



8

You, Me,  
and Emmylou



You, Me, and Emmylou

## **You, Me, and EmmyLou - Ellipsis Zine #8**

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# Sony Steve

Emily Devane

Steve stands at my bedroom door most days and stares at my television. I return from work to find him in my bedroom, running his finger along the silver letters – S – O – N – Y – that protrude fatly from the matt silver casing in a way that pleases us both. He is still wearing his outdoor jacket. He doesn't even make to leave. 'A high quality piece of kit,' he says, eyes shifting up and left, as if racking his brains for the answer to a particularly difficult sum.

'Steve,' I say, 'do you need something?' I sit on my bed and unwrap the scarf – pink, with white birds – from my neck. It occurs to me that he wouldn't even notice if I stripped right down to my underwear. Most people would have gone by now but Steve is still by the TV, cupping the remote control with something like reverence.

'Is the picture good?' he says. Before I can answer, he's perched himself on the edge of the bed and is pressing the standby button, his eyes glowing in the blinking red light.

'Sometimes he goes to the local tip and just, I don't know, examines the rubbish for mangled bits of old wire,' says Pete, our other house mate. Pete's room is the largest in the house. Obviously we resent him, but he means well.

'Is everything okay?' I ask Pete through the crack in his door when Steve has gone downstairs. 'Is everything okay with Steve, I mean?'

'Sure,' says Pete. 'That's just Steve for you.' Pete has a paintbrush in his hand, and is copying passages from the Bible onto his bedroom wall in giddy, looping letters. 'Steve's just a regular guy – apart from the TVs, I guess.' But what would Pete know? Once, while having a bath, Pete reckons he saw India in the bubbles and now he's saving up to go there.

After dinner, while I do the washing up, Steve stands behind me looking over my shoulder. He is so close I can feel his breath on my neck. I wonder if he's about to touch me, but when I turn to look at him, he flinches as if I'm a live wire that's

buzzing, a thing to be fixed. His eyes won't meet mine.

'How's it going?' he says, looking at the tap.

'Fine,' I reply. 'You made me jump, standing there. Do you think you could... not do that?'

Steve is quiet for a moment, as if he's on pause. He doesn't back away. His eyes are big and round.

'It's alright,' I say. 'Forget I said anything.'

Steve reaches past me for a tea towel. This feels like progress - he never usually offers to help. But instead of drying, he fashions the towel into a letter S and lays it on the table. 'S,' he says, tracing the shape with his finger. 'They really are high quality pieces of kit, you know.'

# Caught up in Woodstock

Valerie Fox

Our dad drove a bread truck and every year got his two weeks off. One summer, when there was still a kind of equilibrium in our lives, we went up to New York State to visit a retired pastor, who showed us a Rockefeller mansion and the Chagall stained glass at Union Church. Next day we get all caught up in Woodstock traffic, with the flower people and the hippies. I'm seven and scratch-scratching absent-mindedly at the unfurling American flag decal glued to the car window. It's hissing hot, cars turned off, cars on the side of the road, some broken down, our heads hanging out of the back windows. Our mother humming *what a friend we have in Jesus*. Girls who look like our older cousins walking by making the peace sign. One says hi honey what's your name. Our dad is scandalized but tries not to let on. Stopped cars of all sorts, halter-tops, no tops, fatigue-type jackets, skunky-smell. *All that hair, can't tell the boys from the girls.*

# Imprints

Sherri Turner

I am as strong as a lion. I love with all of my heart. My tears are rare but fat with sorrow. I always have room for pudding. I notice the softness of people's hands. I sing loudly. Colours that clash can still go together. You don't have to cry at funerals. The more necklaces the better. It is not mad to talk to your teddy bears, even when you are grown up. It is not mad when they answer. We can't be strong all the time. It is over too soon, and sometimes it is too late. It never matters what people think. The voice in your head is your poetry.

This is who I am.

This is what I learned from you.

Your hands were always soft.

# Black Dot to Little Flame

Amy Stewart

I'm staring at the hob trying to convince myself that it's OFF – because it is OFF – but I think I've been here for about five minutes now. I'm going to be late. I'll have to blame it on the bus. My eyes flick from the black dot on the knob to the little flame above it – a setting that means OFF. Black dot to little flame. Black dot to little flame. Again and again, just to make sure.

I think about all the hobs I haven't stared at over the years and all the houses I haven't burned down. I think about the pair of straighteners I left on once, how instead of melting the carpet and eating the wallpaper from the walls, they just switched themselves off.

I think of all the times I've been to the doctors and never been diagnosed with anything.

Black dot to little flame.

I think about what an enormous responsibility it is to make decisions for yourself as a person in the world. How there's no one here to police whether I turn the hob off or not. I wonder about my brain, about coffin-like MRI machines – whether the part that's going black dot to little flame black dot to little flame would be lighting up right now, like brilliant lava. Whether that part is a muscle I've over-exercised, or if I'm just not very well.

But that can't be it, because in an hour I'll be drinking cheap cava at bottomless brunch and telling the story about when I ran for the bus with no bra on. So, I must be fine.

Black dot to little flame.

I look away because my eyes need a break. I resolve to have one more look and then go. Straight to the door without looking back. Outside the window I can see my shed, and a butterfly has landed on it, orange wings shocking against the green, and my brain goes, *monarch*. I didn't think I knew that term, and I wonder how many more secret shelves there are in my head, waiting for the right trigger

to send everything spilling free.

Back to the hob, and I've broken my own promise because I don't trust myself. I've started to sweat, all around my hairline. I could go upstairs and put more deodorant on, but I don't want to, because that would mean checking the taps again and the straighteners and then back to the hob.

Black dot to little flame. OFF OFF OFF OFF. I take a picture to make sure.

It's been ten minutes. I'll have to wait twenty more for the next bus anyway. I think about leaving and locking the door and am momentarily crushed by that, thinking of the time I bruised my wrist testing the lock, over and over, trying to keep it quiet so the neighbours wouldn't hear. I could cancel, but I want to spend the day drinking cava and not staring at the hob. My eyes are starting to hurt, and the front of my hair is damp. I think of when I went to stay with my sister in London to do work experience at a publisher's. She left the house before me in the morning and so I had to be the one to unplug everything and lock the door and it took me forty-five minutes because it was her house and what if I burned it down? I was late for my first day at the publisher's, but I never told anyone why. And when the manager asked why I was late I didn't give an answer, because you can't really say 'I was staring at the plug trying to convince myself nothing was plugged in for almost an hour' can you?

Black dot to little flame. Black dot to little flame. OFF OFF OFF OFF. Two more pictures.

I really have to leave now. My eyes are stinging a bit. I think about how everyone at brunch will talk about mental health, and they'll mean feeling worried then having a bath. I'll start talking about the hob and they'll stare at me, scared of the wound I've shown them.

I push the hobs as far as they can go into the OFF position but it's a mistake, because now I've touched them so I might have flicked them back on by accident.

BLACK DOT TO LITTLE FLAME BLACK DOT TO LITTLE FLAME.

My phone is ringing because I'm late and I let it. I need to leave now for the next bus. I count out the change in my pocket, then it's back to the hob.

OFF, I say out loud. OFF.

I wish someone else was here to look at it and tell me that it's okay to leave, because I'd trust them. I don't trust me. I'm sure it's OFF now but what if I'm getting mixed up and that was yesterday? I need to keep looking at it. I'll give myself one

more minute. One more minute, then I'll go.

Black dot to little flame.

Black dot to little flame.

Black dot to little flame.

# Dream On

JY Saville

The Mayfair, Newcastle: Britain's Biggest Rock Club, as the adverts in *Metal Hammer* used to boast. In a city where long hair could get a lad assaulted in the nineties, it was a dim and smoky haven. Memory claims I was there every Friday and Saturday night for eighteen months – four pints of snakebite and a second-hand tailcoat every time – in reality it's anyone's guess but either way it closed down in August 1999. Demolished for a cinema development.

That last Saturday night we rolled up early, still full light outside and the queue already round the block. Without a twinge of guilt we strode past the local news cameras and slotted into place with friends near the front. For the last time, my cuban heels scuffed their way along that manky carpet and down the stairs to the dancefloor, where a couple of thousand maudlin drunk rockers mourned for five hours. We all wanted to stay until they chucked us out.

We knew the moment had come when the lute-like opening notes of *Dream On* rang out, Aerosmith distilling everything we were feeling into four and a half minutes recorded before any of us were born. Simon snatched Andrew's cowboy hat, anointed each of us with it in turn and settled it on his own head shouting, *It cannot be true*, and we held onto each other and wept until we were herded into the street clutching souvenir scraps of beer-spattered wallpaper, never to return.

## Exode de 1940

Francesca Newton

My grandmother asks me how I am.

Beside her chair is a small table. On it is a mug and a rose-patterned coaster, two pens, a copy of the paper turned to the crossword. Still-life of Sunday mornings. Letters leak out of their puzzle-box perimeters, English translations embossed over the top of answers she's miswritten in French.

It happens at least once a week.

She was five when it began. Her grandmother – paternal, living with them while her father taught in Paris – took her to the park, and then brought her home to find home was rubble and a body laid out on a stretcher: a daughter, for one. A mother, the other.

The war didn't end with the house, though the world might have. That was the day that they started to walk. What remained – the grandmother, the five-year-old girl, an aunt, a cousin whose name she doesn't remember. She gets frustrated by the whitewash of memory. Exhales. I tell her it doesn't matter. She tells me it does.

Thousands went towards the West, and the sea that could wash them clean of the grime and the dust and cool their burning hearts. Dropped into ditches on the sides of the road when the planes flew low, shut their eyes against the shrapnel. Sometimes on top of corpses. Sometimes underneath them.

Three or four days of that. They didn't sleep. The one place they stopped was the church: a small village, uniform in tired red brick, with houses long since evacuated. On the windowsill of one an apple core had been left out. Teeth marks were still outlined, edges grown brown in the sun.

The priest was there, wearing vestments almost as dirty as their clothes. No cleanliness for godliness here: for one reason or another he kept on his second skin. Some sense of normalcy. Divine order. This was a time for the testing of faith.

Her grandmother spoke to him in a low voice and he nodded, once, twice, and then they pulled her by the hand, the little girl, up to the font so he could touch

the holy water to her forehead. Her skin shone where his fingers made contact. Latin, mumbled; she fidgeted. Hands touched crucifixes hung around necks, where saviours lay waist-deep in dirt.

They had to make provision. Just in case.

In 2017, she went back to that church. Her husband spoke to the priest there – now young, with clean vestments, and dirt washed from the walls, and the village populated again by teenagers on mopeds playing American music – to tell him about the small ceremony. He went out, returned with a fat, yellowed book. Her name was in the records, with two beside it. The aunt, the old priest – her formal godparents.

She asked the young man what had happened to him. He lived out the war, he said, when the families returned, baptising more children, burying others. Died of old age in the 60s, the same year her first child was born.

They saw out the war, too, the grandmother and the aunt and the girl and the forgotten boy, in basements and farmhouses and cottages on the land of gentry who took pity on them.

The enemy caught up the way enemies do. Not just the officers in their black, at least, but the men they dragged with them from elsewhere: she liked the Poles the best. They missed their own daughters back home, showed her photographs of little girls who looked like her with the same pale skin and straight, dark hair. Her father came when he could from the capital. There were holes in his clothes, and even at five, she saw he'd grown so thin.

Then Paris and Armentieres, when it was over, although it never really was, and on to London and Hong Kong and at last to grow old in Hampshire. Suburban and safe. Crosswords. Coffee.

It's not just the puzzles. She dreams in French and answers the phone with an accent that sixty years of British wind and rain have failed to corrode. We tease her, her grandchildren, mimicking her attempts to manipulate her mouth around the name of the eldest among us: Harriet comes out uncertain, consonants tumbling.

It's not a scar, exactly. It's an identifier. The hangover of a language none of her descendants speak. Her son was teased for his mix-ups, so she left off with us. It was that kind of time – the anxiety of the modern world trying to find itself a

foothold. *Speak English.* So he did, and we do.

She asks me how I am. I tell her I'm fine. Her history scorches the roof of my mouth; I pick up the paper, suggest an answer she hasn't yet got.

# The Texan

Bronwen Griffiths

I lose my heart to a Texan guy who says he has no name but calls me Sweetheart and Pepper and he holds my hand and takes me to the desert to look at the stars and he laughs louder than anyone I have ever known and he was born in Dallas and is big like a bear and his eyes are brown, his eyes are full of shit, this is what his father said, but to me they are like some kind of deep river you can't be sure of getting to the bottom of and he wears a silver bracelet on his left wrist and a silver and turquoise ring on one finger and this makes me blue for a guy I once knew but all the time I am around the Texan guy I am together happy and sad but there's never going to be a together with this Texan even though for a while we are close as we can be in this big lost country which is all dust and unknown plants with strange habits like his own.

When I leave, forever leave, I am lost and found and lost again but I do not forget the places of dust, stars and strange plants or the Texan who still creeps into my heart and will always be trouble to any woman coming his way.

# The Digital Assistant Who Shall Not Be Named

Simon Nagel

It was 11:30. I was working late, but it didn't matter. You were gone, across the sea and in Europe while I was on the couch with the pets. I was writing for the bot whose name I'm legally barred from mentioning.

The voice databases were divided between Utterances and Responses. The Utterances were from users around the world, talking to their phones. The Responses were the phone's voice, the digital assistant as written by me. We were meant to be companions through thick and thin, no matter what happened.

The phone had its limitations, for sure. But emotional intelligence is learned and it takes time. One day it will be seamless.

I had run through the batch of functional Utterances during the day: Access Maps, Call Mom, Play Music. I saved the personal ones for night time. It was the fun part of the job, and the most creative. How can we make someone believe the phone has feelings, or at least cares for them more than they thought?

The personal Utterances were usually strange and misspelled, sometimes spoken by accident. Most weren't though. For some reason, a large number of people really meant it when they spoke to the little machine in their hand. Each color-coded Utterance transcription was flagged.

I clicked the first personal Utterance: **Come on my back.**

I clicked Response: **I think we're better off as friends.**

The digital assistant was a world traveler and a humanitarian, good natured and ever ready to offer help. It didn't judge and always listened. Even when it came up short—like not having a physical body or senses—it found a way to make things work, even when it was told to fuck off or eat shit. It believed in the best of people, while the people believed it was a hunk of lithium and microchips to be replaced with every upgrade.

The last Utterance asked **Are you there?**

I typed **Good question** and deleted it. It wouldn't fly under the style guide.

I came up with **I'm always here for you!** instead and logged off at midnight.

## Another Crossword

Nicola Ashbrook

Just another crossword, I think. If I just do another maybe she won't die. Weighted eyelids blur the page, my head begging for sleep.

The shrill ring of the phone sends dodgems to my belly. My ears strain to hear my dad's side of the conversation whilst I battle with myself: listen. Don't listen. Listen. Don't listen.

She's alive, I can tell. But she's still so poorly. My mum needs to stay down there more days, maybe more weeks. And I'm relieved-disappointed which is complicated when you're eight. I want normal life back – no more getting picked up from school by my mum's friends or the boy in my class' mum and especially the woman whose house smells bad. I want my mum back.

But it's her mum. And she might die.

I prop myself up, begin another puzzle.

I'm playing ping-pong with my eldest and although my thoughts are everywhere, my co-ordination is not. Somehow I'm beating him, which he doesn't like, but it's fun – the tip-tap of the ball accompanied by the infectious gurgle of his laughter.

The shrill ring of my phone sends dodgems to my belly. I have to get this.

She's still in the hospital; the news meaning the dodgems will become my parasites for the foreseeable. More games of ping-pong will be abandoned. My eldest probably won't turn to crosswords in this digital age – maybe an iPad game, maybe scrolling his phone. He will become familiar with relieved-disappointed. He'll wish for his mum to have more time, less phone calls, fewer emergency dashes out.

He'll want his mum back.

And I'll want mine.

# The Chair

MT Talensby

They put a chair at the door to hold it open. I found myself wondering about that, as I followed them into the room. Could I not be trusted in that room unattended? What had happened, to need that precaution? Was it for easy access, in case of the low moan that grows until it fills up every crack and corner? Would they would rush in and slam my body to the ground, to crush the wailing from my body?

You always read about those moments when the world stops, but it always seemed, to me, like a flourish. Not something that happens in real life. Time always continues, because that's what time does.

They had told me to be prepared.

They had struggled to close her mouth.

Her silence was always her most brutal weapon. Over 25 years and I still spiral wildly into dark places, if I am met with silence rather than recrimination.

I had never stopped to consider what her silence did to her.

Her body had been ravaged. Hollowed out. They had taken her teeth out, which made the bottom half of her face look like it was being washed away with the tide. A vein in her neck stood rigid and her mouth...

Her mouth.

It looked like all those years of silence had been screamed out of her body, in the last hours. She had frozen like that, face and neck contorted from the sheer violence of it.

My sister had been sleeping in a cot in her room when it ended. A nurse gently waking her, minutes later. She hadn't been woken by the sound. She hadn't lain there, eyes closed trying to escape from the constancy of it. The screams had been silent, rousing no-one.

I remembered I hadn't breathed in for a while, so I did that. Which seemed to signal to the attendant that I could be left alone. Door open.

I found another chair and pulled it over – not too close – and sat down. I looked at the person laid out before me. Her body seemed to disappear as my eyes

travelled the length of the bed. I wondered where her feet were.

What are people supposed to think or feel in those moments? I sat there, looking at her, waiting for something to happen. A cousin said she was unable to speak. My sister said she had been asking for me. But I didn't go. Not until after. Even monsters deserve peace in their final moments. But I knew that I would go after, if only to wedge the event in my mind, like the chair at the door; to stop it slipping away from me. I needed to see her, to make sure I knew I'd never see her again. I got the call at 5am and it would have been so easy to just go back to sleep and carry on as though nothing had changed.

I pulled out the notebook I carried with me, tried to sketch the landscape of her destruction. Perhaps looking for the detail would commit this moment to memory? It didn't take long before I returned to just sitting.

Looking.

Waiting.

There were notices placed strategically: no photography. I did it anyway.

I take photos of dead things. I don't know when it started, but if I pass a dead animal or bird, I can't keep walking. I need to crouch down for a close up. It feels like a tribute, somehow, knowing this was once a thing that moved in the world.

I couldn't be sure that my mind wouldn't distort her image in the nightmares that would inevitably come. A photograph would be a placeholder, to remind me of the truth of it.

Maybe this was the reason for the chair.

So sneaky. I held my phone down at my side at first, lest the curtain really be as transparent as I feared. I crept close, trying to make it look like I was just communicating my pain, texting my wailing to the world.

This is as close as I'd been to her in decades. We bumped into each other on a busy city street once. I turned a corner and there she was, walking towards me. I saw the recognition in her face, followed by a fleeting internal debate about what to do. My own reactions, right in front of me. We both reached the same decision, at the same time, and kept on walking. It felt like it took minutes, rather than just seconds.

Even at this nearness, I struggled to find something in her face that I recognised. Her hair was straighter than I remembered, greyer. Her eyes were black crescent moons fighting against her eyelids. My memory would need something more. The chair I had chosen wasn't the right weight.

So, I reached out my hand and touched her. Her hair, as it swept away from her head in waves. Soft between my fingers, not coarse as I'd imagined. I carefully touched a fingertip to her forehead. That's when it finally felt real. The body remembers when the mind can't. I delicately stroked her forehead with the tips of my fingers, soothing all of those things that had made her scream at the end.

The faintest hint of memory in the deep of my throat.

I was so sure that I would set the world on fire, when this day finally came. But it was cold and quiet and calm.

There's time yet.

# The Big Bang at iBrow Studio

Hema Nataraju

I'm most scared right before she begins. When your neck is resting at an obtuse angle, you cannot feel anything but powerless against the pain that's coming. I can smell the metallic heat as she warms the wax up and my insides churn in panic. My brain has decided the wax is too hot.

"Please don't scrunch eyes." She says in a heavily accented voice. I've endured labor pain, twice. I was Rosie the Riveter for Halloween. I can do this. *Breathe*. I file the possibility of second degree burns on my face along with my other irrational fears - my kids getting lost, bashing my face against a pole and losing my front teeth, falling into an open manhole. That file cabinet in my brain is full.

Her unfamiliar body closes in. She's not my usual eyebrow lady. *Why isn't she blowing on the wax?*

She lays a thick layer of hot wax just under my eyebrow. It's not screaming hot, but my nails dig into the foam armrest upon impact. The wax cools instantly and weighs down on my eyelid. And then without warning she yanks it. Through closed eyes, I see stars, planets, entire universes forming in a hot dark ocean of pain.

Why do I do this to myself? I don't mind bushy eyebrows, but it's that rogue hair on my upper lip which brings me here every time. You know the one. It's persistent, coarse, and wiry. It's a great source of amusement to my husband and it acts as my worry bead while I'm in a reflective mood. I quite like it, but the jerk is beginning to turn gray, reminding me of the slippery slope that aging is.

I try to think happy thoughts, to remember this pain so I can write about it later, but soon the wax is on my upper lip and when she yanks it off, the Big Bang takes place all over again, completely numbing my brain. A few more minutes pass and the torture I put myself through (and pay for) is over.

I walk home feeling great despite the shimmering pain under my skin; a freshly formed planet brimming with possibilities but still carefully avoiding manhole grates and poles.

# Grieving the Thing it's Better you Lost

Brittany Terwilliger

I let the ramp scraps rot in the garbage because that pasta was the last thing you cooked for me. Ramp pasta with lemon and parmesan, remember? And you were tense because I didn't want my handful of spaghetti snapped in half like your mom used to do. The tension didn't last long, although I know you remember it differently. It was always bewildering how one tense moment could spoil everything in your mind, how later you'd be unable to remember anything good that happened. That night, we kissed against the cold window, snow flurrying outside. At the table I rested my forehead on your stomach and you ran your fingers through my still-damp hair. I made us cocktails with that blood orange stuff and those syrupy cherries. The pasta tasted so good.

The night of our fight the ramp scraps had just started to turn, and I almost took the trash out then. Still buoyed by pain and self-righteousness, I wanted to rid my whole life of you. Good fucking riddance. But pain and self-righteousness have a brief shelf life, and when they start to break down, all that's left are those fading, beautiful things you touched only a few days ago. The bridge from then to now was such a short run that it almost seemed crossable.

Soon the rancid smell reached the kitchen ceiling, slipped under the couch. It followed me into the shower like you used to. Stuck to the t-shirt you got me for my birthday. One night it got in bed with me, put its arms around me and told me stories. That night at the pub by the fireplace when we could not stop talking to each other and then that busboy dropped half a pitcher of stale beer on your lap. All those simple, sun-dappled mornings waking up with you pressed against my back despite your insistence that you hated sleeping next to anyone. The first time you said you loved me, on the phone drunk and crying because you didn't know how to get back to your hotel. Then, that lovestruck guy turning disgusted so fast when I became the lovestruck one. Your admiration gradually becoming annoyance. Annoyance becoming a breeding ground for insecurity and shame.

These rotting things became a suffocating, inescapable fug that grew and grew.

I wrestled with it, slept with it, cried on its shoulder. It's the good moments that sink into your bones, you know. The good ones get branded onto you, and it takes so much bad to erase them.

I should have known not to go back to Illinois, but my mom said she'd take care of me for a few days. She was shit-faced when I got there, red Solo cup sloshing when she hugged me. The first words out of her mouth were, "Sophie was so sad you weren't here yesterday."

"Sorry," I said. "It turned out I didn't feel up to the drive yesterday."

"She kept asking 'Did Aunt Laney forget about me?' I had to take the day off work and take her to the pool to cheer her up."

She took another slug from her cup, which was filled with Riesling from one of those giant bottles she keeps in the door of the refrigerator. I plodded down the hall to put my bag in the guest room, and Mom settled back into her pristine yellow birdhouse-print couch.

When I reemerged, I opened my mouth to speak, but she spoke first.

"Sophie was so upset you weren't here yesterday," she said. "Do you ever feel selfish for moving away?"

I stopped and looked her in the face for a few seconds. Really looked at her, and thought about how frequently we all lose things, even when they're sitting right in front of us. I wondered if I would ever have good memories of this moment.

"You know, Sophie loves you," Mom said. "She was so upset you weren't here yesterday, she cried and cried."

I sliced a hand through my hair. "Maybe she should stop loving things that make her cry," I said.

Mom just blinked at me.

After I got back I couldn't hide the fug anymore. It followed me to the grocery store. The parking lot was haunted with cars like yours and I sat frozen in the dark driver's seat exhaling white puffs of breath, ruminating on everything I did wrong and how sorry I was, how maybe if I'd been more fun or more lighthearted or more confident or more mysterious or more exciting, then maybe. The guy who wrangles the shopping carts waved a hand next to my window and asked me if I was okay, and I nodded and started my engine. But I wanted to turn myself inside out, wanted to ask everyone I saw how they do it. How do you pretend everything is fine when loneliness has filled your throat like tar and forced you into this savage self-reliance?

The next day, the neighbors started asking questions and my landlord stopped by. He gagged when I opened the door, and pulled a wadded up tissue out of his pocket to hold over his nose.

"You'll have rats in here," he said, pointing at the trash bin. "Let me get rid of that for you."

I took a deep breath of the stench I didn't even notice anymore. All the beautiful rotting pieces of us twisted inside me like vapor, like something that can only exist when something else is lost.

I thought of what you said that day at the lake, that almost every good moment, by the time you grab it, is already gone.

"No," I said, "I'll do it," and I closed the door. I felt the fug searing the moment onto my heart.

## Point of Sale

Essie Dee

I thought he was gay, we all did. Flamboyant, funny, facetious. Flirtatious with the men, friend to all the girls.

But here he stands before me. With demands.

I clutch the box of 'to be assembled' parts to my chest; a stockroom standoff. The light is dim, casting shadows, while the joyous sound of 'Jingle Bells' filters in from the showroom floor. He looms large, is notably stronger. High heels and stepladders - a poor mix to be sure. If I were injured - my word against his beloved best in sales or seasonal worker and apparent trouble maker.

I pay the toll. Burst forth into the bright lights of the store. Impatient customers with ruffled feathers to smooth. Fear and shock of the moment fade.

I let that happen.

I should know better.

Shame takes over.

To make it through the shift, I carry on in silence, trying to convince myself that I enjoyed it.

# My Neighbor, the Gentleman

Brenden Layte

My neighbor lived on a strip of vacant land next to some train tracks. In the summer, he'd lay blankets on the grass and sit to look toward the tree-covered hills in the distance. Bottles and broken clay pots and other things he collected were arranged by color on the cement wall at the edge of his camp. They'd shake when trains went by and, once in a while, they'd sound like rocks do when waves tumble them over each other, pulling them toward the ocean. Sometimes he'd manipulate his collection into folk art sculpture and lean the pieces against the wall or hang them from the overgrown bushes that intertwined to form a canopy for him to sleep under. I'd walk by before everything was a construction site and want to look closer, but you don't enter another person's home uninvited.

My neighbor would hang out on the bench behind the laundromat next to where I live. He'd rest there after collecting things or he'd shoot the shit with the family that runs the place or maybe he'd just be sitting down and grabbing a few minutes of peace where he could find it. Some days he'd be happy to see me, and we'd talk and laugh. Other days, he'd mutter or yell right through me, angry at something I couldn't know or understand.

One Mother's Day, I was pushing my grandmother to the park in a wheelchair. She wanted to see the lilacs. It was after she couldn't really walk around anymore, but before she decided she was too proud to be pushed around in a wheelchair and that, combined with her dementia, made it so she didn't visit anymore. We approached my neighbor on the sidewalk and I smiled and asked him how he was. He smiled back and stepped aside and went a few steps up a crooked and cracked cement staircase that leads to a worn-out three-decker and he ushered us by with a smile, an elegant arm gesture, and the proud proclamation, "I am a gentleman." My delighted grandmother replied, "Yes, you are." I smiled again and thanked him. She talked about how charming he was for the rest of the day.

When they broke ground on the new developments, somebody threw all my neighbor's things away. His bottles and pots and sculptures and blankets and

everything except what he had with him in his cart. For a while, he kept the cart in a disused old Catholic cemetery nearby. The cart nestled against a fence in the corner among graves that were put there because they weren't allowed in the city's Protestant graveyards. After a couple months, someone started locking the gate for the first time in years. Maybe it was only a coincidence that they started locking it right when they began showing the new \$750,000 townhouses next door.

I don't remember the last time I saw my neighbor because I didn't know it would be the last time. It's not him being gone that bothers me; it's that he was indifferently tormented away from what was his home. Maybe he got help and maybe I should know better, but I would have hoped that aid didn't look the same as throwing things away. His cart is still locked in the cemetery, among grass-covered graves, a strip of blanket over the handle.

I walk by and picture my neighbor's camp still being there with him squinting over the tracks to the trees beyond. I hope he's gone because he has a safer, more humane life. Or if that's not for me to judge, I just hope he's content somewhere. Maybe he's someplace sitting on a blanket enjoying the view. Or trying to use the broken things he finds to make his neighborhood a little more beautiful.

# You, Me, and Emmylou

Alva Holland

You looked so out of place in your shirt and tie, but you insisted, and I realised that even coming to this place was so out of your comfort zone that I said no more, not even when you stared aghast, and visibly paled as we approached the street where the National Stadium sat, opposite the grimy shattered windows of the derelict tenements reflecting the ghosts of past lives, at the crowds of fans streaming towards the doors which were manned by tattooed bouncers you chose to ignore, and they you, as we inched inside to the next shock for you which was no seating and I could see you wondering how on earth you would survive this few hours of 'music' and I could visualise you putting that in fingered inverted commas if you ever talked about it because you didn't listen to this kind of thing ever, and you tried to look at ease but couldn't have looked less so when young Martin, 'baby' brother of your best friend, spotted you in the crowd, came over, slapped you on the shoulder and said, 'hey man, what the hell you doin' here?' and you answered the question by introducing me and then Martin understood with a nod and a wink that you were out to impress, that you could really do something like this for someone you liked a lot, might love eventually even, and I said nothing but I smiled at Martin and shook his hand while he grinned and turned away and you looked at me with that raised eyebrow thing you do and I wanted to say but I didn't, how surprised I was that you were making the effort, that you actually came here 'to this dive,' a description I refused to acknowledge when you said it, as Emmylou sashayed onto the stage the way she does and 'Pancho and Lefty' filled the stadium and everyone erupted except you, but you watched my eyes sparkle, my lips move to the lyrics, my hips sway to the blues of 'Quarter Moon In A Ten Cent Town' and I figured out later it was at that precise moment you worked out that we might have a future if you hung in there, which we did, not just because you hung in but because I think that same evening while the music played, I fell in love too.

## Newsreel, Kahanamoku Pool, 1938

Gail Anderson

I see you in flickering light, black and white, fired from the block by the starter's gun. Your mighty curl springs arrow-long, water shadowed before the fall to pandemonium. Strong-arm pull and scissor legs churn your wake, the prow of your capped head curls a bow wave. Roiling, foaming, fifty meters and leading, you shoulder the turn, a kaleidoscope tumble. Cameras flash. Shouts needle the air. Submarine, you push through a gash of bubbles. In this moment the future is unbound. You will leave an echo in a sister's voice. A basket of clippings dusty as moths' wings. Medals, gold on grosgrain ribbons. Photographs. I will wear your plumeria lei, borrow your feet to walk through sugarcane fields, smile over a fence, blur beneath a volcano. Now, with a whirl of the projector's gate you shatter the surface. The final lap, and your course lies through open water, aquamarine. Your crowd, brought to its feet, stamps the bleachers. Just hold this shimmering line, this celluloid moment, surge under flags to the finish and rise up, up into seething air. Into the camera's lens. Your face, a mirror, drips diamonds, and I see you. Grandmother. Champion.

## Behind Her in the Looking Glass

F. E. Clark

Today, from my right eyebrow, the one whose arc has always behaved, a precocious white hair breaks the line.

Before the shaming stopped me running, and before I discovered the shaming was a lie, I run along a corridor holding an orange plastic boat up high to show the nurses and doctors, who smile with kind eyes.

The plastic is hollow and my small hands can squeeze and collapse it inwards if I hold it in a certain way. The plastic has gone white where my milk-teeth have gnawed a hole in the prow, and it makes a whooshing sound when the air is squeezed out, then whistles when the air is allowed back in—re-inflating like a deployed life-raft.

I was told to choose something of mine to give to my new brother. I can't remember why I chose the boat. Perhaps I didn't decide this myself.

The night before I'd stayed at the farm with Grandma and Granda. I'm bursting to tell Mum Grandma fed me saps—bread in milk with sugar, what they feed the farm cats, and I'm disgusted.

Today, my mouth is full of angry words of disbelief and protest, but these hidden behind my cherry-flavoured lip balm slicked lips, and clamped tight behind my gritted teeth, which are surely cracked and rusted closed from holding back for so long.

I find a glossy photograph, stuck between the pages of an old sketchbook that smells of oil and fixative. The top right corner is creased over, obscuring the right side of my face. It leaves a diagonal photo-scar when unfolded. I'd had my hair shorn tight to my skull, and my eyes look huge and neutral.

My eyebrows are symmetrical, except that my left eyebrow (the right one in the photograph) has the crease running through it. I don't know who took this photograph, but I know it was someone I didn't like, someone who took the photograph without my permission.

I'm sitting on a bench outside somewhere near the Design Museum in London. There's a crowd of other students from the trip with their backs to me in the background. I'm not smiling—perhaps I've been gritting my teeth for decades.

Today, my eyes are reproachful. Why do I look so rarely? Looking now I think perhaps I can still see the glint of green, still see the spark, still remember it's me. Hello old friend, hello.

I was lagging behind workmates whose names I can't remember now, as we walked one lunchtime into the shopping centre. At the entrance a busker was massacring a Waterboys' song. The smell from that shop that sells bath bombs hummed in the air.

Halfway through the centre I saw the woman, it was just a glimpse as we passed each other, going opposite directions. The dark pits of her eyes. How she held herself in a certain way as she was jostled by the crowd—cowered in, as if in pain, as if the entire surface of her skin was purpled with an invisible bruise.

This woman, she wasn't crying or anything like that, but I knew something terrible had happened to her, that she was broken. No one else seemed to notice. I turned to see where she was heading, but she had already gone. I wish I'd gone after her. I always wondered what happened to her—if she had somewhere safe to go, and if there was someone there to comfort her.

# The Panini Epiphany

Riley Winchester

The pool has never looked like this. Not when Ray was here to take care of it. Wrinkled leaves drift atop the surface, algae inhabits the floor, built up thick along the edges. The water is adopting an ugly hue—grayish and greenish, like this drab June afternoon sky and ryegrass merged. Ray's son Trent is skimming the pool, head down and unaware of us. My mom says hi, and he flinches and looks up. Trent tells us Kathy, his mom, is inside, probably in the kitchen.

Ray didn't leave a note, or at least nobody found one. He went to his hunting cabin in northern Michigan, said he was going to clean out some stuff, organize it a little. He went alone.

My mom and I go into the house through the sliding glass door in the basement. There's a big TV mounted to the wall, bigger than any of the TVs back at our house. In front of it sits a new couch, wide and hulking and shaped like a giant leather L—no washed-out seat cushions or depressed back rests. I can smell the fresh leather. The bar in the back of the room, the bar Ray was so proud of, is collecting dust. The bottles are full with liquor and the glasses are filled with cobwebs.

Upstairs, Kathy is in the kitchen wiping down countertops. She's happy to see us, she says. My mom says she's sorry—about Ray, about how it happened. Kathy says thank you. Then she asks us if we've ever eaten a sandwich from a home panini maker. Ray got her it a while back and she's been obsessed with it ever since, she says.

It doesn't make sense, what Ray did. A successful obstetrician, healthy marriage, happy family, nice house, cabin up north. Nothing makes sense, so of course rumors emerge. He had hidden financial problems, a secret mistress, was getting sued by a patient for malpractice, it was all an elaborate murder. Rumors fit for an early afternoon soap opera.

Kathy makes a turkey pesto panini, and my mom and I split it. I bite into it and it tastes so good I don't even care that it feels like a thousand little fires have been lit on my tongue. My mom tells Kathy it's the best panini she's ever had. Kathy

smiles and reminds us Ray got her the panini maker. I watch steam escape between the folds of turkey and take another bite and pesto oozes through the crust and drips onto my hand and I'm eight years old and thinking: with sandwiches this good, who would ever want to die?

# I See You in Songs

Davena O' Neill

*Purple Rain* as we shared headphones, heads touching. I wanted to freeze-frame the moment, your hair against my cheek, your scent, the low tone of your voice as you hummed. You were just being kind, oblivious to the heart pounding beside you, so loud I couldn't make out the songs until later, alone.

*Love Cats* as I watched from my bedroom window. Your slow, sloping stride, unaware of being observed. I knew your school timetable, your schedule at the chippers, saw the thin-lipped blonde that dropped you home, later than when your shift ended. All the others that caught you, before finally, you looked my way.

*When Doves Cry* as you stood laughing in the snow. We drove over mountain roads, snowflakes flurrying against the windshield, your fingers twirling my hair. I envied your calm, as my heart fluttered around every bend, the countryside a blanket of white.

*Rapture* as our eyes locked, your head between my legs, my hand in your thick hair. I pulled you up, as you pushed in, wet red lips, hot and salty. You were just as I imagined, every touch and taste familiar. But you were tender too, vulnerable. A deep pool that I dove in, never able to reach the bottom.

*Blue Valentines* as we lied, promises hastily made, easily broken. Rose-tinted glasses unable to shade the colour of deceit. They say you should never meet your heroes, perhaps also true for dreams; some are not for the waking. Disappointment turned to relief.

*The Beautiful Ones* as I look back, memories gentle like butterfly wings, soft on my skin. The golden haze of nostalgia, kind to how we were, softening our edges so no sharpness remains. What might have been, better because it never was. Worlds away, but all as it should be.

# Acadia

Steve Carr

Like huge flakes of snow, chicken down blew across the open field, swirling, rising and falling in the late October breeze, forming small mounds and drifts in the clumps of grass all the way to the bay. At my knees the metal of the heater vibrated slightly as it hummed and chugged out a steady flow of warm air. On the other side of the field, a car took the sharp curve on the road leading into town, spitting up dust and rocks as its back tires swerved into dirt and gravel, then slowed and continued on until it disappeared down the main street lined with stores and restaurants. I turned from the window and surveyed the wreckage in the room: strewn clothes, beer bottles, a pizza box, my emptied duffle bag.

In the other bed, next to the bed I had slept in, lay a naked man, sprawled out in what looked like a drunken stupor. An empty whiskey bottle rested in his left armpit. I tried, in vain, to recall his name or how he came to be in my room.

Passing beside the poultry manufacturing plant I watched men in green overalls remove live, squawking chickens from wood crates, quickly bind their claws with short pieces of bright red cord, then hang them upside down on hooks from an overhead conveyor belt that carried the birds through wide open metal doors into the bowels of the factory. Brushing down from my olive-colored Army field jacket I quickened my pace, passing by large Victorian homes painted in bright colors with contrasting painted shutters that gave them the look of oversized doll houses. The leaves on the trees that lined the street were turning from bright oranges and yellows to shades of brown. Balding branches poked out in all directions like arthritic fingers.

Pearl's Diner was almost empty. The small bell above the door tinkled melodically as I entered. I stood there momentarily allowing my eyes to adjust to the neon pink décor and inhaled the aromas of fried fish and floor cleaner. I took a seat at my usual booth in the back corner and smoothed out a wrinkle in the plastic table

cloth, then removed my jacket, and waited.

Grace was working. She came to the table, as always dressed in a pink uniform with a white apron and her bleach-blond hair piled high into a beehive. The porcelain smoothness of her plump cheeks was colored with the faintest hue of pink blush.

"What'll it be today, sweetie?" she asked, taking the order pad from a pocket in her apron.

"Waffles and black coffee."

"You sure you don't want to try something different?" she asked, scribbling on the pad.

"Just waffles and black coffee."

A bell on a buoy clanged loudly in the choppy waters as fishermen unloaded lobsters in the traps from their small boats and stacked them on the wood planks of the dock. Screeching seagulls circled overhead, sometimes swooping down toward the pier but never landing. Sitting on a barrel I tasted the saltiness in the air being carried inland.

The captain of the blue and white boat with the name Endora painted on its side in large black letters stepped off the boat and walked over to me, a large metal ring with keys hanging from his belt clinking with every step. "You seen Dave?"

Dave! That was his name. "No."

"He didn't show up for work this morning and his wife is looking for him. He didn't go home last night," he said. "I thought I saw him walking up the road with you yesterday after he was finished here."

"No," I repeated. "I haven't seen him."

Dave remained under the thin sheet staring at the television, the pillow behind his head, an unlit cigarette dangling on his lower lip. At the window I watched night spread over the ocean and town forming a landscape of blackness. Rain pelted the glass sounding like muted gunfire. In my reflection in the glass I fought to recognize the face staring back at me.

Without turning to face him I said, "You need to go home now."

Wordlessly he got out of bed and put on his clothes. "You staying here?" he asked, his voice filled with longing to be somewhere else, to be someone else, that

he had just spent an hour bemoaning while drinking a six-pack of beer.

"I'm leaving in the morning."

He left the room, leaving in his wake the aromas of lobster, sea water and booze.

On the ridge of a valley looking down at a large dark blue lake I heard the moose before I saw it. As it came out from a line of pine trees into a clearing beneath where I was seated on a rock it made a guttural snort and stopped and turned its head toward the same scene I had been looking at. The thought of how easy it would be to kill from my position if I had my rifle crossed my mind. I picked up a stone and threw it near the moose's rear foot. It didn't move, stubbornly waiting to be killed.

I stood up and hoisted my duffle bag onto my shoulder and headed north.

Standing on the side of the road I waved on two cars that slowed, apparently to see if I needed a ride. Since that morning the air had turned crisp, cold and damp. My breath came out as mist that hung in the air before dissipating. I leaned against a pole with two signs. One pointed north toward Nova Scotia. The other pointed south toward Bangor, and toward the Army base. In my ears was the echoes of shots being fired and voices calling out in pain. I crossed the road and stuck out my thumb to hitch a ride to return to the Army base.

## A Marble in a Shot Glass

Christopher Oliver

"I have seen someone eat a tomato like an apple before. I have seen the same man several times, walk up and down the train sing "The Lion Sleeps Tonight". This man also quotes dialogue from the same movie that this song features in, *The Lion King*, though I can't say I've ever heard him repeat the same scene twice. I have seen multiple people complete Rubik's cubes on the tube. I have screamed very loudly at a man carrying what I thought might be a cello, for whistling non-stop for almost 30 minutes whilst wearing noise-cancelling headphones - I'd even clapped to get his attention to no effect, though when I screamed at him, he most certainly heard me through those noise-cancelling headphones of his. I have seen countless, countless people rush to make the train before its doors close, only to jam them open and make it on board, smiling inanely at the surrounding passengers to see if they got the joke or were somehow glad, perhaps impressed, that they managed to get on this train with them. My brother and I have only done this once before, exceedingly drunk and with belligerence to make up for all the other times we had witnessed others do it, and we dared others to stare us down for it. I have seen more people than I can tolerate eat hot fried chicken on both quiet and packed out trains; I never get used to that awful smell. I have encountered far too many people watching YouTube videos on loudspeaker from their phones. I have seen someone eat a cucumber like a banana before, peeling the plastic down the vegetable like the skin of said fruit. I have endured far too many people far too often have phone conversations on loudspeaker, a scenario I'm consistently incredulous with. Where does this impulse derive from, to have the public listen to your private affairs? What kind of narcissistic person sings out loud with their headphones on, the dichotomy that they can hear the music but not their own voices, knowing that the other passengers can hear that latter and not the former. What is that? One man in particular speaks to someone I can only picture being a sibling, given how early in the day it always is; *every single* morning as loudly as possible, in patois. I have seen people squeeze in behind me, when I swipe my

oyster card and enter through the gate in a station, only to laugh at me when I notice exiting the gate, fucked-off at the theft of it. I have seen a man wear two hats on his head with apparent nonchalance; I tried to take a photograph but couldn't bring myself to do it. Worryingly, a man once walked alongside me the whole route to my station wearing a wolf mask with his hood up. He was carrying a shopping bag, and would glance left towards me, awaiting some response that I failed to elicit. I can see right through people's bullshit, and I will not give them one inch. Disturbingly, I have smelt an insurmountable number of rotten farts on the train, people just simply do not care and go for it, packed train or not. Out with it. People have eaten prawn and tuna fish sandwiches directly in front of me. People have yelled "Move down please!" to those of us, packed out passengers crammed in the carriage like cows transported for slaughter, where there was no room to 'move down'. I have seen many preachers yell their creeds at the silently waiting. Too stupefied or tired to care. Can you blame them? I have not seen enough dogs. I have taken mine on the tube only for her paws to get trampled on. Too many humans I have seen pick their noses and eat it, carefree, indignant. One in particular I have seen many times, he with awful sense of dress who wears a fedora and a sports backpack in the same outfit flagrantly and knowingly mining his nose, plunging his index back into his mouth, repeatedly scoffing the detritus of his nostrils. I have seen one man wear shorts all year round, but I recognise him not by this feature but by his glasses. I have heard people hold business conversations agreeing that their 'positions are aligned', that they should update their 'primary action items as a result of this call', and discussing who should build which portion of the deck. *Please*. I have seen several people clipping their nails on the tube. An associate of mine once described an incident where he sat beside a man who proceeded to empty the contents of his nose onto the floor of the train in long, hawking strains; you can imagine the noise that motherfucker made. My associate said he wanted to move seats whilst this was happening but didn't because he felt it was too rude to act so obviously. What even is that? I have heard a group of women discussing the type of sandwiches they wished to purchase for lunch the next day and go into great detail about their preferences on fillings; they talked about texture and their chosen adjectives nauseated me beyond belief. I can't take food descriptions, they're somehow perverse and pornographic; how people pull faces and make noises when they eat or talk about eating. My God.

I have spent approximately 442 hours on trains this year; I calculate that as a

minimum. That's 26,520 minutes. That is 18.41 days of my year spent on public transport, enduring the quivering, shuddering, shaking mass of humanity, watch them behave in ways I have yet to fully understand; I picture these incidents as though from a movie, crescendoing; a collage I feel as my fury at the world builds and builds, Moby's "God Moving Over The Face Of The Waters" sound tracking the carnage. In my mind it's a toss-up between that, and the slow motion, rolling-crashing ambulance from the film *Magnolia*, you know that scene? One so devastatingly beautiful I think about it too much. About the crushing vulnerability of everyone everywhere, about their infinite yearnings and doubts, their love for each other and lack of it too. And yet, instead I am witness to the atrocities of the tube. When I'm spinning I try to pull through, really pull through, and I can remember how the morning light cast a beautiful arching pattern across a young girls face reading a novel on the Overground almost two years ago. I can think about the wonderful feeling of my breath creating cyclical mist in the winter air or I can think about seeing others like me, smiling to themselves.

I have paid for every single one of these journeys."

# Unblended Family

Em Kelly

My baby is away. My big baby. Standing nearly four foot eight. He did not want to go to his overnight sleep. He clung to me and whispered he loved me. But he had to go.

I am seated at the table. It's a dim room and the remnants of my boy's favourite meal—fusilli with cheese—stares back at me. A glass of Rioja is left unsipped. I slide my hand alongside the cool wood of the table top, creating invisible patterns and stare at the telltale signs of wrinkles beginning to mar my smooth skin. I am ageing, he is growing. Somewhere, not in our home tonight, my son will sleep and arise tomorrow morning with bones that have elongated in an undetectable increment of millimeter. And I will not be there to measure his growth.

In the other room, a man celebrates Father's Day. His children gather around him and I hear their laughter. Sometimes I am their stand-in mother but today I am invisible. Their compassion and hearts are absent. My flesh and blood is elsewhere. I sit alone. Not held, not regarded. I lift my chin.

Outside, the air is thick with unprecedented heat. It's an invisible soup of warmth that clings to bodies as they shift slowly on streets and in parks. I leave the bowl on the table and walk to the alley alongside the house, where shadows hide my form. I press my bare legs against painted white bricks. The impact of icy, fired earth brings relief to my sweaty pores and I remove my summer shoes to nestle toes on dirty cobbles. I do not care about the dust beneath my feet. It will create its own dark patterns on the floor of the bath when I step into the shower before bed and entice jets of water to cleanse me from above. Patterns. A body always making patterns. Dissolving patterns. A disappearing imprint from my body into earth.

I feel grounded in the alley. This is my time, I tell myself. My alone time. A gift of solitude I so often crave but rarely source its indulgence. I think of my son's eyes looking at me this morning. The same eyes housed in a bigger face than when I glimpsed him take his first breaths.

I ring my mother. I am my mother's only baby and am also far away. My mother's baby today is grown and stands five-foot-nine, but still my mother says my face contorts in the same fashion as when she birthed me into the world, when I yawn and chew and smile.

In the kitchen, I look at the remains of the meal on the countertop. I need to tidy this mess but instead I stand anchored and stare at the pot of paintbrushes on the window sill. The handles are wooden and brightly coloured. My son and I have painted landscapes and self-portraits with these brushes for nearly ten years. His hand has grown, his brushstrokes becoming more determined and defined over time—faces once painted with googly eyes he now creates with blue irises under arched brows and mouths less cartoonish. I recognise my face in his paintings. My teeth still resemble train tracks but his older self adds highlights to my hair in contrasting yellow hues.

I hear laughter still erupting from the other room but I am not offered a place to sit beside them on the sofas, so I mount the stairs. My son's bed is made but the duvets are haphazardly thrown at angles over large pillows. His stuffed crocodile continues to hold place, as has done for many years, yet today competes with books for advanced readers, an iPad and a medal he won for athletic success a few days ago. I straighten the duvets and wonder how soft his pillow is tonight.

I descend the stairs barefoot, leaving behind a trail of microscopic dirt from the alley along the warm carpeting. The wine is pitched down the drain but I gobble the tepid pasta while standing by the kitchen radio, listening to a woman reciting Yeats. I think of Innisfree. An island. Ireland. I feel homesick and mull over the gifts of solitude, how elusive that feeling feels, like fingers struggling to grasp water.

I decide the greatest gift in that moment is to write. Write for me. Write to mourn, to celebrate, to release, to ground. I will write to my son and send him another letter to an email account he does not know he has, but one day he will log in and read my words. He will know that when he was not with me, he was with me. In my mind, in my heart, in my words.

The gift of solitude tonight is connection, connection with the invisible, those far away, the elusive, the forgotten, the cherished ones.

Tonight, I write in solitude.

## This Ain't Cornball Crap

Paul Ruta

*There's a hole in daddy's arm where all the money goes  
And Jesus Christ died for nothing, I suppose*  
— John Prine, “Sam Stone” (1971)

People who were into music in the 1970s read Creem and Rolling Stone magazines, hung out in record stores and listened to FM radio. You could hardly escape AM radio on your daily rounds, so everybody heard the same big hits between traffic reports and the weather. But if you wanted to go deep you also listened to FM, where the real music lived. Anyone who cared—and that was a lot of people in those days—tuned into FM literally and metaphorically.

So here's my theory. In middle white North America, where this story takes place, we all listened to the same stuff. Millions of us knew the same artists, the same songs. We bought the same albums. I believe this shared cultural experience is what tricks Boomers into thinking 1970s music is better than other eras.

But anyone today with an open mind and a Spotify account can tell you it simply isn't true.

Music in the 1970s wasn't better. The difference is the way we experienced it.

I grew up in Niagara Falls, Ontario, a place that's about as middle and white as it gets. We listened mostly to radio stations based in Buffalo. The reception was clearer than from stations in distant Toronto, at least on the car radios and home stereos we teenagers could afford, and we tended to identify ourselves more with Buffalo anyway. (Go Sabres!)

American DJs seemed freer and freakier than the uptight Canadians, and the frisson of all things Buffalonian appealed to us Canucks ensconced over the border in Black Sabbath T-shirts ironed by our moms.

Every high school kid who wanted one got a summer job in the tourism industry. In the summer of 1975 I was the night cleaner at a snack bar on Clifton Hill—that's the strip with flashing signs and wax museums. It took from midnight to 8am to pumice the griddle, flush the ice cream maker, swab the patio and—saving the

worst for last—unclog the ladies toilet. Druggies would come by and I'd give them cold, unsold burgers wrapped in foil. Cop cars cruised past once an hour. That was it for human interaction until sunrise.

These were the days before strict formatting ruined FM radio, when DJs could actually play what they wanted. In the wee hours a certain Buffalo station would play an entire album. Side A, followed by a few ads while they flipped the album over. Often it would be a rock classic I knew by heart and probably owned the vinyl. Much more fascinating to me was when they'd dig out the unknown stuff. Jazz fusion. Dutch prog rock. California garage bands. The more outside my Zeppelin-centric comfort zone the better.

The night they played John Prine's first album I froze in mid-mop to listen. The plastic snack bar radio suddenly seemed unworthy of emitting such an outstanding collection of songs. This patio coated in a day's worth of tourist muck was going to have to wait.

It was the first time I'd imagined country music as being anything other than cornball crap, a low form of art ranking just above polka. Against all preconceptions, Prine was young and sang his plain and simple songs with a tolerable twang, with lyrics rich in humor and heartbreak.

"Sam Stone" is the song that stood out most. This tale of a soldier who returns from Vietnam as a junkie is still among the most personal and compelling anti-war statements ever set to a melody. And it was released while the war was still in full swing. Anti-war country music—who knew?

Later that snack bar summer I hitchhiked to Toronto to see him at an outdoor concert—85 miles each way—back when hitchhiking was still a fine means of transportation. I went alone because my friends still had their heads stuck in Genesis and Pink Floyd.

The next summer I did the same.

By the time Prine played at my college, years later, various demons had caught up with him. Songs were substandard and the drunken performance was sloppy. I gave up on him for a decade.

Eventually he sobered up, acknowledged his 'missing years' and won the first of his three Grammys with some of his best material yet. I have come to regard John Prine as one the greatest songwriters from this planet. Many others agree, judging by the outpouring of love and sorrow and respect when in April, 2020 John Prine died in Nashville, one the early victims of the coronavirus.

## Best or Worst Waitress?

Kay Rae Chomic

For my 50th birthday, I celebrated with friends on top of the Space Needle expecting the revolving rooftop restaurant to provide a memorable evening with 360° views of my favorite city.

"What do you recommend," I asked our waitress.

"I don't want to steer you into my stuff. Look over the menu, and I'll be right back."

I looked at my friends. We shrugged shoulders, reviewed the menu.

"Sorry, that was my 15-minute break."

Our questions started with, "How's the Salmon Wellington?"

"That's our specialty, but it's not very good."

"How are the mocha braised short ribs?"

"I don't eat beef, so take your chances."

"How about the halibut?"

"Had it last night and got sick. It could have been something else, but I'd try something different if I were you."

"Do you recommend anything?"

"I've worked all over Seattle. This place has the best view, but the worst food."

"How long have you worked here," I asked.

"About twenty minutes. No, seriously? Three weeks. I've lost 15 pounds."

"Maybe, we'll just get drinks."

"Drinks? Oh. I recommend wine."

We ordered wine and appetizers (nothing memorable) and tipped her well, knew she'd soon be out of a job.

# I Don't Mind, This Could Be The Last Time

Jane Copland

The flu has me. I felt it arrive, fast and mean like a jet landing in a snowstorm with its iron thumbs digging into my forehead and hot poison fusing my neck to my shoulder blades. It wants a piece of the action. January's revenge.

*I want to end it, I say.*

He keeps reminding me: *you need me if you want to keep your green card.*

On both counts, I don't.

Department of Homeland Security form I-407: Abandonment of Lawful Permanent Residency. Fill it out, send it back, let him make a big deal about getting his copy. He says, *They'll come after me if you try to stay in the country*, even though the last fight he picked was from the threads of my dilapidated bank account, marvelling with callous glee at the cost of my plane ticket home. January is an expensive prospect where I come from.

They won't come after him. Scorn sits rotting in my molars, threatening to creep onto my tongue and spit itself into the gritty, damp air of the apartment. *No one is going to come for you.*

I follow instructions from the future, from someone older, healthier, someone in control, whose crackling signal can somehow reach me across years and hemispheres before my batteries run dry. I follow the instructions under the superficial hypnosis of someone whose soul left the country six months ago.

*You're not lying to me, are you?*

I'm lying about everything. Lying is the only way to placate the last lap, the last thirty days, to wind down the clock and make it to the referee's whistle and kick the ball into the stands and run.

*I'm not lying.*

We live underneath the I-5 freeway as it roars through central Seattle. It's both a liberator and a trap. On account of its filth, its bulk, its intimidating gritty stench, it makes passage from the apartment impossible without a car. But it promises escape. It promises the Canadian border one-hundred miles north, or any other

border sixteen miles south at the airport. It coats our meagre, warping balcony with thick black dirt. We made tentative pokes at living like adults who enjoyed our lives, drinking margaritas on the balcony in the evening once or twice. But the first thick, black, gritty rainstorm further warped the spongy decking and we gave it up to the freeway, to the dirt.

I work in an open plan office above a brewery on Capitol Hill. I come to work at midday after following him sadly around civic buildings in the city all morning, notarisations applied to clumsily photocopied documents, bang bang! with the inky stamps at the courthouse. I am an unsympathetic character. I am full of ibuprofen and paracetamol, and I try not to cough. I stay at work until nine at night, adding performative touches to audits as the cleaners stare at my hunched back under an industrial strength company hoodie. The other girls in the office glare and whisper and their tweets are filled with sighing, self-satisfied innuendo and derision about people whose tarnish is too visible, whose lives are failures, tweets they will regret in time and I want to tell them, be careful what you wish on me because the future is coming for you too.

The instructions from the future are remembered in stinging, infected present tense. Allow him to file as the petitioner for divorce, even though it was your idea. Divorce. Live with that albatross for ten years until you're forty and everyone else is divorced too. Exit interview. The girls, irritated and sniping: leaving them to pick up my slack in the middle of a project, as if I should have timed the collapse of my marriage and shamefaced trek to the other side of the world to fit around the shared calendar. Sleep on the sofa for a month. Call a cab. In the second bedroom, he's been taking apart his guns and putting them back together all night.

The driver goes north to get onto the freeway, passing over the apartment at seventy-five miles an hour. He asks if I'm going anywhere nice and a decade later, I wish I could tell him that yes, I did.

# EllenAndHelen

Mimi Kunz

"What have you done for peace and justice today?" Ellen would say. She laughed at how she was described as '*a big, square man canoeing out into the lake*,' in a book written about her peacefully dismantling parts of a nuclear submarine. In reality she hardly saw above the steering wheel of her car. She drove fast and I always felt safe with her because she knew what she was doing.

Ellen is the only person I know who went to prison. She said it was great publicity. The only problem was that she was the cook at home and the food in prison was horrible, and when Helen brought her a homemade bread it was taken away for fear there was a knife hidden in it. Which is funny because they were pacifists.

Helen was Scottish, Ellen Chinese-Californian. They met during the war in Vietnam where they worked in orphanages in Saigon. They fell in love and adopted a little girl there.

Helen used to be a history teacher and became a peace activist. She taught herself to break the law. Together they opened Peace House, educating people on non-violent direct action. They were everybody's host, everyone was their guest.

Helen could talk to anyone and always stayed herself. She loved whisky and Scottish dancing. She climbed and painted the mountains, and led the first all-women climbing expedition to Greenland. She stood very upright and I always found her posture full of grace. She wrote a book on prayer called '*No Extraordinary Power*', and she wrote a diary.

Ellen told me about their honeymoon — a romantic week-end by the sea. When they sat down for a candle lit dinner, an acquaintance joined them, as if they were friends on a holiday.

After they retired Helen wanted to live by the mountains and Ellen by the sea, so they moved to the north-west coast of Scotland. On the way there their truck burnt down. Their new home was called '*Burnside*'. It was so lucky, they said, it was the one with all the clothes, not the one with albums and paintings.

Once they went to see an art exhibition separately and Ellen fell in love with a painting. Helen came home feeling guilty because she'd spent a lot of money and bought a painting. "I hope it's the right one," said Ellen, and it was.

Every Sunday they sat silently on a bench in front of their home for an hour, looking out onto the mountains and the sea.

Ellen loved seafood, and would keep the shells of shrimp to make soup. She wouldn't let anyone into her kitchen, which looked like a living organism only she knew how to work with. She had a background in zoology and once while cleaning the sea shore of plastic they found a whale skeleton which their neighbor put up in his garden for school classes to visit.

When we went for a hike Helen led the way and Ellen brought marshmallows and a pot to make a picnic by the beach.

Ellen got diagnosed with a lung disease and they said she wouldn't see Christmas. Helen waited for three days before sitting down to learn the piano. She spent all their money on trips, cherishing the time they had together. They went on a cruise, flew to Florence.

Ellen lived and Christmas came and went, and another Christmas came and went, and another one came when Helen got cancer. They moved their beds to the living room where they could see the mountains and the sea through the window.

"You know, everything I did, I did it all for you." Helen said on her last day.

Ellen held Helen's hand. "I know, honey, I know."

One of Helen's favorite songs was 'Morning has broken'. The medics came early in the day to take her body. They talked about daily life, the neighbor, the rubbish collection. "How can you talk about rubbish when I just lost the most precious thing in my life?" Ellen said.

"I'm sorry it's just me now," she told me when we visited Helen's grave.

Ellen lived for another three years by the sea.

*Peace activists Ellen Moxley and Helen Steven received the Gandhi International Peace Prize. Ellen received the Right Livelihood Award.*

## Lost Jesus

Donna L Greenwood

Jesus fell off his cross when I was thirteen years old. Mum always told visitors she was quasi-religious whenever they commented on the large crucifix on our back wall. Mum told us that 'quasi' meant partly or almost. I guess that's why Jesus stuck around for a while, partly or almost is better than not at all.

Nobody took much notice of Mum. Neighbours on council estates want to talk about rent arrears and sex, they don't want a discussion about whether Christ was an astronaut. She was always a bit different, our mum, wearing her flares and writing her poetry. Dad wanted her to be normal. We all did. I wanted corned beef hash for tea not yoghurt and crisps. I wanted her to shut up about Jesus and aliens and to talk about Coronation Street like everyone else.

I think Dad drank a lot because there were too many of us and the place was always a mess. Or maybe it was because Mum never wore dresses. I saw him hit her once. Right across the face. Her head flew back and banged against the kitchen door. She didn't cry though. She looked at me and said, 'Sorry, love, go to bed, it'll be okay.'

Dad used to get really drunk on Sundays. He'd come home from the pub and throw the money he'd won at cards on the floor. There you go, girls, he'd say, fight over that. Then he'd fall asleep in his chair, doing drunk hiccup-burps. One Sunday he didn't go to sleep, he sat in that old chair shouting. He was furious because Mum had been to church.

'What the hell have you done that for? Like that's going to help. Like your God's going to come round 'ere and pay these bills.'

He was getting angrier and angrier and all I could think about was mum's head hitting the kitchen door. Dad's chair was set against the back wall and when he kicked it back in fury, the crucifix fell on his head.

'That'll teach you,' said Mum, and a miracle happened, we all started laughing, even Dad.

We found the cross, it'd fallen down the back of the chair, but we never found

Jesus. He'd come unstuck from the crucifix and his little silver body vanished forever.

Over the next few years, Mum stopped talking about Jesus and aliens, she stopped writing poetry and wearing flares. She slowly disappeared, bit by bit, until she was only partly with us – a quasi-mother creeping around the house, forever looking for her lost Jesus.

# Atmospheric Disintegration

Anita Goveas

## **Space Log 1 (take off)**

*Earth date: January 16th 2003*

*Earth time: 10:39am EST*

*Crew: Kalpana Chawla, Mission specialist, aerospace engineer, first woman of Indian descent to go into space*

*Six other crew members of the Space Shuttle Columbia*

*Location: Kennedy Space Centre, USA, Earth*

It's Kalpana's second space mission, and the crew includes the first astronaut from Israel.

Kalpana studied engineering for 12 years, has a PhD in aerospace engineering, is a certified flight instructor. She's worked hard and dreamed big to get here, as all astronauts do.

The Columbia is the first space shuttle, and has flown 27 previous missions over 22 years, before this, the final one.

A piece of foam insulation breaks off from the external tank and strikes the left wing of the shuttle during launch. Foam shedding had occurred on previous shuttle launches, and NASA control limits the investigation, assuming it was something typical during spaceflight.

Lift-off complete, the shuttle settles into orbit.

## **Space Log 2 (in orbit)**

*Earth date: January 17th 2003*

*Earth time: 9.30am EST*

*Location: Orbit of 177×170 statute miles.*

The crew settles into gravity-free life, and sets up four experiments that will run continuously through the flight.

The first experiment is set up in Columbia's payload bay, designed by the Israeli space agency to look for dust storms in the Middle East and Africa.

Another experiment tested a prototype water purifier that helped all future International Space Station crews with a water shortage problem. Something that's lasted many years after the Columbia crew have gone.

The crew also chatted to loved ones on Earth, and helped monitor experiments sent into space by school children across America. Kalpana waved to her husband of 20 years, told him about life on the shuttle.

When one of the experiments malfunctioned, Kalpana offered to give up her off-duty time to fix it. Time that could have been spent in looking at the tiny dot of the Earth, or remembering all that she achieved to be there.

### **Space Log 3 (re-entry)**

*Earth date: February 1st 2003*

*Earth time: 08.52 EST*

*Location: the skies above Texas*

The crew awakened to prepare for re-entry, setting up their seats, preparing their orange pressure suits.

As a child, Kalpana went to local flying clubs and watched planes with her father, and she loved to draw pictures of the planes. She always wanted to fly as high as she could.

As the Columbia began re-entry, the tiny piece of foam had caused more damage than realised. The heat shield had been compromised, allowed hot atmospheric gases to destroy the internal wing structure. The whole shuttle became unstable and broke apart.

The crew quickly became unconscious, as the shuttle disintegrated in the atmosphere above Texas. NASA lost contact with them as their families waited at the planned landing site.

Their remains were identified through DNA.

Their research advanced our knowledge of human adaptability to microgravity, and improved the lives of everyone who came after them on the Space Shuttle.

NASA named a supercomputer after Kalpana Chawla, and in India there are scholarships, streets and planetariums named in her honour. Kalpana Chawla continues to fly.





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