by sweat; it is everything and anything.  
It is the kiss of the sun, the support of the earth,  
a bed of grass.  
It is spending every ounce of your energy into work.  
The smell of wood shavings and hairspray.  
It is quiet after a long day of silence,  
warmth after heat, and sleep after absence.

ANNA JEWERS

*Cleaning Agent*

My reliance on alcohol

is a hand-me-down

I didn't ask for.

My go-to cleaning agent—

the last time I used it

to wash you out of my system

like a stubborn stain,

all the colours ran

and I haven't caught up to them

since.

So,

I take the next load

off my shoulders,

set it for delicates

and hope for better  
the next time around.

It's a destructive cycle

where I can't even  
hang myself up to dry

since I'm still hung up  
on you—

but maybe

you weren't the mess  
I should've been trying  
to clean up.



*Ghost Story*

My body is not a temple—

it's a haunted house

and you're the phantom limb

that lingers long after

it was cut off for good.

A memory in the

backyard cemetery of my mind,

laid to rest in

an unmarked grave.

There is no respect

left to pay.

I drink spirits

to exorcise the demons,

my stomach a cellar

for storing booze—

somehow, it never clicks

how it only adds to the haunting.

Yours being the sole presence

that has the power to possess me,

I've become comfortable

residing within a constant state of fear.

Nothing scares me now,

except

how your name

can pop up any time

and turn a casual conversation

into a ghost story.

**LIAM KENNEDY-FINNER**

***PhotoGeneration in Twelve Steps***

A camera lens is an eyewitness, lying

facedown in the garden by the violets

Birthday parties and soundstage landings- POP!

Right to the moon. The story of the eye is held

in nitrate film canisters,

rolling in a burning building.

Mounted crosshairs, bright light flashes, shooting

a magazine's worth of oil painting subjects, exposed

Skin drying on the page, X-rated eyes

polaroid-red like two balloons, searching

For the ninety-seven others just like them- Stop,

and hold the truth like water in your hands.

**ALISON KITT**

*Love Lost at Sea*

Pushing forward a stalwart ship,  
Tacking back and forth, hip to hip.  
Sailing among the distant highlands,  
Embraced fortuitously by fruitful islands.  
Fortitude and fortune fall into fathom,  
Where desire opens up a watery chasm.  
Sailors doth revel in the profane,  
Never to shirk from sultry strain.  
Exploring a map creamy and soft,  
Guiding to Paradise, it's held aloft.

Shipwrecks haunt the rocky shores,  
Warning reason to lock its doors.  
Desire skims the waves behind,  
Twirling about the ropes til twined.  
While Love flees to run its chains,  
Plunging deeper into abyss its' reigns.  
Virtue's balms lie hidden away,  
Mending put off day by day.

The map gets torn in petty wrath.

The course diverges from the path.

The chasm widens, the storm arrives.

Passion in its multitude contrives.

Spirit chimes in mute dismay,

As wooden beams begin decay.

The anchor tears limb from limb

Love's rudder turns at every whim.

The stormy Eye nowhere be found,

Leaving Body to be drowned.

**KAVITA KRUEGER**

**06/11/2018 10:47:34 pm**

*Trigger warning: suicide, depression*

She took me to the edge of the world today.

She said she'd started going there a lot after I'd left last year.

I asked if it was to think,

she said it was to not be at home.

The wind whistled through the playground equipment like distant screaming.

I said I understood.

It was the kind of place you'd come to tell someone that you loved them,

or that you were thinking of killing yourself.

Neither of us said anything.

We ate ice cream on the swings with our backs to the ocean;

the yellow glow of a streetlight illuminated our feet and

the fact that we wouldn't look at each other.

My shoes dragged through the wood chips, exposing what was underneath.

*"I don't know if I can do this anymore"*

Lightning flickered.

A roll of thunder

pooled into the silence between us, disguising that our throats had filled up with chalk.

*"oh."*

My ice cream dripped onto the ground, soaking into the uncovered earth.

She whispered that we should go to the car,

just as it started to pour.



*your friend who was there when you died told us it was not, in fact, raining*

The air is indifferent

to who it decays and who it nourishes

and when one becomes the other

The wind screams of its own accord,

neither for you nor with me

## MADELEINE MCIVOR

### *The Harpy*

She is pinned to the cave  
By her throat  
Hanging by death  
Living by pain  
At night she is awake  
Still  
Her eyes closed  
Concentrating  
Pain contained  
Meditating  
The sun comes quickly  
And she begins to tire  
Focus  
Dripping  
Slowly from her fingertips  
The tide creeps  
Into the cave  
Carrying liquid gold  
From the rising sun  
Her eyelids lift  
Twitching  
Her hands and feet  
Flinching  
At daylight  
In the heat  
She cries  
Blood and salt  
Mixing gurgled sobs  
Choking her into  
Mad rage  
Uncontrolled in  
Desperation she

Screeches

With pain ridden madness

While the tide recedes

In fear

**COLTON MORRIS**

*Cerebral Ruminations on Modernity*

Fingers in a furious blaze

The completion of circuits

Initiate a complicated series of events

Constructed with ones and zeros, pixel by pixel

Displayed by complex mathematics

Orchestrated by plastic on plastic

Directed by fingers with practiced dexterity

Conceptualized by a mind evolved over millions of years

Fueled by a bloodline that extends far back to The Original Ancestors

Utilizing knowledge developed over thousands of years of

Societal Cultural Exchanges

Comprehended fully by only those with extensive knowledge of

Esoteric and Forbidden Cultures

*“OwO Wats This”*

## EILIDH RAM

*untitled (or, the fixer).*

my-identity's a churning sea with  
ever-changing charts,  
oscillating wildly round a  
bleeding, beating heart.  
i fix what's others' to my-self  
until that's all i see.  
'cause all my time spent fixing them  
i need not spend on me.  
my-identity's a sudden squall,  
and so's my-sanity.  
but if it's me or if it's them  
remains a my-stery.

*Zip.*

On some days, all you do is pull  
And pull, and never do you move.  
The disparate sides cannot connect,  
And never do you move, my dear, no.  
Never do you move.  
Your fingers pinch,  
Your wrists complain,  
You reef and tug your arms to pain,  
You sweat and scream and pop a vein,  
But never do you move, my dear, no.  
Never do you move.  
The disparate sides cannot connect,  
And dear, you've snapped the zipper's neck,  
And some days, all you do is pull,  
And pull, and cry, and try, and lose,  
And never do you move, my dear, no.  
Never do you move.

## EMMY SHARPLES

### *Burning*

she felt

the old man stiffen.

Hands clasped on her stem

flakes of bark and ashes of skin. Writen

into a wrinkled speculum.

She longed

to please him with leaves of burning red.

Hers a greying brown caught in the old man's throat

leaving words unsaid.

He lay silent.

she screamed

as he reached down in his pouch

and pulled a single match.

Her body began to slouch

and the old man sat and laughed.

She wondered

as she toppled

into ash,

if the old man who uncoupled

her,

ever loved her back.



## CORRIE WATT

### *Blue*

Blue. We all know blue. It's not the same.

The blue when I'm blue - it's not the same  
as the blue of the dragon dancing along the wall  
of the Forbidden City: a strong and serpentine blue.

The blue when I'm blue - it's not the same  
as the blue of the bright delphinium between  
storm-broken sunflowers in my chipped pottery jug:  
a blue glowing in an ultraviolet rainbow of blues.

The blue when I'm blue – it's not the same  
as the blue in the sky above this splintered linden tree  
planted fifty years ago, a twig from the dooryard of a now-dead friend  
vanquished by Dorian: it's a cold and mournful blue.

The blue of the warm sea in the Bahamas today  
is nothing at all like the blue when I'm blue.  
No, its blue is now a Dorian blue, dark and murderous,  
crying out: "What if?" and "Why?"  
We all know blue.

## JACK WILLIAMS

### *Self-Portrait as a Cup*

i can be fragile.  
it's true.

it doesn't take much  
force to make me  
shatter.

it doesn't take too long  
before i crack under  
pressure.

i get stained easily  
and take forever  
to wash clean.

but  
i can be filled  
with water,<sup>1</sup>

or  
i can be filled  
with juice,<sup>2</sup>

or  
i can be filled  
with wine,<sup>3</sup>

and on good days,  
i spill  
over.

1

Water is the most  
destructive force on  
Earth. It carves dirt  
and stone and can  
drag you under its  
rapids. It can also be  
still and tranquil (and  
you need It to live).

2

Juice:

- as in juicy
- as in sweet
- as in nectar
- as in full of life, pulp,  
flesh, and chewy bits  
that  
are hard to  
swallow
- as in sour and tart on  
the tip of your tongue
- as in fruit
- as in Eden

3

You get better with age. You flood  
my  
mouth. You fill my tongue and now i  
can't  
say anything but how sweet You are  
and  
how dry i have been. You open  
yourself  
and pour into me. You stop my heart.  
You  
get me drunk.



FICTION

## ALEX AFFONSO

### *To Roam Forever*

As my body spun, the image framed by my helmet switched from the space station to the glaring sun; where I came from, and where I'm going. With time, the yellow orb grew wider and the station shrunk. It didn't take a genius to know my fate.

"Clarissa?" a blue LED light appeared on the corner of my vision. "How much oxygen do I have left?"

"Your oxygen levels are at eighty percent," replied the virtual assistant. "You have ten minutes and thirty-two seconds left of fresh air."

"How long until I can't stand the heat of the sun?"

"At your current speed, it will take you eight minutes and fourteen seconds before the temperature reaches a fatal level."

"Great."

Thinking back on the choices that led me here, I feel only regret. Well, also self-hatred—for not double-checking if the tether was safely attached to my suit—and fear—because of my impending death—but mostly regret. For the first time in my life, I understand the popular expression "YOLO."

#

I remember the first day my father "caught me in the act." I was staring at my computer screen, my hands moving faster than my mind. It had seemed as though my soul had left my body and was now a part of the world in front of me. I was so lost in this nirvana that I didn't hear the footsteps coming down the stairs. When my dad opened the door, reality crept in all at once; it was like being suddenly woken from a vivid dream. Before my brain had time to readjust, my father had already seen the window that was open on my computer. I closed it in a hurry, but it was too late. I tried to lie about it, but it was no use. And so I spent the next hour or so hearing a lecture on how writing was a waste of time.

#

I wish my parents could see me now. Would this have happened to a writer? Unless NASA suddenly decided to publish stories and poems about space, I don't think so. It's then easy to blame my dad's stubbornness and my mom's guilt-trips for the circumstances I find myself in. They were the ones who designed and built my career, who pushed me towards space. My whole life I've been following the carpented path they set before me—roaming towards my death.

#

During my high school years, my parents took charge of my registration process—not surprisingly, they didn't pick Creative Writing. So, like any other teenager, I rebelled. Since I lacked the courage to openly defy them, I did it in secret—I joined the Living Poets Society. They met at room 209

during lunch-time, thus involving no risk of my parents finding out about it; as far as they were concerned, I did my homework in the library during the break.

Meeting with fellow writers was the best part of my day. Someone would start off each session by reading a poem they wrote, then we would discuss it as a group until lunch was over. I skipped my turn a couple of times before being peer pressured to read my own work. I stuttered and jumbled my words at first, but then the teacher in charge of the group, Mr. B, asked me to stop. “Pretend you are in your own space,” he said. “Pretend you are alone, in your safe zone.” And so I did. I closed my eyes, imagined my room to its last detail, then focused my eyes on the pages in front of me. I continued reading. Once I was done, the silence was broken by a round of applause. Before anyone could make a comment about my poem, I said I had to pee and rushed out into the hallway. When in the bathroom, I looked at the mirror and saw something odd, unfamiliar. Something I hadn’t seen in a long time, and which I deemed impossible. There was a smile on my face.

#

Just thinking about that day makes me grin. The space station could now fit in my hand, my suit had initiated emergency mode, and my face was drenched in sweat. Still, that memory broke through the sorrow surrounding me and brought a glimpse of joy to my heart. That was the first time someone else was exposed to my writing. I was anxious and afraid at first, but proud afterwards. I wasn’t proud when I saw an A+ written on the headings of my assignments, or when I read the email offering me a job at NASA, or even when I learned I had been chosen to go on my first space mission. Those weren’t *my* accomplishments, unlike that poem.

According to Clarissa, I had about four minutes left; could be more, or could be less. I felt suffocated and sultry. At least closing my eyes helped with the dizziness, and allowed me to picture myself somewhere that brings me comfort—not my bedroom this time, but room 209. Thinking of that place reminded me of unfollowed dreams, of unwritten poems and unpublished books. My parents are now gone for almost five years, and not once since then have I sat down, opened a blank document, and started to type. At the time I didn’t think I could, but I did.

#

Although the space station was now but a dot in my vision, my suit was still connected to it. If I hadn’t insisted on coming alone, I would have someone to contact. Now there’s nothing to do but wait to die. Unless...

“Clarissa?” the blue light appeared. “Could you record what I say and send it to the space station once I’m done?”

“Certainly,” replied the assistant. “What would you like me to record?”

I took a deep breath. “As my body spun, the image framed by my helmet switched from the space station to the glaring sun...”

THE END

*La Vie en Rose*

I have often debated the merits of leaving my alarm tone as it is; there is something about using necromancy to rouse myself from sleep that doesn't sit right with me. The dead should stay dead. I have never been fond of reminiscing.

Either way, I wake up to 'La Vie en Rose' every morning. At least it's the 1945 original recording, not that abominable English translation playing in Walmart these days. 'It's like they've taken all the life out of it,' I'd say to Shannon in the middle of the coffee aisle as the song came on over the speakers. I hated coming across as one of those grumpy old men who have nothing good to say about anything; I didn't want to live up to a stereotype—even if it was partly true. Some things simply drive me to abandon my principles, I guess. The one thing I could hold on to was that I loved Shannon, the eternal optimist, who, as she added to our cart some overpriced sugary swill of a coffee mix that we certainly did not need, would reply: 'I think it's kind of sweet.' The song would change, Shannon would float into the next aisle, and I would take the coffee out of the cart as she looked for an overpriced pasta sauce or something.

Some mornings, when the alarm goes off, I don't believe I am casting a spell over myself. Sometimes, sleep-addled, I think there's a tuning fork buried in my brain—like the one I got Shannon for our first anniversary all those years ago—but instead of A-flat, it rings 'La Vie en Rose.'

When she was still well enough to give lessons, I would go into her practice room after whatever kid had left. I always found her with the fork clenched between her teeth, as if I hadn't walked in. With her eyes glazed down and her body hunched over an instrument half her size, she would run her fingers over the frets like she used to run them over my knuckles to soften my fingers and palms, so they could fold into her own. She would hum a melody over the A-flat, happy to float in whatever daydream that was conjured by the fork ringing through her jaw, given texture by her hands slipping over the frets, softening them back into tune.

The note became her world, and whatever song she created was her way of floating on its wave instead of letting it take her under, as it did the entire room. I'll be damned if her stacks of sheet music didn't quiver, if the music stand didn't bend under the weight of the coming tidal wave. She was oblivious to the impending destruction, unless, by some accident, I tripped or sighed or muttered something that wasn't quite on pitch. She would look up, take the tuning fork out of her mouth—as if she hadn't realized she was holding it there in the first place—and thank me for the coffee I had left on top of the piano.

Feeling like I'd shattered something, I would go into my study next door and put 'La Vie en Rose' on the record player to cover up the sharp silence before it shattered Shannon, too. And then the cello would start, tucked somewhere beneath the base notes of Piaf's accompanist. In such cases, the cello was often out of tune, but I don't think Edith or I minded—even if Shannon most certainly did.

These days, there's this halfmoment between sleeping and waking where I think it's Shannon humming as she goes about her morning routine instead of the alarm going off. I get half a mind to shout into the darkness that if she's gonna wake me up, she should make me coffee, or at least sing something a little less sentimental. She would call out, less angrily than I, that it was the song from our first dance, that she wanted to hold on to whatever dream from the night before had made her nostalgic, that perhaps there were worse ways to wake up.

Then the room turns upside down in the silence. I am reaching to turn on my oxygen machine instead of for a cup of coffee in Shannon's hands. But the asbestos they found in our walls—an awful lot of it balled up like storm clouds in the wall between her practice room and my study—wasn't one of the tidal waves she could float over. There wasn't any tune she could sing to cancel out its waves as they lashed against her lungs like they are lashing against mine.

At this point, I am sure 'La Vie en Rose' still plays somewhere between my coughs and sputters and the sound of my lungs imploding because there is not enough air or music or oxygen in this room—

but then my lungs take a caustic leap,

and the music stops.

I am alone in the breaking dawn.

*A Sermon On The Bouquet of Flowers That Is Laid On a Grave (An Ode To The Passion)*

On a muggy August morning my brother and I were sandwiched into the 5 train, downtown-bound. Stops came and went and, despite interminable construction, our journey lurched forward. And now, sitting at my desk, working away at an unevenly cut grapefruit, I think back on our conversation, the other patrons, the setting, our faces, looks being cast our way. Desperately, I try to recreate a thought-strand that came over me that morning, of which I was unable to think clearly over the din of the train, in the presence of that work-bound peloton. I suppose I had grown accustomed to the type of thinking typical to a summer spent variously in the foothills of Vermont and at our family's small house in the islands of Lake Champlain. Though the noise shook me into a delirium of awareness, my mind became more cognizant of the multiplicity of strands that had always been there, which were all at once taught. I felt more susceptible, more malleable, more penetrable than, I suspect, many of my co-habitants, Jeb included, as if this damning vision, this crushing immobility, had opened a new understanding of the innate oneness of everyone in the train. Although at the time this was quite frustrating, I now realize I may have stood at a privileged place, albeit hazardous, to come to some interesting conclusions. I think I was thinking about love and sacrifice; spurred by the ostensible dynamics of New York's public transportation—each person in their seat, engrossed in whatever media best distracts them from the ostensible despondence out of which they try to carve a sliver of light which might cover their cowering existences. Earlier, I had been reading Simone Weil's work on *malheur mère* and I was struck by that blind mechanism which had done so much for some and so little for others, yet left them all equal access to a subjective experience of human happiness, if only they were to take hold of it. What follows is your image, your first-person account, which you can strap to the main narrative: a seriously tender boy unwittingly receives an inhale of factory smoke, harsh on his pink lungs, and after a few moments of real anguish, he exhales. Please do not mistake me for the flower, and please do not cry disanalogy, but, re-tether your mind to the fact of the matter.

---

And as I looked at a small old man clutching a fistful of flowers, I began to dream. Tumbling down through the mysterious channels of my inattentiveness I came suddenly upon the same old man, and now, with a resigned and regal passion, he spoke.

"And here is an ode to flowers laid on a grave, doomed to wilt in perfect synchrony with the corpse rotting six feet below. Who are you? You brave and beautiful thing. I love you. Where have you come from? From where have you amassed the bravery to be beautiful in this place, full of the dead, or to commit your life to dying alongside the dead, in a hushed solidarity? Oh, yes, I love you endlessly, and after ends meet ends my love for you will sift abstractly through the space you once inhabited. For you are love for its own sake. You are a love which exists to be sold to demonstrate the *hope* that one's love might do that very thing—sift abstractly to the beloved, I mean. You are grown by an entity who prostitutes your love thus, who cares not for you, but takes advantage of the love which you selflessly give to the world, expecting nothing in return. Fostered in that indignation, that greed, that merchant's driving force, which whispers gently in his ear, *live*, you became love purest. You became love that passes through the distance we ourselves cannot not traverse.



Sentimentality is only a love which is felt passing by—caught, as it searches for its beloved. And you feel it at some stage in its perilous journey, unshelled, uncloaked, vulnerable.”

The man now began to weep softly into his handkerchief. He composed himself and looked up at me with renewed sureness, and carried on in a louder tone.

“And sometimes, when love is not easy to find—because maybe it was poorly directed from its onset—it will look and look, and its residual effervescence, following always in its wake, will grace the hearts of all those it encounters along its way. Maybe when the love you feel most strongly strikes with its strength, that love is meant for you, and has not gone a long distance. And maybe when love is harder to discern from hate, from jealousy, from lust, it has travelled a long way, and has been pared down from all those whom it graced on its long journey. But, still, it finds its way to you, a glimmer of something it once was, what it was intended to be. When you feel this love, the love of the flower you see on a grave, who is looking for its beloved and not for you, you can take it as a smaller love, or you can let it permeate your being, and flow endlessly through you, to feed a love within you, that can grow immeasurably. But, ultimately, be grateful to those flowers laid down to represent this love, the passionate love who lives only to transmit or represent this love, who dies a martyr of the one true cause that brightens any human life.”

Coming back into the light of the present moment, I felt the damp air of the train give way to the hissing sound which trumpeted my exit from the tube. And time was perverted as I took the inaugural step over the crack between the train and the platform, as my foot dangled loosely over that indeterminate space, and I thought again of the old man, who had remained on the train. But fighting all premonition, I pushed forward into the crowd, remembering the sentiment that he had helped me find that morning, amidst the dirt and all the screens, thinking always.

Yours most sincerely,

Andy B-H

## TARINI FERNANDO

### *A Bike Ride*

The fat drop was glossy and red. It burst through the broken layer of skin on Tillie's knee. More drops soon appeared. Some small. Some big. Some slid in jagged lines down her pale, white shins.

Tillie felt a strange urge to lick them off. The scratches didn't hurt that much, but there was a lot of blood.

"Gross!" Mara yelled, looking wide-eyed at the scratched knee.

"I'm gonna faint," Dylan said. He stumbled backward and pretend-fainted. He laughed at his own joke while lying on the ground, but the girls weren't paying attention to him.

"Everyone shut up," Anisha said. "Are you okay?" She looked down at her friend with concerned eyes.

"I'm fine," Tillie said. "I need a band-aid."

Tillie felt the hot air weighing down on her skin as she limped toward Anisha's blue house at the end of the road. Anisha walked beside Tillie, pushing both of their bikes along.

Anisha thrust open the heavy front door of her house. The smell of shrimp curry and spices filled the girls' noses.

"Ammi—we need a band-aid!" Anisha yelled.

"What happened?" Anisha's mom turned off the stove and came over to the two girls climbing onto her living room couch. She knelt to look at Tillie's knee.

"*Chi chi*. You okay, darling?" Anisha's mom looked up at Tillie and touched the girl's pink face. The bangles on her wrists softly tinkled as they slid down her arm. Tillie loved the sound.

"What were you doing, huh?" Anisha's mom looked sternly at her daughter.

"Nothing!" Anisha yelled. "Tillie fell when we were going around the circle."

"I told you not to go fast spinning around. You always fall and get hurt. *Chi*, you told Tillie to do it, huh? Now look."

Anisha looked down and started to cry. Tillie didn't know why, but she began crying too.

Anisha's mom sighed, and her voice changed to something sweet. She told them both not to cry. She went to the fridge and got them each a popsicle. Then, she opened a cupboard above the stove and got a clear bottle and a cotton swab.

"Close your eyes. Anisha, give her your hand. Hold onto it tight, darling. I'll go really fast."

Tillie sniffled quietly as the stinging liquid touched the underlayers of her skin. Anisha's mom put a blue band-aid over the wound.

"You're so brave," Anisha's mom said and smiled up at Tillie. "Anisha always cries even when she gets little scratches," she said with a laugh.

"No I don't!" Anisha yelled with an angry frown on her face.

"Stop that now," Anisha's mom said sternly. "Stay and eat, Tillie."

...

Tillie walked her bike up the road when it started to get dark. The air was cold now, and it felt sharp on her bare legs.

She looked up and saw a million stars in the sky. Even though she was full from the rice and curries, Tillie felt so light. She smiled and ran home with the bike at her side, so fast it was like she was floating.

"Dad, guess what?" Tillie yelled as she climbed the front wooden steps of her house, pulling the bike up with her. She placed it carefully against the wall between a rusted barbecue and a stack of tires. She closed the screen door behind her as she walked inside.

"Dad, guess what?" Tillie said a little louder.

She walked into the living room and found her dad lying dead asleep on the couch. The TV was on and playing a wildlife documentary. Tillie watched as a leopard raced toward a frightened antelope. She stared at the screen just long enough to see the antelope get away.

"Dad," she said again and nudged his shoulder, "guess what? I got a huge cut on my knee, but I didn't even feel it, and I didn't cry."

Tillie's dad snored.

"Dad," she said a little louder and nudged his shoulder a little harder.

Then, her dad jolted awake. He quickly turned his body around and flung up his right hand, which held a brown bottle.

The glass met quick and hard with Tillie's forehead. She stumbled backward against the coffee table covered in used paper plates.

“Oh shit,” her dad grumbled half-awake. “You okay, baby? Shit. I’m sorry.”

“I’m okay,” Tillie said quietly and rubbed her head.

“Come here. Did it hurt? Lemme see.”

Tillie’s dad pulled his daughter by the arm toward him. He stretched open his red eyes and pushed his daughter’s hair back from her forehead to see if there was a bruise. He made a little grunt and put her arm down.

“I’m okay,” Tillie said louder this time.

“Good,” he said and rolled back on the couch. “Turn the TV off, baby. I’m really tired. I got work in the morning. Make yourself some chicken fingers if you want.”

“Okay.”

“And go to bed right after.”

“Okay.”

“It’s late.”

“Okay.”

Tillie turned off the TV. She didn’t want to eat again. She didn’t know exactly what she did want. So, she just went upstairs to her room.

Tillie sat on her bed and looked outside her small window. The stars were even brighter now in the black summer sky. She could hear the loud chirps of crickets. Some from outside, some from inside.

Her head was really throbbing now, but she didn’t cry. She wondered why she cried before but not now. She wondered why she couldn’t control it. Tillie thought she should get an ice pack for her head, but she couldn’t remember where her mom used to keep them.

Then, Tillie felt the heavy feeling again. The feeling that sat at the bottom of her stomach, like it always did. It could just be loneliness, but Tillie felt it was something more.

She didn’t want to go to sleep. She didn’t feel like crying. She wanted to go outside. She wished she could feel light and empty again.

## ELIZABETH FOSTER

### *Pink Carnations*

The flowers on the table shouldn't be alive, but their yellow-green leaves point to the sky as if they'd been cut from the earth mere hours ago. Their petals are firm, pink and fragrant, and the light streaming in from the window makes them glow, illuminating the faint purple veins that web out like tree roots. Outside, the leaves are falling off the trees, looping through the air on an invisible fall breeze before settling in piles.

I reach out to inspect one of the flowers with an expert's touch, rubbing the velvety petals between my fore finger and thumb.

"Do you like them?" an elderly man asks. He sits nearby, holding a mug of black coffee. Steam curls up from the rim of the cup and evaporates in the warm air. As the man speaks, I can't help but notice how beautiful his almond shaped eyes are.

"I bought these flowers three weeks ago. They shouldn't still be alive," I say.

There's something about the way the man looks at me. I've never seen him before and yet something tugs at my memory.

"I bought these for you yesterday," he says. "They're carnations."

"Yes, I know what they are," I say. "And who are you?"

"I'm Ted."

Ted. A few faint wisps of memory claw their way to the surface. For a moment, I think I remember a wedding. A family. Dancing together in our living room and taking a cross-country roadtrip in a big RV. Then, the memories slip back into the fog.

"Do you remember when I gave these to you?" Ted asks gently.

I don't remember yesterday. I don't remember receiving any flowers. I shake my head.

Ted opens his arms, and I let him embrace me. He smells like freshly washed laundry and subtle cologne, causing another wave of weak memories to break and retreat.

...

It's spring. The sun is honey warm on my face and lilac trees arch over the walking path. My arm is linked around that of a man whom I do not know. He smiles as he hands me a clump of lilacs. Small purple petals shower down around my feet.

“We had a lilac tree in the garden,” I say, thinking of the gentle purple tree my children used to play under.

“You remember that? You remember the garden?”

“Of course. We kept bees at one point too. At the house on Seymour Street.”

The man stops walking, turns, and takes both of my hands in his. They’re warm and rough, and the tips of his fingers are calloused.

“What else do you remember?”

I stare at those hands. They are the hands of a stranger. I let the lilac clump fall to the ground.

We continue walking.

...

There’s a man preparing coffee in my kitchen. Whoever he is, his eyes disarm me completely. They smile and dance with life even when the rest of his face is still.

“Well,” he says. “I was thinking we could go visit the grandkids today.”

I continue staring at him.

“Is everything okay?” he asks.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I can’t help but notice that you have the most beautiful eyes.”

He looks surprised, then laughs.

“That’s the first thing you ever said to me,” he says. “Do you remember that?”

I think I would remember having met such a handsome man. I think I would remember...

...

I live partially concealed by fog. It shrouds everything: my home, my loved ones’ faces, myself. Some days it’s so thick that I can’t even tell where I am, and no matter where I walk, it envelops me. I wander, lost and afraid in this strange, muted world. Even the tears on my face feel like they came pumped in from a mountain spring far away. Some days, the fog clears, and I begin to remember. Ted’s name surfaces and then fades into an echo.

Everything, eventually, fades into an echo.

...

I've always been old. I've always existed the way I am right now, sitting in a plush red armchair in a soft nightgown. My hair is long and white and reaches the small of my back. Someone behind me begins brushing it, slowly, working out all the tangles but never yanking too hard or hurting me. When they finish, they kiss the top of my head. I don't know where I am, but the feeling of someone running their fingers through my hair feels so comforting that I lean back and close my eyes. I've always existed here with no beginning and no end.

...

It's Christmas, or some kind of holiday. People gather in the living room, decorated with sprigs of holly and bright poinsettias and golden string lights. The fog clears and I begin to recognize them one by one, all my children and grandchildren, in-laws and cousins. I see my daughter Lorraine, who has her father's eyes. She used to play under the lilac tree at our house on Seymour Street. One of my grandchildren, Alexandria, plays Christmas carols on the grand piano and everyone joins in. She gave me a pair of knitted wool socks for Christmas one year. Her little brother, Milo, is learning to skateboard. He reminds me so much of Lorraine.

For one unspeakably beautiful moment, it all comes back. I look over at Ted, who meets my eyes and says, "I love you."

After 60 years, he's just as handsome as he was the day I approached him. When we got married, we promised we'd take care of each other forever, for better, for worse. For richer, for poorer.

In sickness, and in health.

I don't want to lose it. My family smiling, my grandchildren singing, Ted holding my hand. I can't lose it. I want to cherish this moment forever. I want to remember...

Suddenly, I'm sitting next to a man, and I notice that he has the most beautiful almond shaped eyes.

*The End of the Beginning*

**Endometriosis**

Noun

en·do·me·tri·osis | \ , en-dō-, mē-trē-'ō-səs \

**Definition of *Endometriosis***

: the presence and growth of functioning endometrial tissue in places other than the uterus that often results in severe pain and infertility<sup>1</sup>

“It’s called Endometriosis,” the doctor said. After months of tests, waiting, and preparation, this moment was surprisingly underwhelming. Maybe it was the lack of the harsh fluorescent light that I had grown so accustomed to. Grey sunlight was flooding through the one window. I stared out to see long icicles hanging from nearby power lines. “It accounts for all your symptoms. The ovarian cysts, the stomach issues, everything.” I nodded as if I understood. “Do you have any questions?” Only one, but the sinking feeling in my stomach told me that I probably already knew the answer.

“Can I still have kids?”

The silence that followed was all the answer I needed. Even so, the doctor swallowed and swiveled briefly in his chair before replying.

“There is a chance that you could still conceive, but I’m afraid that it’s a very low chance.” The look in his eye, was it sympathy? Pity? It was hard to pinpoint through his blank stoicism. His lips continued to move, but whatever he had to say meant nothing, not after that bombshell. I pretended to be fascinated by uneven paint marks on the back of the closed door. I wondered what left them. Visions of a Chlamydia prevention poster came to mind. Only snippets of the doctor’s speech were getting through, something about “chronic” and “some treatment options”. I shifted uncomfortably on the stiff examination table, letting loose a wave of the crinkly paper sounds that always made me cringe. “Do you understand, Miss Jones?” The doctor’s voice snapped me from my trance.

“Huh?” I replied without thinking. He blinked a couple times before continuing.

“I said there’s a surgery you can have. It will remove the endometrial tissue, which might relieve some of your pain temporarily.” I wanted to laugh, *some* of the pain.

“It won’t magically make me fertile, will it?”

---

<sup>1</sup> “Endometriosis.” *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/endometriosis>. Accessed 24 May. 2020.



The doctor looked down at his feet. “No,” he replied finally. “And there’s a high likelihood that the tissue will grow back within the first year or so.”

I snorted. “When you said temporary, you meant it!”

“You don’t have to go through this alone, you know.” He pushed off the floor and rolled softly across the small room to the sink. From a clear plastic display case on the countertop, he pulled out a couple brightly coloured pamphlets. Then he briskly flipped through one before circling something with a pen from the breast pocket of his white coat. He scooted back towards me and handed me the pamphlets. They had titles like “Coping with Chronic Illness” and “Finding Your Way Through Fertility Issues”. Maybe their vivid colours were meant to distract from their grim information. “I realize that this is a lot to process at once. There’s a few different support groups that meet around here if you wanted to talk about it.”

“Thanks.”

His eyes studied my face. Deep within his denim-coloured irises, I could see something unfamiliar swimming around. “You’re not alone, Maya. You’re in a relationship, yes?”

“Yeah.”

“Surely you can turn to your partner for support.”

“Yeah, I’m sure once I tell him that he has no chance of starting a family with me, he’ll be very supportive!”

“It’s okay to take things slow, to do everything at your own pace. The biggest thing to remember is that everything you’re feeling right now is valid.” He glanced at his watch. “I’m really sorry to cut this short, but I have another patient waiting.” He stood from his chair and opened the door. “I’m sorry I can’t be more helpful but you will get through this.” I nodded before swiftly exiting the office, trying to hide the tears that were welling up in my eyes. I fled down the two flights of stairs down to the lobby, averting my eyes in case someone decided to try to start a conversation.

For a moment after reaching my car, I couldn’t bring myself to turn on the ignition. I clutched the steering wheel, gritting my teeth in an attempt to preserve what few shreds of composure I still had. Very gently, I rested my forehead against the cold, leather wheel. Tears rolled freely down my face and into my lap. My mom had always told me that life wasn’t fair. I had long since come to terms with the universe’s injustices, and yet the universe always found new ways to knock the wind out of me all over again. At that moment, I heard my phone vibrate in my purse. Wiping my eyes, I fished around in my bag before nabbing my phone from the very bottom. Dylan’s name crossed the top of my caller ID. I almost let it go to voicemail, but I wanted his comfort so badly. On the last ring, I finally answered.

“Hey babe,” I said.

“Hey Maya, how was your appointment?” Dylan’s gentle voice threatened to send a new wave of tears, so I shut my eyes tightly and clenched my free hand in a fist.

“It went fine!” A long silence followed. I was about to check our connection when Dylan spoke again.

“Are you sure? You don’t sound fine.” No, I wasn’t fine, but the cause of my unrest seemed too difficult to confess at that moment.

“No, it’s all good, I’m just focused on driving right now.” In reality, my car had yet to leave the office parking lot. It pained me to lie to him, but I knew the truth was going to hurt him more.

“Okay, we can talk about it more when we get home tonight.”

“Sure.”

“I love you.”

“Love you too.”

*Being a Woman.*

I rolled around in our single bed as my eyes fluttered open. The air felt heavy with heat that seemed to be sitting on my chest, suffocating me in the small room. I pushed my back against the exposed concrete wall and felt the coolness of the wall provide me with instant relief. My eyes quickly adjusted to the darkness of the room as I sat up and brushed aside the mosquito net. My eyes focused on a mosquito trapped in the net, struggling to escape. I slowly raised my hand before slamming it down the insect. My brother stirred beside me in his sleep.

“Toba...” I called as I used my feet to nudge him. If I was awake, he had to be awake too. His head perked up and he looked at me. His face formed a scowl as he wiped the sleep out of his eyes.

“What?” he asked as he looked at me for a justifiable reason as to why I would wake him at this hour.

“Let’s go,” I said as I motioned towards the door. Toba obliged, he was already awake. We snuck past my parents’ exposed bedroom, careful to avoid the creaks and cracks we had become accustomed to. We escaped into the courtyard, grateful to feel the cool, crisp air of the early morning. The open space was barren and brown. Sandflies swarmed around my ankles once I stepped out of the house. Footprints could be seen as those who they belonged to refused to be forgotten. The courtyard was where I learnt everything I knew. It was where my father taught me to speak Yorùbá and where my mother taught me how to use my nimble fingers to make tie-dye. Toba walked up to the Baba Oni’s goat tied to a lanky tree. The goat could escape if it wanted, but the presence of a robe around its neck seemed to keep it in captivity. My brother brushed a branch against the goat’s nose and stepped away when it retaliated with its snapping mouth. Crouching down, I ran fingers through the sand.

The skies emitted an orange hue as the sun gradually began to peak over the corrugated iron sheets that covered each bungalow. A few early risers stretched out of their house and some friendly greetings were tossed around. Chickens darted around as a relentless stray dog greedily stalked them. The air that was once crisp with morning dew was now being suppressed by the smells of frying acarajé, a staple breakfast meal made of flour. Motorcycles darted back and forth as people began the journey to the neighbouring city.

My mother was one of the early risers and was now leaning at the edge of the verandah, calling out to us. I looked up from the sand at my mother and felt my stomach churn. Even with the space between us, I knew we were in trouble. As we walked the short distance to the house, Toba marched in front of me with his chest puffed out and ready to put all the blame on me.

“What did I say about wandering around like you are fatherless?” she asked as she grabbed us by our elbows. Her fragile frame was rigid, like any movement would break her. She stood up straight when she walked, and her brown eyes were sharp, focused and unwavering. Her skin was the colour of oil.

“Where did you round up these troublemakers from?” my father chuckled as he emerged from his bedroom to join us in the living room.

“Don’t encourage them,” my mother said. She took hold of my arm, digging her nails into my skin. I wriggled out of her grasp and ran towards my father, wrapping my arms around his knees. I always wanted to be like my father. I sat at his feet every night listening to the words fall out of his mouth the way water gushes out of a watermelon; it was sweet, and I wanted more. He knew everything. Missionaries had taught us about God in classes and painted images of a figure sitting on a throne, granting wishes. Coming home from school and finding him sitting on the couch, he was the face to those stories; he was God.

“They announced a date for the wedding,” my father said to my mother as he ran his fingers through my hair. “Some men are going to get some more cattle.”

“I will go to the market today to get vegetables,” my mom replied. “Oyinda will come with me.”

I began shaking my head fervently. “I’ll go with Papa.”

My mother tried to peel me off my father’s leg.

“Let’s go,” she said in annoyance.

I looked up at my Father for assistance. His broad shoulder frame gave me a sense of security like he could protect me against everything, including my mother.

“Listen to your mother,” he answered. I reluctantly allowed my mother to pull me away.

“I’ll go to the market too,” my brother’s meek voice announced. The corner of my mouth turned up into a smile.

“You...” Mother pointed at my brother. “Go with your father.”

“Why?” I demanded.

“You’re a woman and he’s a man,” she simply answered. My scowl deepened. My mother rarely spoke unless it was to bark orders. I hated every time she spoke and wished I could sew her mouth shut.

I was still angry when we arrived at Yaba market. I found myself wishing I was sitting in class as the teacher’s words fell on deaf ears but many of the missionaries had left and the schools had become desolate. The market was the heartbeat of the city. People trickled in and out like blood coursing through veins. Pounding footsteps mimicked the rhythmic throbbing of a heartbeat. The sound of crying animals occasionally pierced through the cacophony of bargain deals being made. The sharp smell of decaying flesh from the butcher stall felt as though it was burning nose hairs to ashes. As we approached Mama Kunle’s stall, I felt my mother’s grasp on my arm loosen. She released me from her hold and wiped her hands across her skirt. Her strong back seemed to bend and her steps became slow paced. My mother did not like Mama Kunle. My mother did not seem to like anyone. I liked her. Her yellow skin resembled an unripe mango and her matted hair sat on her head like cap. The tribal mark on the side of her face deepened whenever she spoke, and her waist beads sat below her belly button accentuating her pear-shaped figure. Her strong neck and brown eyes were a strong indicator of her youth. Sweat trickled down the sides of her temple and hung at her chin before dropping down between her breasts as the sun beat down mercilessly on her. Her ears glimmered as her earrings caught the reflection of the sun with the movement of her head. I had heard my mother complain about how

young girls like Mama Kunle were swarming to Western ways like flies hovering over rotting flesh. The smell of tomatoes seemed to cling to her as she reached out and patted me on the head.

“Good morning, Mama Kunle,” Mother said as she ran her fingers through the rice bowl.

“Mama Oyinda...my loyal customer.” She laughed as she pulled my mom into a tight embrace. Discomfort was written across my mother’s face.

“How much for tomato and okra?”

“For you? Cheap.”

“How much?” my mother’s voice was coated with impatience.

“N500,” Mama Kunle answered. My mother retrieved the money from a cloth hidden under her waistband handed it to her without argument.

“How is your husband, Mama Oyinda?” Mama Kunle asked.

It looked as though someone had poured cold water on my mother’s head. Right there in the scorching heat, I could have sworn I saw my mother begin to shake.

“How is yours?” Mother coyly asked. Mama Kunle’s face turned red like her tomatoes. Everyone in the village knew Mama Kunle’s husband had left her and her son Kunle for another woman mere days after they were married.

Mama Kunle handed me the grocery bags and grudgingly thanked my mother and we were finally headed home.

We arrived home and I made a race for the couch and to my dismay, I found it empty.

“Where’s Papa?” I asked. I was eager for him to save me from my mother.

“Come and help me cook,” my mother said, ignoring my question.

“No.” I sprinted out to the courtyard. I ran a stick through the untarred road as I waited patiently for my father and brother to return. I heard the singing of a familiar voice as the village men emerged from the belly of the forest. My brother led the group with the limp body of a hare decorating his neck. The smile seemed to stretch as wide across his face like Ogun river. My father’s hand rested on my brother’s head as he held a live chicken in his other hand. Women danced around them, their waistbeads sounding a musical beat. My brother ran to me, eager to show off his hare. My father waved at me from a distance as he accompanied the rest of the men to see the chief.

“Oyinda, run to Mama Kunle’s house and get me pepper,” my mother ordered as soon as I walked into the house. I stomped my foot to ensure she was aware of my dissatisfaction.

I walked to Mama Kunle's house, dragging my stick behind me.

"Mama Kunle," I called as I peeked my head into her door frame. My voice echoed throughout her.

I slid my slippers and entered her house.

"Mama Kunle..." I called again. My ears picked up voice from the back of the house and my feet followed.

I caught the glimmer of Mama Kunle's red and green waistbeads and I saw a man's hands fondling them. My Mother's voice echoed in my ear, ordering me to close my eyes but as usual, I ignored her. Mama Kunle leaned forward to kiss the man.

My heart seemed to drop to the floor and urine trickled down my leg when I realized it was my father. My eyes watered as I saw my father in his true form; as a man and not a God. I looked down at the puddle of urine that had formed at my feet. I walked back to my house in a daze and reach the courtyard before realizing that I had abandoned my stick in Mama Kunle's house. A prayer passed between my lips as I hoped she would step on it and bleed.

I walked past the empty couch and into the kitchen. My mother's back faced me as she silently chopped tomatoes. She felt my eyes on her and turned.

"Where is the pepper?" she asked. I forgot. I placed the coins on the counter and murmured a weak excuse. I watched her hands as she swiftly cut the tomatoes into delicate slices. The kitchen was so foreign to me but familiar to her. The way she bustled around the kitchen, I could now understand that perhaps this was the only way she knew how to keep her family together. Looking at her now, she seemed so lonely.

"What do you want?" she asked. "You're standing there like a palm tree."

I climbed up the foot stool next to her allowing us to be the same height.

"Can I help you cook?" I asked.

*Do Not Fall*

Night falls quickly in the autumn; bright day fades to flaming sunset, and twilight tumbles into darkness within an hour. When it does, those who are alone often tumble with it.

Do not walk alone into the night.

After twilight, darkness will lie heavy over the plains, and a flashlight beam will cut a narrow passage through the night. Follow that light, and keep your feet far from the shadows. In the darkness, a shadow will grasp your feet and make you fall.

Do not fall into the night.

A steady beam will cut a passage, but one that flickers will only wake the shadows further, drawing tendrils out to find its source. They know that you have no place on the plains at night.

Do not let the shadows find you.

If you fall, then do not scream. Screams can pierce the autumn air, and you cannot know what might come through the holes. Rather, stand again, and walk again, and continue on your way.

Do not linger in the night.

Should you see another blade of light, or should you hear another slicing scream, then do not try to follow it. It will only retreat, drawing you further and further from your path.

Do not be given to the night.

When twilight climbs out of darkness again, dragging dawn behind it, it may not bring you along.



NON-FICTION



*An Indian Saviour*

Your cousin clutches your elbow, nervous and excited, like she wants to have the whole experience for you. You've never liked thrills so you're nervous too, but you're doing this for her. Well, that's a partial lie. You figure, who wouldn't want to ride a motorbike behind an extremely attractive, not to mention rich, boyfriend? The only problem is, he's not yours.

It's a forbidden romance that started in the cold and lonely parking lots of The Pas, Manitoba. It's the last place anyone should fall in love – home to the smelly dreams, broken hearts, and shaky steps of drunks and druggies who drag themselves through the ice and snow on a Thursday night to be sick in the Giant Tiger parking lot. But somehow, your cousin found Navjeet.

He's kind, loyal, romantic, charismatic, and Punjabi. She's, well, Mennonite. The word hangs over everyone's head, like the fruit of good and evil. You don't have to look too deep into yourself and your family to realize there is a near genetic distrust for anyone who is not white, Christian, and planning to have six children in a third world country with a missionary pastor. It doesn't matter what kind of Christian they are, as long as they're not Catholic. Well, Navjeet is definitely not a Catholic. But what's worse? Infant baptism or brown skin and a motorbike?

He's sitting on that bike waiting for you, with *ripped jeans and a white t-shirt*.

"You scared?" he asks.

You shake your head, but only because the helmet is so heavy your neck just bends that way.

Your cousin squeezes your arm again. "You're the only other girl to ride his bike," she whispers, smiling like there is a secret between you. "He respects you very much, I think."

You look over. He's gazing at her like she's the full moon. The connection between them is undeniable, a magnetic field that's trapping you in its vortex. You're only too happy to oblige it.

"What do I do?"

"Just squeeze your knees," she taps your leg, "like you're riding a horse."

You climb onto the back of the Harley. The seat is twice too small. It doesn't matter though. His back is gorgeous and he smells that way too. You wrap your arms around his unyielding abdomen and lock your left hand over your right wrist. You feel a pulse in his stomach.

"You like speed?" he asks.

You don't, but you say "sure."

Suddenly, you're torn away from the bike – like the wind and gravity don't want you there. Gripping with your knees to such a small machine, feeling his trunk bending back like a bungee that is about to snap, brings a rush of terror and exhilaration. You can't feel him breathing anymore, maybe because you've squeezed all the air out of him. You take a deep breath, and let the wind try to rip you off the back of the speeding motorcycle. This is living.

On the open highway now, the remnants of a pink and orange sunset are fading on the flat horizon. He stops the bike, and pulls his helmet off. A chiseled, well-groomed, yet emotional face is revealed. His skin reminds you of the sun, warm and welcoming. He fixes you in his tender black eyes and smiles, like he knows you.

"That may have been too much," you say, trying not to sound as shaky as you feel.

"Sit." He slides to the back of the bike and pats his hand on the seat just occupied. Barely breathing, you take his spot. He adjusts you so he can sit behind you. How in hell does your cousin manage to cling to her religious vow of chastity?

Patiently, he teaches you how to control the machine. It's like he's showing you how he'll take care of her. The clutch and gear shifter are like the old three-wheeler in your farm shed, so you impress him by learning quickly. The terror slowly subsides. Luckily, there is no traffic to scare you into crashing. You know he's totally controlling the balance of the bike, and a good thing too because there's no way you could do it on your own.

"I don't know if I can do this!" you exclaim as you approach a stoplight and a turn. This has been the mantra of your whole life, but he doesn't need to know that.

"Trust me," he squeezes his hands over yours. "I'm here with you. You're safe."

A sense of calm settles over you – a holy ecstasy that comes from complete trust. It's like he's in love with life and everyone in it. Is this how people felt when Christ touched them? Jesus was brown. Maybe he even rode a bike. You wouldn't find it hard to believe if he did.

Change is coming to your family as swiftly as this bike makes its way back to your cousin's house. She's told you before, "it could never work in the long run." But you know she's only saying it to put her mother at ease. But your mothers are both old Mennonite ladies who ate too much *vereniki* as children and had blisteringly tight braids that deformed their brains. What do they know about falling in love? They follow the ghost of a Jewish mystic; they can learn to accept an Indian saviour.

They are all still standing there in the dark when you get back. You stumble off the bike, drunk off secondhand love and the suspended fear. Your legs are jelly. You're sweating profusely when you take the helmet off. A funny sound gurgles out of your throat.

He just sits on the bike, chuckling, then offers your mother a ride. She gladly accepts. No doubt, even she can't resist a ride on a Harley. You look after them as they roar away and hope she can come to the same revelation that you did just moments before. You figure, if anyone can break down the walls of an old Mennonite lady, it's Navjeet.

“He’s never let me drive. He must like you a lot.” Your cousin folds her arms with a nervous shiver.

“He’s amazing,” you say, breathless. But she doesn’t need to be told.

She smiles wistfully, looking down the street to where red and orange lights glow. Your mother is trying to master the art of Harley riding while analyzing the handsome stranger behind her. Distracted driving at its best. They’ve already capsized.

“Yeah, Jeannine. I think he’s the one.”

## MICHAEL CICCIA

### *Morning Tea*

Nostalgia has been a red teacup.

Last Saturday it was the Fabulously Rich. Performing our favourite tunes from the Tragically Hip. Nobody was a customer. It was dark so the gradient altered. We didn't see a pedestal, the stage felt level with our feet. Couldn't help but move them. Move them for ourselves. Our childhood homes. The people we've delivered. And those who have helped us. Our fathers and mothers, our sisters and Gord. My old unfinished basement. Our collective and varied lore.

Nostalgia has been an early morning.

Last Saturday it was a late night. Sweaty and packed in a bar that was swaying side to side. It was though we were all grounded. One strong tree in the wind. Stability in the music we were raised on singing along. But Bobcaygeon played and our branches fluttered. The uncertainty. Or maybe hope or maybe angst, that that ceiling was hiding our dull and hypothetical sky. That a constellation wouldn't have another star to show us that night.

But for then we weren't there. We were in Toronto where I heard the Hip for the first time. A strong tree in the wind, clueless of how the stars were aligned.

Nostalgia has slowly evaded me.

More and more throughout the years. Escaping me softly in ways I don't, never, and can't fear. It's a rose-coloured truck you're lucky enough to get hit by. Mangling your body as you hold on past the foreshadowing from the stop signs. Tossing and turning through memories as you grit your teeth. That those memories will be lost again by your next meal.

But I had breakfast that morning. Like I used to with my mother. Breakfast complete with tea in the same two mugs she'd always pull from the cupboard above the fridge. And when Fiddler's Green played. Every other morning holding hands with my mom. Last Saturday night. It seemed that's what I've traded. At least while I'm here for a while. But just a while ago before tea with my mother, I was there on the ground. Watching her sip from a red cup. Waiting for me to sit across from her, and the world she would share with me.

I was no astronomer in that diaper.

The sky was the sky. Beautiful blue needed no design. And so, when Fiddler's Green played last Saturday night, I cried.

## BROOKLYN CONNOLLY

### *My Body is Decaying and All I Can Stomach is Sage*

I purchased new bedsheets in July. I left the old ones in the laundry hamper, I don't know what's so hard about folding them up and putting them away. It's November now, and the old bedsheets are still at the bottom of the hamper. I don't know why I didn't buy the right size in mid-July.

When you're twenty years old it feels like passion was left in the 'teens,' and the 'twenty' is just an extension that goes before an age you've already aged passed. When I got sick in July, I left the prescription with the bedsheets in the hamper, there was a hole where the 'teen,' once lived, and without it, the passion had begun to decay.

As a means to an end, I downloaded Tinder, although nothing made me feel more ill than the thought of going on a first date. I knew that second dates were just as bad as first dates, and that third dates are even worse – because by that point, their personality really starts to show. People can be whoever you want them to be, until you get to know them.

Luckily, the dread of getting to know each other is a feeling often shared. There happened to be a lot of magicians on Tinder who had perfected the art of vanishing. I learned that they called this 'ghosting.'

Soft ghosting is when you and the person you've been going steady with have talked about every possible thing there is to talk about, so you stop talking altogether. Your schedules change, and you're both overwhelmed with life and life's happenstances – none of which are worthy of conversation – so you decide that they must have lost their phone charger, because you stop receiving clarification on whether or not they had a good sleep, or if they're busy next Sunday. When this happens, buy yourself a new phone charger. Mail them the broken one.

Hard ghosting is when you're on the verge of becoming 'Facebook Official,' with someone, but right before a blue checkmark tacks to the end of your names, their account vanishes with them. You're left wondering if they fled the country, or if the entire encounter was nothing more than a fever dream. When this happens, go back to the doctor, refill your prescription, and leave it with the old bedsheets at the bottom of the hamper.

The good news? Second dates are almost always scarier than ghosts. And third dates? Scarier than prescriptions.

As comforting as it would have been to return to my process of decaying, I persisted, and continued to swipe through the cursed app.

At this point, I began to realize than many men on Tinder were haunted by their own ghouls — or baggage, rather. If they decided to ghost me, I decided all they were doing was attempting to project their ghouls onto me. For that, I respect them. If projection was not a tool powerful enough, many seemed to seek carnal holes deep enough to bury their ghouls. I had to learn how to navigate around these ghouls; possession halts decay, and sage burns slowly.

The only hypothesis I – a single and decaying young woman – could think of was to become more frightening than the lingering ghouls.

First: reject the idea that life online is a universe disconnected by our own. Since coexisting between these realms, I've yet to meet a man whose armpit hair is longer than mine. I use the added length as rope to wrap around the ghouls that show up for our date, when my match is not in sight. It might be the scent, but the ghouls often vanish into successfully thin air.

If I've yet to sense a ghoul, I ask them what their 3 worst traits are. If they respond without too much thought, I assume I'm talking to their ghoul – dirty laundry hides within unpacked luggage. If they are superior to untasteful traits, I challenge them to a thumb war, curing the boredom to come.

In the odd case that we've made it this far alive, I test them with chaos. This test takes many different forms. My favourite is sending them a photo of my reflection in the bathroom's mirror, and ask them to guess what is brewing beneath me in the bowl. A fun game. Or, I turn on my fine-tuned British accent and refer to everyone in passing as 'comrade.' When the phone rings, I run into the abyss. If my match does not share McCarthy-educated anxieties, I can only assume that they are McCarthy. Much scarier than any ghoul.

It's November now and I've yet to encounter McCarthy, but my fever dreams and I are still running. Slowly I'm accept that there is no twenty-teen, but I'm too weak to dig my prescription out from the dirty laundry. The dates were meaningless and it was haunting to become, but I'm finally more frightening than the lingering ghouls.

I filled the fridge with sage once I learned that the ghouls, we avoid are the ones already decaying inside of us.

*On the Absurd*

My father is a flat-earthier and has supposedly found God—or so the story goes. A few years back, we received an email from him that linked to an amusing, broad-scoped conspiracy theory warning of the Rapture (the Evangelical end of days) and insisting upon the speedy repentance of our sins. That’s how I remember it, anyway—that the email ended with *J.*, and not something like *love, J.* But perhaps I’m wrong, perhaps I’ve repressed the memory, or even removed it from reality, but I do remember laughing with my sisters about the absurdity of the whole ordeal later on.

I also remember feeling absurd as a kid. Growing up, I could never seem to shake this peculiar feeling, something akin to shame, a distant cousin of humiliation. The feeling was an invasive and constant gnawing, that—like a tick—made its home somewhere just out of reach. It felt kind of like sucking in my belly at the beach, but instead of my belly, it was something in my head; something untouchable. It lurked quietly beneath the surface, persisting even when I would swap my bathing suit for a snow suit.

I still feel this way some days, and I still suck in my belly at the beach, but at least now I can diagnose the gnawing. I have decided that it is merely a feeling of anxiety, which, I have also decided, is a result of an encounter with the Absurd. And I think that Jean-Paul Sartre (or is it Friedrich Nietzsche? — I cannot remember which) articulates this condition more clearly than, for example, someone like me.

You will have to forgive me for speaking such nonsense, because the Absurd is just absurd, and there seems to be no way to speak of it perfectly without scaring people away; without sounding like the main character of Sartre’s psychological novel, *Nausea*. That is, of course, without sounding like Antoine Roquentin, a man who spends his days strolling the streets of a fictional French town, plagued by the Absurd. This is what Sartre calls Nausea.

When I think of Roquentin, I think of Pop Rocks. In elementary school, my class and I were shown a bone-chilling, nausea-inducing photo of a Pop Rocks packet lying on a muddy road in what I imagined at the time to be rural Alberta. Later, my father told me that I wasn’t to pick up any Pop Rocks and eat them, and in fact, it was best to avoid all Pop Rocks—even the Pop Rocks I trusted—just to be safe. The reason for the whole ordeal was that the RCMP had recently found traces of opioids in a half-opened packet on the street (the one from the photo) and we would die if we ate the stupid popping sugar. I, of course, fearing both Pop Rocks and authority, decided that every packet of the damn candy was evil, that is, intent on my immediate death.

Now, I shiver a little bit every time I see the absurd candy in convenience stores, feeling a little bit out of my mind. Like Roquentin—as James Wood puts it in the “Introduction” of *Nausea*—it’s as if, upon seeing the candy, I am *plunged into the thick heavy abundance of existence*<sup>[1]</sup>. In other words, it’s as if I am confronted with the brute existence of things (‘things,’ of course, being the existence of Pop Rocks and the like) and therefore confronted with the fact that my life doesn’t tend to a perfect, cosmic, or godly end. This thought, at least for some Absurdist philosophers, constitutes the Absurd.

My roommate tells me that Absurdism is a movement characterized by the recognition of the meaninglessness of human life and of all that exists. I like to imagine that Nietzsche and Sartre

spent their days much like me, confounded by something like my father's religious email. Nietzsche, though, says that I must live through *the horror or absurdity of existence*<sup>[2]</sup>, and turn this Nausea into *notions in which [I] can live: these are the sublime as the artistic taming of the horrible, and the comic as the artistic discharge of the nausea of absurdity*<sup>[3]</sup>. That is, I must assert the chaos lurking beneath the surface—the disarray that makes life interesting—and affirm it by living *with it*, not in spite of it<sup>[4]</sup>. But, please, enough of these talking corpses. Back to the good stuff!

Of course, the Absurd is perhaps no more uncommon than the normal. I like to think that it exists in the American pornography industry, or in canned meat, or in Fox News, or in televangelism, or in some combination thereof. Sartre says in *Nausea* that all of these things—opioid-ridden Pop Rocks, and so on—are absurd because I notice their existence, and in turn, I am confronted with the futility of living in a world in such a way where *to exist is simply to be there*<sup>[5]</sup>, that is, to have no higher (whatever that means) purpose.

And yet, like our little Roquentin, I long to *play with the absurdity of the world*<sup>[6]</sup>. So, most days I wear the Absurd like a cloak, one made from some fine, antique silk. I try canned meat and I try it again. I hand myself over to the Nausea—I affirm it—and I listen to the grumbings of that damn tick hiding in my brain. The little parasite helps me understand why my father sent that absurd Evangelical email; why he decided to live *in spite of* the Absurd and not *with it*. Because, accepting the Absurd is accepting the figures of my childhood—and I have to tell myself, “you don’t hate organized religion, you hate sucking in your belly at the beach.” And that usually helps me get through the day.



## Works Cited

Clift, Sarah. "Nietzsche I: Tragedy and Ancient Tensions." *Modern Social and Political Thought*. 18

November 2019. Lecture.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy and the Case of Wagner*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. Random

House, Inc., 1967. Print.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Nausea*. Trans. Lloyd Alexander. New Directions Publishing Corporation, 2007.

Print.

Wood, James. Introduction. *Nausea*, by Jean-Paul Sartre, translated by Lloyd Alexander, New

Directions Publishing Corporation, 2007. Print.

---

[1] Wood, xi.

[2] Nietzsche, 60.

[3] Nietzsche, 60.

[4] Clift.

[5] Sartre, 131.

[6] Sartre, 130.

*On Texting the Dead*

When I emptied her apartment, I dragged a black garbage bag full of the contents of her fridge across the hallway outside her door. Olga was still alive, then, but we knew she wouldn't be in a month's time. There was a bottle of soy sauce in the bag that I had forgotten to empty out, and as I dragged the garbage bag along the carpet, I left a trail of it behind me. It looked like a bad cover-up of a poorly planned murder; like I was hastily disposing of a body, not realizing that the telltale trail of blood would give me away any minute. I felt like I was losing a part of her with every step I took. The dim hallway lights flickered as I waited for the elevator and it was only the smell of soy sauce that brought me back to reality when the doors finally opened.

She died two weeks later. The last time I saw her was in the hospital. I remember the feeling of my ear pressed up against her heart when I got into her bed. My tears soaked her shirt but she told me not to worry.

I called her Olechka. She called me Odrik, or "my dear." She treated me like her daughter. She would teach me Russian on long train rides — though I never made it past the alphabet. Sometimes I would read aloud to her, not at all understanding what I was saying. This always made her laugh. One Christmas, I took portraits of her for a photography class. For her sixty-fourth birthday, I made the portraits into a little book and sewed the spine with pink thread. When I emptied her apartment I found it sitting on the shelf, patiently waiting to be made meaningful again. I still have the text I got when she died. It was early in the morning. I'd just walked into my first class of the day. "Hey Audrey, Olga is gone ... She is no longer suffering. I am sorry it happened. I know she was a huge part of your life. Hugs." [1] I have other texts too — important ones and not important ones. I have a whole archive of conversations, a library of moments that I've forgotten over time: "Hugging you; I kiss; I is hospital now, maybe next week will be home; I love you; I can't will come today, I will come tomorrow; Спасибо, моя хорошая и красивая девочка — Thank you, my good and beautiful girl".

When people say that they're mourning, what they really mean is that they're forgetting — that they're allowing a whole host of memories to fade away while holding onto the special few that remain in the foreground of their saddened mind. But this digital archive doesn't let me forget; it doesn't just let me hold onto the dripping garbage bag, the patient book on her shelf, or the tears on her shirt. It forces me to remember whatever moments, by whatever stroke of luck, became digital in some way or another — photos, texts, emails, voicemails, videos. It's patronizing. It doesn't forget anything. It makes selections for me, telling me what I will and won't remember. It makes a claim on me. It screams at me that it knows her better than I ever did.

But I let my digital archive dictate my memories. Without even realizing it, I let it control my mourning. It's a small price to pay for not having to close the door on her completely, for not having to delete her contact in my phone. Because I want to be able to explain to her the decisions I've made since she died. I want to tell her things that I've done, people that I've met, things that I know she would've wanted to know. I want to tell her that nothing is the same without her. I want to text her. And I don't think this impulse will go away for a long time.

There's this episode of *Dear White People* where Sam's father dies[2]. For the next month or so, she texts him every day. One day she gets a response: "I don't know how to tell you

this, but... this isn't your dad. I'm sorry." The phone company had given her father's number away. She stopped texting him after that but the impulse to talk to her dad didn't go away.

It's hard to imagine a point in my life where I won't want to talk to Olga. Like Joan Didion once wrote, when speaking of her dead husband, "I could not count the times during the average day when something would come up that I needed to tell him. This impulse did not end with his death. What ended was the possibility of response."<sup>[3]</sup> But this is exactly the effect of the digital world on the mourner: it gives us hope of a response. If we were to write letters to the dead, which is what I imagine those dealing with grief would've done before the Digital Age, before technology could dictate the ways in which we remember and forget, we'd effectively be writing to ourselves — we'd be writing in order to decide what we remember and how we remember. But when we text the dead we're not writing to ourselves, we are writing to ghosts. We don't just write a letter, we send it. It's as if we've not only written a letter to a ghost, but sealed it in an envelope, wrote down an address, stuck a stamp in the corner, and put it in a mailbox. When we send texts to ghosts, we'll always be a little disappointed every time we check our phones to find no response. And this is the curse of digital memory: an ever present, gnawing feeling in our chests when we are ignored, day after day, by the ghosts of those we once loved.

### *Works Cited*

Belkina, Katya. Text message to Audrey \_\_\_\_\_. 15 Dec. 2016.

“Chapter V.” Dear White People, season 3, episode 5.

[https://www.netflix.com/watch/81012908?trackId=14170286&tctx=1%2C1%2Cececadd31e554afd-be1c-6dcf9fd768c1-6643518%2Cf2e8b5e1-a578-4bbe-8a218b25bd3b715c\\_79411323X3XX1571073936326%2Cf2e8b5e1-a578-4bbe-8a21-8b25bd3b715c\\_ROOT](https://www.netflix.com/watch/81012908?trackId=14170286&tctx=1%2C1%2Cececadd31e554afd-be1c-6dcf9fd768c1-6643518%2Cf2e8b5e1-a578-4bbe-8a218b25bd3b715c_79411323X3XX1571073936326%2Cf2e8b5e1-a578-4bbe-8a21-8b25bd3b715c_ROOT).

Didion, Joan. *The Year of Magical Thinking*. New York City, Random House, Inc., 2005.

---

[1] Belkina, Katya. Text message to Audrey \_\_\_\_\_. 15 Dec. 2016.

[2] “Chapter V.” Dear White People, season 3, episode 5.

[3] Didion, 194.

## KATIE LAWRENCE

### *Ode To The Empty Toilet Paper Roll*

In the half-light of midday, halfway to the end of summer, aware of the oncoming crisp autumn breeze, I am thinking of all these things but mostly thinking of my full bladder on the verge of bursting, I am assaulted by you and your lack.

The empty toilet paper roll.

Cracking along your cardboard curves, forgotten again on the holder thing, a scrap of limp paper hanging from your frame. Not enough for a single serving, not enough for a nose blow or a seat wipe, not enough for anything. Not enough for me, in my moment of need, trapped in a house of strangers and needing to pee, with nothing but this. I am flushed with frustration and the mounting terror of no way out.

Why would no one replace you?

Empty toilet paper roll, formerly full of such power and majesty. Now you are purposeless; stranded between use and disposal. Toilet paper: a pillar of civilized society, like libraries and free health care. Pleasing and clean, soft and quiet, in varying textures, patterns, shapes, and sizes. To watch you unroll and pool endlessly on the floor—another satisfaction so great is hard to come by. Rivers of white ribbon unfurling on the tile, reckless abandonment that makes my hands shake.

Dear empty toilet paper roll: we used to decorate your outsides, stick you together, tear you up, make art. Tubing for a fort, or a cardboard telescope to magnify the stars of our imagination. Mindless craftwork of a compostable kind. Creative re-incarnation and recycling. You are so strange, colloquial and common, but odd and specific. Cardboard covered in paper for the worst of wiping. I forgot about these things.

You who I had grown complacent to ignore; you were never my responsibility, like everything domestic and unrewarding. But now that I have left home and adopted communal living with The Summer Subletters, strangers I neither know nor like, I am forced to confront this unfriendly sphere of domestic compromise. Here, on the battlefield of chores, shared space, and making noise at peak hours of sleep, I find no mother to mediate and protect, no parent to make meals or clean dishes, scrape toothpaste out of the sink or replace the toilet paper. When I lie in bed, sometime halfway between midnight and morning, choking on homesickness that tastes like salt water and runs down my cheeks, I wonder if anyone can hear me. Ashley? (Who smokes pot on the porch and watches TV between her hours of hotel work and kraft dinner eating.) Colin? (A hermit and likely hentai watcher, who disappears into his illicit cave of stink when he is not sneaking food or glowering.) I am alone again in a house not a home.

Oh empty toilet paper roll, how I wish you were full. How I wish there weren't mice scratching in my ears all night or maggots in the compost bin or empty propane tanks on the porch or an abandoned car seat in the hallway or long black hair in the drains or spilled frozen corn in the freezer. Student Housing is not Student Homing: we are all of us strangers, alone. I will have to make do without toilet paper for now. I will go to the store later and enjoy the fading rays of summer sun. I will lock the door behind me.

I

I was a boy and I had long legs and still I hated myself. It was a dark feeling in my gut, poisoning me from the inside. Everything was touched by my loathing: my bed, my parents, the trees. I felt it was extraordinary, I felt it was worse. In hindsight, I was ordinary. I was a boy and I had long legs and I spoke french and I ate red meat and still I hated myself. Hannah said she'd see me soon and I didn't care if she did. I didn't care if anyone did. I looked in the mirror and didn't even see myself. I looked in the mirror and saw a girl with freckles I looked in the mirror and I only saw the mirror I only saw the glass. I looked in the mirror I looked in the mirror. I looked out the window of the city bus and heard music. I heard every song. I looked away. I hated art because it made me feel something, because it moved me and I wanted to be still. I was stagnant. I was car-sick. I wasn't scared of death I wasn't scared of cars I became scared of living.

I decided to be in love so I picked a boy. At that point it was hard to distinguish between lust and love so I didn't and I didn't care which one made him kiss me so hard, maybe both. It occurred to me later that I had not been able to will myself to fall in love, to bask in it because I wanted to and would. It occurred to me but I un-occurred it. I saw it as a failure on my part—to fail to love, to try so hard at a feeling when other feelings came easy to me. I thought I hated myself because he loved me, or because he loved me and still touched someone else. I touched other people and gave myself no time to heal. It liberated me. I was breaking and burning and fusing together again. I was happy and furious. I said no over and over again, I screamed it until my voice was hoarse, until I lost it entirely.

I spent a month as a girl, I danced more and felt more and almost I liked myself but surely I chose myself. I braided my hair. I was no longer stagnant, I was anti-stagnant, I was moving, I had chosen to embrace the aliveness of it all so I did. I was aware of my body, aware of my heart as I stuck my head out the window. I felt extraordinary in such an ordinary way. I hated myself and still I was addicted to myself. The world seemed to be happening all at once in the pit of my stomach, it was the first time I had known myself and still known other people. I felt I knew everyone. I knew strangers in the grocery store, I loved chocolate, the city, the colour yellow, football, fighting, good art, bad art, bicycles, and still I hated myself. I was a girl and I hated myself—I hated myself!

I made every wrong decision and that was the right one, I met a boy. I met myself again. I looked at myself and noticed the gap in my teeth, the straightness of my nose, the crookedness of it all. I liked it. In the quiet of my childhood bedroom I wrote. I sent dozens of letters with hot wax seals, I spent hours swimming in the ocean, floating on my back. I sat under the sun and thought about how old it was, how much more it knew than me. I felt young. I stopped crying and tried to say sorry less. I tried not to look in mirrors. I let the sun touch me, and touched myself. I didn't know people but I glimpsed them. I glimpsed them. I felt I finally glimpsed myself too. I let myself change and I let go of myself. I let go of myself. I let go of myself. I let go of myself. I no longer hated myself, I let go.

