

May 2024

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Howie Good

Kirby Wright

Hannah Weinstein

Angela Townsend

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Caroline Kerjean

VA Wiswell

ISSN 2754-6764



Volume 4

Figwort Literary Journal

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Editor's Note

Hazel Lockey

Ancient Chinese farmers—my mother's ancestors, perhaps—divided the year into twenty-four solar terms based on the sun's position. Changes in term reflected equal changes in climate and agriculture, flora and fauna. With the publication of this Volume at the 'back flap' of May (in the words of our author Angela Townsend), we are at the very doorstep of seasonal change. The transition from winter to summer, in the northern hemisphere, especially resonates with the Volume.

The Great Snow (大雪) occurs during mid to late December. We carry death on the backs of words. People, like leaves off shedding trees, fall beneath a 'banner of lost stars' as you'll come to discover in 'The Death of Johnny Bravo'. Should you let Matthew Sam Praxmarer be your guide, you will find yourself in the mismatched company of caskets and misnomered clams.

Rain Water (雨水) occurs in February. The name is self-explanatory. It's a time when you can scarcely go a metre without stumbling across your own reflection in a puddle or a rain-streaked window. While Kirby Wright offers the key to observation, Hannah Weinstein kindly provides us with its focal points.

The Awakening of Insects (驚蟄) is a harbinger of spring. As humanity is once again dialogue with the natural world, so I have decided to end with a selection of conversations.

We leave the final word to VA Wiswell. You'll have to do a bit of digging to see what she has in store for you.

Part 1: Partings/Great Snow

In Addition

Nathalie Spaans

Dear H.,

I hope you are well, I want that to be sincere.

In 1860 a man named John Ruskin wrote in a letter he found penguins at present the only comfort in life. I want the thought of animals inside me too. You wanted a Bernese Mountain dog, it's a great family dog.

I'm learning things like, literary devices should serve the text and not the other way round so I'm allowed to say I like tangerines and that they're my favourite and never mention them again because

we give

what we want

to receive and winds

don't blow, they suck 1 in a car

2 with my back against a wall in a club

3 when I looked up

'Du'

the only German that ever left your Disney mouth, you

Freiherr, you held my fucking hand.

I want to say it out loud, your name, your second name.
You were standing in front of me with your passport

I'm sorry,

you were

in front of me

peeling. I'm sorry

the only animal I have

is black and white

please

you said you were the devil

I fell

please, I'm sorry

I love you

The Death of Johnny Bravo

Adédoyin Àjàyí

Your tweet was one of the first I saw regarding the ‘End SARS’ *wahala*. I never did pay much attention to tweets carrying hashtags. They were always so stupid to me. You could see a tweet with *#KyllianMbappe*, *#bigass*, *#SterlingBank*, *#fireinLagos*, and *#NancyIsime*. You’d click on ‘*#KyllianMbappe*’, hoping for a sizzling video of him Harry Pottering with a football, only to have all the zest sucked out of you with a tweet you’d forget as soon as you saw it.

Dami pokes me in the back. ‘Have you seen the tweets trending online?’

I snort. She knows I don't like Twitter that much. I keep playing *Call of Duty* on my laptop.

‘Hope it’s not another challenge? What was the last one trending some time ago? Shadow something.’

She corrects me. ‘Silhouette challenge.’

I shoot up a grove full of soldiers before I answer. ‘What’s this one about?’

‘Youths protesting against police brutality.’ She shows me her phone, and I have to pause my game.

I know the accuracy of her words. Dami doesn't lie. Whatever she tells you, you can take it to the bank. There has to be a reason why she’s telling me. I’m still doubtful though. *No be Naija we dey?*

‘So it’s another *yeye* protest that'll soon die out. *Abeg jare.*’ I dismiss her words.

She raises one eyebrow in that way she usually does when she's slightly annoyed and she shakes her head at my disbelief. She taps her phone in a fast motion, her black nail polish glinting with the backlight of her screen. Though it’s simple, her Rihanna T-shirt looks great on her. Everything usually does.

She holds her phone out to me again, eyebrow still raised. I huff, pause my game again and snatch it off her. I’m dumbfounded by what I see.

She sneers at me.

‘Do you believe me now?’

*

Your mother sold some of the tastiest *akara* I’d ever eaten. Sometimes I found myself comparing the *akara* I bought on campus with the one your mother sold back home in Ikorodu. It was carefully fried, unlike that of the cash-hungry campus sellers. I think your mother's pleasant disposition made her *akara* sweeter. Everybody near the shop along Isawo Road knew her. It was a beehive at night. She handed out *akara* spiced with her smiles, offering reprieve to people wearied by their daily activities. The scent of it teased nostrils and aroused mouths in our neighbourhood.

Your mother didn’t always sell *akara*. She began only after your father died when one of his *operations* went badly. He was hit by a lorry while running from the police and the *olode*. When your father wasn't stealing, he was driving a bus for a transport company whose name I can’t remember, which specialised in long-distance travel. His passengers were varied—fresh graduates heading halfway round the country to NYSC camp, families going for an *owanbe*, businessmen on company assignments, lovers on weekend rendezvous.

The chatter of his death never went away. It swirled about like filthy water in a blocked sink, miring you and your mother until it threatened to drown you both. Your mother, a smart woman, realised that filling your bellies was a more important concern than stilling tattling tongues and loose lips. She’d taken to selling clothes during the day and frying *akara* at night. She moved on quicker than you. The choice was harder for you. His assault on you continued even after his death. The two long, horizontal scars in front of your left ear ensured you wouldn’t forget him.

Our little neighbourhood never saw you more than the son of a thief. In their eyes, they saw it as a ceiling you would never rise above. Being teenage boys in that delicate phase where we shrouded ourselves with an inflated sense of self, that phase where our egos dominated our consciousness, we were prickly. You got into fights. But you seemed to forget about them quickly. You had this light that made it easy to shake off your hurts. It made the tiny scars on your face look like a sprinkling of black confetti.

We went from eating *akara*, licking *Trebor* at break time and playing on *jangolova* to *whyning* girls, balancing chemical equations and playing PES, which you called the second-rate version of FIFA. You had the swag the girls all liked. You were the one who made them laugh when we all walked home from school with the sun beating down on us. You also liked to play ball. You were one nifty dancer with the ball. Nobody liked marking you because you would humiliate them. You sidestepped markers like a glorious suave ballerina, Ronaldoed your way past us with lightning step-overs and lobbed the goalkeeper when he dared come off his line for the ball and ran off, jubilating wildly, your dreadlocks falling into your eyes. The only way to get the ball off you was by kicking you. The girls and the ball were your respite from your troubled childhood. You were an overgrown Johnny Bravo, who didn't get beaten up like women. Rather, you moved from one adventure to yet another with little memory of what hurt you.

The tiny black spots on your face reminded me of my younger brother's battle with chicken pox. You never told me when I asked you what caused them. But I knew your father was mean as fuck to both you and your mum. My mother took a liking to yours right away; and under the guise of attending to their needs and running errands for them, flecks of your troubled childhood dropped in my mind. At first I wondered why you never really grieved for him when he died. Only later, much later, did I understand that few sons grieved for a father who flicked lit cigarettes into their faces; and even fewer sons bewailed the exit of a man who took a knife to their faces and left them looking like a young Al Capone. When

your father wasn't driving passengers from Lagos to Kano, he was smoking one too many cigarettes in his house and tossing them at his wife and son while he complained about your mother's cooking. Sometimes when his *Action Bitters* got the better of him, he cursed fate for what he saw as the sorry state of his life—saddled with a family he had to provide for. Our houses were close, and every morning when your mother turned up at my house just before we went to school together, her lips the size of sausages, I knew you would be sleeping over at my house at night to spare you from the same fate. Your father's world had collapsed around him, and his frustrations were rubble that you and your mother bore the weight of.

Though I never told you, I wondered how you felt living with a character that bore failed fantasies inside him. That was why my mother tried to make our house a comfortable place for you. You liked coming over too. However, my mother's company couldn't keep you in my house for long. Not when the girls were there. It was easy to see them jaywalking down the streets, revelling in their newfound femininity, their bodies stretching the seams of their tight skirts. You told me some crazy gist about them, the kind that teenage boys liked to tell over and over till the truth became inflated with braggadocio. Just like when you told me that Folake's nipples tasted like baby powder. I wonder how long your head spent buried in her bra for you to know that.

'Like baby powder and sweat,' you said, laughing. You were just the worst kind of *werey*.

I was incredulous. 'Why would she use baby powder at her age?'

'To smell fine *now*, why else?' You laughed some more. 'But Mercy doesn't use it.' You winked. I didn't ask you any more questions. I had no reason to know what Mercy tasted like, or anyone else for that matter. My imagination filled the gaps for me.

You met Dami when we were in the university. She was slim, yet her figure held the promise of curves borne from a *soft life* and motherhood. With her, you

stopped bouncing from girl to girl like a rambunctious kid who'd just discovered a trampoline. She saw a part of you that no other girl saw—that haunted part of you that fought with the ghosts of your abusive childhood, and the perception that you struggled against. She saw you as a man who tried to find happiness in whatever way he could. Till this day, I don't know what cut you more—your disfigured face or her death.

When the 'End SARS' protest began, I was sure to find you in the thick of it. You were there tweeting, retweeting and red-hearting any post that drummed support for it. You took to it with a vengeance. You were the devil in hell; the protest, your sharpened pitchfork which you rammed home mercilessly, and the bedlam on the streets were your raging fires. When Twitter's banks could no longer stem the outpour, the protest spilled into the streets with striding youths carrying placards. You were right there with them. Your dreadlocks had made you the target of many stereotypes.

Once when we were home on break, two policemen had accosted us on our way back from Ketu. Their rifles looked like relics from the Nigerian Civil War we never witnessed but had only read about. Yet we weren't willing to test the possibility they could leave bloody holes in us.

Although they assaulted us once, it could garner enough pity for two lifetimes.

They forced us to lie face down near the pavement at the BRT terminal in Majidun, where errant Lagosians would relieve themselves. The stench burrowed into my nostrils, so deep; I couldn't eat anything else that day.

*

When Dami showed me your thread of the incident on Twitter, I was floored. I didn't play *Call of Duty* for the rest of that day. At the time, it only had less than a hundred likes and seventy-nine retweets. Two days later, it had over a thousand likes and more than two thousand retweets.

Unfortunately, 'End SARS' failed. It left you with more pain by taking Dami away from you forever. The protest gave you a chance to even the scorecard in your slugfest with life, since you had been on the receiving end your whole life. You could neither fight your father's assault on your body and your mind nor his ghost that left whispers in our neighbourhood. You couldn't fight people's views of you that chained you. You were a victim of your circumstances, an unfair prisoner of war captured by distorted perceptions. Your bubble burst, Johnny Bravo died, and I saw how the pain had ruined your insides. It taught me that the mind could process hurts, even if not fully mature enough to comprehend it. Sadly for you, the protest ended with the one person who saw you for who you were taken from you.

No one knew how it happened or what actually happened. One minute you both were carrying placards and chanting in the streets, sneaking smiles at one another when you could. The next minute, gunshots rang out. Feet took off in countless directions. You saw Dami lying on the ground, sputtering and choking on her blood. You held her till her eyes stared into space, seeing nothing. Her name fell under a banner of fallen souls, lost stars for which there would be no justice.

Your facade wore off. The bubble of nonchalance and escapism you so tenderly wrapped yourself in had burst. Your eyes lost their lustre, and the black spots seemed to stand out more on your face. There would be no girls and ball to offer you respite this time. The only solace for you is a memory. But it does little to deaden the scars you carry.

Pasta Vongole

Matthew Sam Praxmarer

I stand in the doorway. There you sit, wrapped in your shawl, that silly show blaring, Patty sitting by, your youngest, doing whatever it is she does on that phone of hers to escape the fact that you are slowly dying.

‘What’d you say Matt?’ you ask, and I am comforted that you still remember my name.

‘Hey Nona,’ I say.

‘You look like you’ve lost weight.’

‘Oh, only in the shoulders.’

‘Sit down and visit.’

We don’t really require words; ours is a convenient shorthand culled from so many decades of warmth and knowing, so many decades of love, the endearing way you tell me again and again the same old story, told again. We drive to church sometimes.

When I tell you I’m depressed, you say: ‘You should try walking.’

You always say exercise is what saved you when your husband died. I see him waving, ankle deep in sand, at the dunes, contented to be surrounded by so many grandchildren that he can’t keep track of them.

‘Don’t you think I’ve had enough?’ he says when I take him golfing and the Alzheimer’s has already taken him away somewhere where no one could see anything but that flash of anger when he asks, cutting a birthday cake and we steady his hand. Even my brother is there, long dead now, in his black T-shirt and studded wristbands.

‘You’ve said that so many times,’ I say, so low that I am fed up by our shorthand. I am back in that chair next to you, the twin chairs, the chairs in that den where the angel looks down on us, the angel mural you had painted when I

was too young to remember the transformation, because in the long expanse of time it seems that angel was already there, etched into the back side of that murphy bed that too was always there, where we slept, a dead brother and a living grandchild, watching our videos and he screams; he screams out when I beat him at some game whose granular shapes would embarrass a young person today. I smell something. I walk into the kitchen.

You stand, hand deep in two parts pork and two parts beef, mashing it in your old hands, wax paper and perfume. I know to add two cups of cheese and one cup of breadcrumbs the way that other people know to put one foot in front of the other and create steps, and all that garlic chopped and all that egg. Some people don't use egg.

'Don't smash them!' you cry out, as I move my hands delicately, as though caressing that very egg, and I insist that I am not smashing them. We test the first two and still you are not satisfied. You are not satisfied because you always tried to improve upon our perfection.

Charles is drunk on the couch. You say I am very patient with him, and you are right because I am stoned, but thank Christ I straightened out in those last few months that you can see me sober, see me really, the real person in front of you comforting you and you say that only the old die this way; she doesn't even know she's old.

'They don't love each other anymore!' I scream and I cry and you listen. How all the grandchildren treat you as their therapist, how I cry out about my parents in their separate rooms and their separate resentments, all bubbled up to the surface and incapable of retaining the shape of a marriage. How you listen.

'She thought her grandchildren beyond blemish or flaw,' I say in the church next to your casket, 'but don't get me wrong, she certainly did try to improve upon our perfection.' I get a laugh. I'm back in the kitchen looking out into the dining room and there you stand setting the table; there you stand preparing the silver and the fragile china and the pitcher of water always with lemon. How is it

that water with lemon will always make me think of you? You entertain the priest who says he likes the pasta with clams.

‘We call it pasta vongole,’ I tell him from the pulpit after he speaks. I suppose all these Italian names have their English composites.

‘Tell her not to put in too much red pepper in the artichokes,’ says Adeline, as though she has some power to command the matriarch at that special day we had, we Italians, Saint Joseph’s Day, all we stalwarts there the day before to cook in the grand hall with the murals and pictures all above us redolent of the old country. You ignore Adeline, and everyone enjoys the artichokes on that day that we sit, all in red, and how that shrew cried out when you lift the sheet off the dessert table and everyone is aghast that anyone would dare impugn you, the matriarch.

Desserts: I see you baking layer after layer of that cake you made for Donald for his eightieth, all ganache and layers and more ganache, and at the restaurant, him in his green Irish blazer, people care less for him than they do for that dessert, created out of love, love and those wax paper hands.

At your party we all sing, we all sing a song about those hands, and little John, what enthusiasm he shows, how he doesn’t take it seriously, how he doesn’t know that you will soon be felled by that cancer already festering in your pancreas. Your organs become enemies in a world where our stomachs are the most sated by your love. I am grateful.

‘You know I don’t think anyone has even read that book,’ you say of *Attitudes of Gratitude* that you bought for all the grandchildren. Fleece pullovers, bathrobes; you always came up with something to buy for us with your paltry income, something that still hangs in my closet but doesn’t smell like you anymore. That perfume that they leave by your casket.

‘That’s Nona,’ says Vince of the perfume, the most sentimental of the grandchildren, and Ana cries, Ana with whom you had that falling out about God knows what. I smell anise; I smell anise for the biscotti that you help me make for

that party we had at school celebrating our ethnic cuisine. Of course we make biscotti, of course. We can't very well make pasta vongole!

'It's cheese and powdered sugar,' I explain to the girl who brought store bought cannoli.

Her mother cuts in. 'No sweetie, this is a dessert.'

We sit at that same dining room table one night and play bridge late into the night; Patty is there, and her daughter Angela. How we beat them silly, how they didn't expect that for every bid we knew what to respond as though we for one instant or another shared the same mind, knew what the other was thinking like when you would to tell me to try exercise.

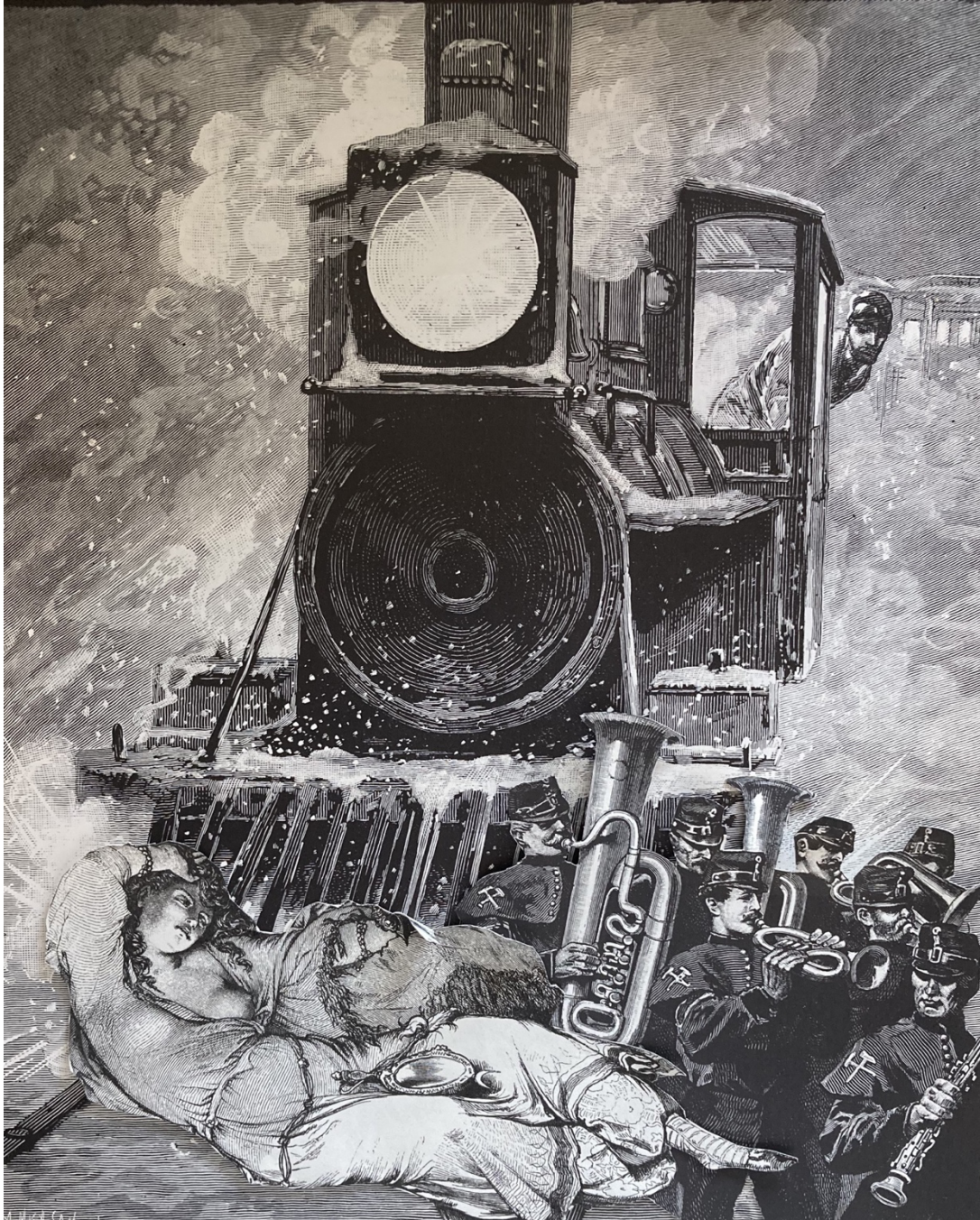
'What'd you say Matt?' you say when I arrive to make the meatballs. 'I heard that music you were listening to. I never knew music could be so beautiful.'

'It was your CD, yours and Papa's, and it was Mozart, Mozart's best scene in his best opera when someone asks for forgiveness.'

You never ask for forgiveness when you take me to three clubs, your greatest blunder that makes me mad until you died, and then all was forgotten, all anger and all angst melting away at the sight of your dead body after I hugged your other daughter. She says we were close; I say I'm sorry. You look like you are hugging yourself. Like you hugged me. So many hugs, you so short, your arms almost around my waist, and I feel something fragile and something strong, and the story is never complete until it ends; the story is never complete until it ends.

Two Collages

Howie Good



The Tracks of My Tears



Punctured

Part 2: Observations/Rain Water

At the National Gallery of Ireland

Kirby Wright

TOO CLOSE? You risk missing everything, including backgrounds depicting battles, lovers, kites, and armadas wrecked on jagged coasts. Step back. Straighten up. Go for the wide view to enjoy the more spilling from edges.

In Moynan's *Military Manoeuvres*, don't miss the steeple rising at the end of the pitted dirt street or, on the far right, the leader of the peasant boy army wearing a helmet adorned with a horse-hair plume. In Stothard's *The Horrors of War*, you'll see grey she-devils floating above the killings of humans and horses.

Viewing's a charade. Lean in to demonstrate interest. Lean out to register surprise. Stare into the ornate gold-framed mirror—observe a room of bent-backed observers studying as quiet as mice.

Same Day, Four Zip Codes

Hannah Weinstein

Same Day, Four Zip Codes (80203, 80204, 80205, 80208)

Analogue Photography

2023

Driving through Denver, I became aware of the diversity and contrasts between the architecture, the landscape, and the people, all within a 10-minute drive of each other. These images are shot on medium-form analogue film.









Part 3: Dialogues/Awakening of Insects

Springs

Angela Townsend

The magnolias will wait for you. People tell you otherwise, but they are wrong. People are afraid, and afraid is where all the half-truths huddle together.

I'm a huddler, so I understand. I have spent years trying to get warm. Urgency has a chimney, which hints of a fireplace. But urgency never lets me in past the foyer, so I cannot know for sure. I can only hear carols from the next room. They sound like a lecture, lyrics with no music. They are warning each other that you must make the most of moments and magnolias. Do it now. Beauty has not signed a contract with you. Tomorrow may be too late.

I am telling you, the magnolias will wait. You can trust me, for I have tested the system. I spent a full spring wintering.

We notarised the papers three days after the equinox. Divorce is supposed to snuff you to embers, but my hearth crackled. My new old name was gingerbread in my mouth. My wardrobes smelled like evergreens. It was the outer envelope of April, but I felt like writing Christmas cards.

Spring was once my season. I went on first dates with myself. I took thirty pictures of the same begonia outside the supermarket, unconcerned by the cart boy's concern. I gathered dandelions and wore a crown to church. I negotiated metaphysics with squirrels. I gave no thought to whether my pinks matched. I put my hand on bark until I heard rhythms.

I was married on the back flap of June. I gave him my name, and he told me I was naked. He applied pesticide to my exclamation marks so the neighbours wouldn't talk. He informed me that people who wear pink are desperate to be noticed. He was beside himself when I took pictures of other people's gladiolas. I was not beside him the day a housedressed woman sprinted out to thank me.

'Thank you!'

There it was. I was naked after all, and magenta. 'For what?'

Her hair was a thousand commas, smiles curled so tight that their eyes disappeared. 'You stopped for my happy chappies!'

If you do not stoop over strangers' gardens, you will never hear the words 'happy' and 'chappie' high five one another. If you are not ashamed, you will learn that gaudy blossoms have names like Vaudeville performers, and women in housedresses intend to stop time, one neighbour at a time.

Spring chaperoned my name, but it left no instructions. There was no Performance Improvement Plan from the dogwoods. The sparrows did not convene an emergency session to discuss my delinquency. The magnolias had not placed me on probation.

Everything exhaled permission, so I spent that single spring indoors.

There are springs in the chorus, and springs when you must commune with yourself. I did not feel guilty, an exotic giddiness unto itself. I was not afraid of what I might be missing. I was cosy. I was home. It was no less of a spring.

Victory's wardrobe includes a cocoon. People warn you otherwise, but they are wrong. No chrysalis is a mere means to an end. Stop, and you will see. Every pupa's jacket is studded with rhinestones. The creature inside is as gooey as baby food, unformed and unashamed. Its safehouse is spangled. It is as unnecessary as hazel eyes and double rainbows. The divine is showing off. People tell you otherwise because they are afraid.

I spent April in sweatshirts and solitude. It was my season. There was terrible prose to write, thousands of words wild as mares. There were forgotten man-hats and greasy anniversary cards to jab into the fireplace. I filled contractor bags with pyjamas he'd liked but kept the brooches he didn't. I assembled ancestors around my candles and interrogated T.S. Eliot about this 'April is the cruellest month' business. My mother brought me a Christmas tree to keep up all year. It was necessary.

The magnolias turned glorious for their own pleasure. If you live long enough to be honest, an audience is irrelevant.

When the next spring's envelope arrived, I used my wings as letter openers. I wore a zirconia four-leaf-clover on my jean jacket. I pressed daisies for my Christmas tree. I took my last name on first dates. I knelt in the mud to collect stones, which is to say I prayed.

I started to apologise to a magnolia, but her laugh was so raucous, she got the neighbours' attention. I stopped. I made a flower crown and hung it on urgency's doorknob. I was not late.

Conversations with Mitya: A Dialogue (And, At Times, a Monologue) in Five Movements

Michelle I Linder

Dmitri Dmitriyevitch Shostakovich (September 25, 1906 – August 9, 1975) was a Russian pianist and composer of the Soviet era. Beloved by audiences, he periodically fell out with the Soviet authorities, who twice officially denounced him. The first denunciation came in 1936, after Joseph Stalin (aka Koba) attended a performance of his avant-garde opera Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk. The second, in 1948, was for charges of formalism (an overemphasis on the structural elements of music) and Western influences during the time of the Zhdanov Doctrine. This led to a ban on his work—lifted only after Stalin’s death in 1953.

The following is an imagined, present-day conversation between Shostakovich and his college-age interviewer, Gillian ‘Gillie’ Lowry.

LARGO

Hey, I’m Gillian. You can call me Gillie, though.

I am Dmitri Dmitriyevich Shostakovich. You may call me Dmitri Dmitriyevich.

So. Uh. Where you’d get those glasses?

My glasses? I obtained them from my optometrist in Nevsky Prospekt.

They look old. Don’t get me wrong, they’re cool. I would have thought options would be more limited in your time.

(Shostakovich hesitates.) My time? I came here to speak about my music. I thought you were a professional.

ALLEGRO MOLTO

(She coughs) This interview's for a class. Actually, my dad hooked me up because he knows like, everyone, and his friend used to be your agent's lawyer or something.

My agent's lawyer? I don't have an agent. My close friend Ivan Ivanovich represents me at times. In fact, he arranged this interview. Why would Vanya need a lawyer?

Because of all the trouble you get into with the secret police and stuff.

(Shostakovich pauses.) How did you know that?

Dude. I'm a college sophomore trading in a favour for some deal my dad cut.

I don't know what this means. Ivan Ivanovich promised me that we would talk only of my music.

You're like, pretty paranoid for someone who's been dead for fifty years but whatever. Let's talk about your influences.

Bach. Beethoven, of course. They are my first loves. Because of my appreciation for them—Bach in particular. (He pauses.) What background do you have? When I was asked to do this as a favour to Ivan Ivanovich, I was under the impression that you were an arts and culture reporter.

Um, I'm in a Russian studies class right now. But I haven't actually listened to your music, if that's what you're asking. I really only listen to EDM.

EDM? (He rests heavily on the 'D.')

Electronic Dance Music? No?

I am not familiar with EDM. I am more of a connoisseur of Gustav Mahler. Yes, this open admiration has caused problems between myself and the State. I would like to explain this, if I may. (Shostakovich clears his throat.)

Relaaaaax. Like I said, it's just for a class.

How are you so certain the State won't hear of this?

Because the USSR was wiped off the planet three decades ago. And also because you're supposed to be dead.

ALLEGRETTO

Let's get into the nitty gritty. Were you sent to the gulag? Did you get tortured? (Gillie rests her Montblanc pen against her cheek and assumes a pensive look.)

I went through a dark period in life, as reflected in my music, but this had nothing to do with the State. (There is a faraway look in his eyes.) I grew fond of Mahler during these times. But I learned from my mistakes, turning to the masters of the Motherland: Tchaikovsky, Prokofiev, Stravinsky. One must also mention Rimsky-Korsakov.

That's a lot of syllables, that last one.

Perhaps to the untrained ear.

Must be your pronunciation. I thought your English would be better.

I never formally studied the English language. What I know, I learned from reading *The Daily Worker*. Evidently you have not read a thing about me, Gillian.

I mean, I've been busy, too. We all have our own personal—uh, gulags. And as a matter of fact I *did* read up on you. My dad's ancient secretary prepared this for me. (She waves a folder in his face. He bats it away.) Printed it out and everything. Dad had to keep her on after the twenty-five-year-old. Mom lost her shit because of Madison and threatened to sue him for everything he's worth. She even threatened to take the dog and my dad is *really* obsessed with the dog. Gauge is his name. You wouldn't even believe it. My father, who's never cooked a day in his life, goes out of his way to boil frozen chicken and cut it up daily. Like every. Single. Day. Because Gauge has a sensitive stomach and is on this special diet and dad says he can't trust the housekeeper to do it. Even though she's been with our family since the dawn of time, or at least since before I was born, and truly is a saint and the only reason I passed AP Spanish in high school. She used to help me with my homework after she finished the housework even though our house is like, ridiculously big. (She closes her eyes.) I can still picture her sitting at the kitchen table late at night while I made my own smoothie—

(Shostakovich attempts to interject.) As I was explaining. My troubles began with my opera: *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*. Perhaps you've heard of it? It was too pessimistic, straying dangerously close to fear and terror. Not grounded in our glorious Soviet folk music, it was out of the reach of our honourable workers. Though I found that it was quite well-received by my countrymen. Until Koba.

After he attended one of the performances, he was enraged. Understandably so. Subsequently, I changed, I swear—I was reformed. Then, after much self-reflection and rehabilitation, I again fell prey to the influence of Mahler—who was born Jewish, though he converted to Catholicism, during a time of ascendent anti-Semitism in—

(Interrupting) Damn. That sucks.

LARGO

I was hoping I might share an excerpt of my new work.

I love that. I could put a TikTok in the write-up.

TikTok?

I'm dying.

(Shostakovich looks concerned.) Do you need medical attention?

It means you're hilarious.

(He frowns.) OK. I could play the piece for you right now. On this piano. (He indicates a Steinway grand as he moves toward it.)

Yeah, sure. How long is it though?

Forty-eight minutes. Approximately.

Yikes! Forty-eight minutes. TikTok is three minutes max. Do you have anything else you could play? Or maybe shorten it to like, three minutes or less?

(Shostakovich glances longingly at the piano, gets up from the bench without playing a note, and returns to his chair.)

Maybe we should back up a bit. My dad's friend's lawyer mentioned something about your first wife.

Nina Vasilievna, yes. My brilliant Nina. She was a physicist, as I'm sure you know. What am I saying? Obviously you don't. Before her, there was my high school sweetheart, Tatiana. So soulful and beautiful. (He looks wistful.) She left me because I was young and headstrong. Not ready to commit. So she ran off and married a chemist instead. Undeterred, I determined to convince her to divorce her husband and marry me. She refused. That is when I married Nina Vasilievna.

No way, Dima. (She leans in.) Can I call you Dima?

No.

Love triangle?!

It was not so much a triangle as a hexagon. (Shostakovich frowns.) You see, after I married Nina Vasilievna the first time, there were my students, as well as a translator. And also my lovely Ninoshka, Nina Pavlovna of the Bolshoi Ballet.

(Gillie brightens) My family always has box seats for *The Nutcracker*.

(Ignoring her) Actually, at least seven, possibly eight sides. There was the divorce from Nina Vasilievna, though we married a second time. After she passed away—

Wait. So you're telling me you proposed to Tatiana while she was married to someone else, she turned you down so you married Nina the First, had an affair with prima ballerina Nina the Second, divorced Nina the First, then married her again right before she died? Shotgun wedding alert?!

(Shostakovich furrows his brow.) There were no shotguns. The wedding took place at the town hall, as was befitting and with the approval of the authorities. We were enjoying the reception immensely until Nina Pavlovna showed up in her... tutu. That is the point at which it became, how can I say it—

I'm telling you. You should turn that into a reel.

What?

Talk about not having done your homework.

I'm not sure if you've learned anything useful for your article.

Oh, don't worry about that.

I wasn't worried.

I took Journalism 101 because I thought it'd be an easy A, but it turns out you have to do research.

You've failed spectacularly.

I'll be sure to include something about your sense of humour.

(Shostakovich takes his glasses off and rubs his eyes.)

You look better with your glasses on. I hope you don't mind my saying that.

(He sighs.)

Things just have a way of working out, you know? The important thing is putting positive energy into the universe.

Say that the next time the knife of censorship is at your throat.

Uhhh, haha. Do you believe in manifesting? Vision boards?

Do you believe in speaking in English that I can understand?

Okay, so what's the Russian equivalent of Lucky Girl Syndrome?

Russians are typically quite superstitious, if that's what you mean.

I'm not talking about superstitions. I'm talking about believing good things always happen to you because they, like, just do.

And this interview was one of your dreams?

Not really, if I'm being honest. Like I said, I only did it so I wouldn't fail my class. But in the end, I'm not sure it works as an article.

You are considering more of a profile, then, or a think piece? Yes? And you will make no mention of these unpleasantries with the State? You are certain of this? (Shostakovich looks concerned.)

I'm thinking of turning it into a TikTok.

Snowe on the Heart

Caroline Kerjean

After a great many preparations and complicated logistics, I arrive in the French capital in early fall. I don't know a soul. The city feels even icier in the autumn than the Canadian winters so familiar to me. It is a chill which I'll always remember. It goes straight through the bones.

I look out of the window of the small room I am renting, out over the slate-grey roofs of Paris, and I am struck by the greyness of everything.

*'All at once my position rose on me like a ghost. Anomalous; desolate, almost blank of hope, it stood. What was I doing here alone in great London? What should I do on the morrow? What prospects had I in life? What friends had I on earth? Whence did I come? Whither should I go? What should I do? I wet the pillow, my arms, and my hair with rushing tears...'*¹

The passage is from *Villette*, by Charlotte Brontë. It's from a chapter titled 'Turning a New Leaf', which recounts the arrival in London of a young Lucy Snowe. In the wake of homegrown tragedy, she hopes to leave behind the past and start anew. Lucy Snowe feels just as desolate, as bereft as I do.

But I have found one antidote, here, to my loneliness and actual terror. It was while scrolling through Instagram one day, years later, that I stumbled upon a few images that brought my life situation, at the time, back to me in vivid if rather dark colours.

In one photo, a beautiful, brooding castle boasting towers and turrets. The château de Beaucresson, the caption read, had at least two towers dating back to the 15th century. Converted into a bed and breakfast today, it yet stood as an important witness to the history of Poitou-Charentes, where my old friend

¹ Brontë, Charlotte, *Villette*. New York: Random House, 2009, p. 57.

Séverine now lived. The image reminded me that the ‘antidote’ to my ghostly existence in Paris had been Séverine.

I had met Séverine years earlier, as a girl, in Québec. We had become fast friends. Hunkered down in Paris, many miles from where she now lived, I clung to the comfort of time spent with her away from the city. That much I remembered, as I sifted through the images in the château’s online gallery: a porcelain cup sitting on a table, statues dripping with moss, the woods outlined against lowering autumn skies...

The *bois* at the Château de Beaucresson awakened a long-ago feeling that autumn in the French countryside was, for me, so much more beautiful than autumn in Paris. Gazing at the photo, like a great river, memories rush back. Memories of one autumnal afternoon, in particular.

As Séverine and I stroll through the naked woods surrounding her house in neighbouring Poitiers, we chat, we laugh, we share memories and impressions and amusing little stories about our new professors, our families. What a comfort it is to have a friend! The fall sky is low and moody today, but its greyness does not affect me here in the same way it does in Paris. Its moodiness, here, is not steel-grey, but soft.

The slanting, wise autumn light promises to teach us things even our professors cannot. Slowly, hesitantly, Séverine begins to talk about her father. I am taken aback, as she rarely mentions him. He died in a road accident many years before.

—I took up law in part to honour his memory.

—I know, and I’m sure he would be proud.

Antoine had been a brilliant lawyer and historian. As we walk under the canopy of darkened trees, I wonder if I was not at least partly inspired to study history because of him. As a child, he had seemed remote, in the same way that a country called France seemed remote. Later, as a teenager, I had wanted to chat with him about my budding interest in history, but something about his formal demeanour discouraged it. As I tried to navigate, years later, French bureaucracy

and the university system, I would come to miss him bitterly and could only imagine how much Séverine missed his counsel as well.

The time and distance that separate us seem a perfect symbol of those stretching out between North America and Europe, the New World and the Old. Though the impact of globalisation has been cultural uniformisation, there still exists a stark difference between the North American way of viewing its place in history, and the European idea of it.

Back home, the destruction of the Indigenous ways of life and history resulted, I believed, in an absence of culture. Mass consumerism had filled this void. I had always suffered from this absence of culture, of beauty, in my native land. One could say that the beauty of the natural landscapes made up for it and that was true to some extent. But not entirely, as we had defaced these landscapes as well. Our lack of aesthetic sensibility was, I strongly felt, a result of that great failing.

‘I have come to feel that there is here in North America a hidden place obscured by what we have built upon it, and that whenever we penetrate the surface of the life around us that place and its spirit can be found,’² observes one author.

As I reflected on the time spent in France, all those years ago, and on the rather tragic events which would unfold between myself and a certain professor, it occurred to me that my sojourn abroad had since come to symbolise a hard-earned life lesson about where, exactly, that ‘place and its spirit’ live. About how to connect with this North American place authentically and generously and, through it, with our living and ancient history. I gazed at the photo of the woods embracing the château de Beaucresson. It haunted me, made me travel back in time to that lovely afternoon with Séverine.

A stiff breeze stirs up, with a touch of winter in it. Down the road, a little way off: an early medieval church, its narrow windows glinting in the midday sun.

² John Haines, as quoted by Douglas E. Christie in *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology*, Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 183.

Though we are near the village, there is complete stillness. We listen to the quiet. It is the silence of a myriad past lives. A constellation of lost histories. It is the silence of transcendence.

Somehow, I feel as though I have found the centre of the soul. As if the whole of existence has been revealed to me in an instant. My search for meaning answered in one flickering moment. Standing outside of time and place, I feel serene, grounded, whole.

Haunted, back in Paris and just like Brontë's heroine, by a desolate loneliness, by 'snowe on the heart', my visits to my old friend continued to ground me when I needed it most. My experience of the *campagne* made me understand the actual reasons I had travelled so far to study history in the first place.

I had travelled this far to touch the past. To experience a truth which, until then, I could not discern at home. I had travelled this far to touch the spirit of place inscribed in its agelessness. A sense of time suspended: *this* was our hidden home. Yours, mine. That which generously allows our sensibility to gently touch a soul community, a spiritual commons.

I store away this feeling as I travel back to the capital to pursue my studies. In the weeks and months to come, amidst the hell of heartache and the heaven of friendship, I will feel just a bit more secure, warmed by the knowledge that Séverine and the dark woods of Beaucresson will always welcome me back.

Koi Conversations

VA Wiswell

Part I: Chasing Dirt

A hole is in the eye of the beholder.

If you keep digging that hole, you'll end up like one of those kids trapped in a well.

What?

See. You can't even hear me—the hole.

What about it?

STOP digging.

Is that what you came out here to tell me, Gina?

No, I brought you some water. And your mother called. She needs you to go over.

Now?

Yes.

Why?

I didn't ask for the specifics—something to do with your dad again.

Great. Just what I needed to do today.

Rick, you're knee-deep in dirt. Might be time for a break.

*

Part II: Old, On The Edge of Something New

If I'd known how short life was, I would've started living a lot sooner.

Hi, Gina.

Hey, stranger. Haven't seen you in a while.

I was passing by. Sorry to stop in unannounced.

Don't be. I'm glad for the interruption. A person can only take so much weeding.

I'm letting my yard go natural. I tell myself it's best for the environment. Really, I'm just lazy.

Sounds like a good plan. I might follow.

Anyway, I've been meaning to return this. I keep forgetting to put it in the truck.

What is it?

Your casserole dish. The one you brought over when—

It is?

Yup. You sound suspicious.

It's just—I don't even recognize it.

Do you think I'm running some kind of grift that involves returning casserole dishes to the wrong people?

Ha. That'd be odd. Though funny.

Yeah, well, I'm not. But I've had it for over a year. Maybe you've forgotten what it looks like.

Or maybe it's one I never use and wouldn't miss if it wasn't returned. Makes sense. Also makes you a bit of a cynic. I hope I've restored your faith in humanity by returning it.

That might be going a bit far, Ed. You did have it for over a year.

True. Eighteen months, actually.

Wow. It doesn't—

I know, but it is—this week.

Jesus. It seems—is that what made you think about it, the casserole dish? Maybe. I don't know if I'm ever not thinking about it—Elaine, I mean, not your dish.

I got that.

I was heading to town—figured there was no time like the present, and before I forget again.

Town? On a Saturday at six-thirty? Dressed in khakis and a button-down? Are you—

I am. At least, I'm sure as hell going to try.

Good for you.

How do I look, by the way? Like I bussed in from 1985? Elaine bought all my clothes. I don't have a clue.

Harry Styles would be jealous.

Harry who?

Exactly. You look great. Can I ask who you're meeting?

Uh, not yet. Let me survive one dinner first.

Okay, but promise you'll keep me in the loop.

If you don't hear about it on the news, first.

Hey, think positive—you might even have fun.

I'll settle for not a complete disaster.

Hang in there. It will get easier.

I don't know, Gina. Twenty-three years is a long time. I'm not sure I'm up for trying.

Elaine would want you to. Besides, what other option is there?

*

Part III: A Bathtub Rowboat

So many things go missing, but none are lost until we notice they're gone.

Rick, why do you look like that? You're filthy.

Thanks, Ma. I was working in the yard. Gina said you needed me? You could've showered first. Or at least changed.

Do you need me or not?

Your father needs you.

Where is he?

The bathroom. Again.

Jesus Christ.

No point in asking him for help, believe me.

Why do you let him go in there?

The bathroom? Gee, I wonder.

How bad is it?

The water's leaking into the kitchen again.

Jesus Christ.

Like I said, he's not coming.

Dad, it's me. Come on out.

I'm taking a bath, Rick. Leave me alone.

Unlock the door.

I said I'm in the bath.

I know. I can see the water leaking into the kitchen. Bath's over. Come out.

I'll be out when I'm done.

Dad, turn off the water.

It is off.

I can hear it running. Open the drain and turn it off.

It's off, I said.

Do I need to get my tools and take down the door?

Why can't I get any peace around here? I just want to take a bath.

Turn off the water. Or—

Happy now, Rick? I'm out.

Dad, please, a towel!

Now you're pissed I bathe naked. What's next? Is my breathing too much for you?

Just open the drain. I've got work to do at home.

Don't complain to me. I didn't drag you here. That's your mother's deal. Yell at her.

If you don't want Ma calling me, next time, remember to turn the water off, or better yet, don't take another bath—shower like the rest of us.

I like the bath. It's relaxing—a privilege of retirement.

Dad, the drain.

There. It's open. Satisfied? Now you can go back to whatever you have going at home.

Is he out?

Yeah, Ma, but he'll be back at it tomorrow. It isn't going to get better. You know what his doctor said. Waiting for what he does next isn't a plan.

I can hear you. The two of you talking about me like I'm dead or worse, five.

Dad—

What? Am I wrong? Rick, go home. You shouldn't have come. Your mother's overreacting—again. I'm starting to think she's trying to get rid of me.

If I wanted to get rid of you, Lou, you'd be gone.

Ha! Ain't that the truth.

Ma, we need to talk. Figure this out.

We will, Rick. Just not today.

*

Part IV: Late First Date

The last time we kissed, you were a Democrat.

What about this one, Kye—forgiving around the waist but not too frumpy?

Ugh...Meg Ryan 1994.

True. Okay, here, this one?

Hard no. Stevie Nicks, Bella Donna.

I love Stevie.

Me, too, but Ed's conservative. I don't want to scare him off by showing up looking like I'm part of a coven.

I don't think he's that uptight. I remember him doing his fair share of partying.

That was back when we were all liberal Democrats.

Thanks. Now I feel old. Here we go. This one's a winner.

Uh... Courtney Love, post-grunge?

It's a little black dress. Timeless. Like us.

If you say so, Viv, but do I still have the arms for it?

Only one way to find out—here.

I don't know. It's pretty bold—lots of skin... and cleavage.

It looks great.

You think?

With some heels, it will be killer.

Why did I agree to this—a date with my high school crush? Going backward never works out.

You're going out with one of the few single, sober men left in this closing clamshell of a town. And, besides, what asshole said you can't go back? It's 2023. You can go anywhere you want.

That's just it, Viv. Ed's not single. He's a widower.

Whatever the details, he doesn't have a wife. That's what matters.

Wow. Cold.

Am I right?

Being a widower is completely different. I can compete with an ex-partner. They have flaws. They're awful, at least in memory. But a ghost? Especially Elaine's? Alive, she was practically a saint. Dead, she's a deity. That's stiff competition. No pun intended.

You might be exaggerating a tad.

I don't think so.

I remember you and Ed having a serious thing for each other. He was as into you as you were him. You would have gotten together senior year if Jimmy hadn't screwed it up.

Please, no Jimmy talk. I'm still having nightmares about our divorce. Sorry. Look, I'm not saying Elaine wasn't great. Or that their marriage wasn't great. But that doesn't mean what the two of you had wasn't real.

Maybe.

Maybe, Kye, this isn't you going back as much as it is you going with the flow.

Hand me the strappy black heels.

*

Part V. Swimming With The Fish

The past is infinite. The present is fleeting. The future is your imagination.

Rick? Is that you?

Who else has the front door key?

You're back sooner than usual.

You sound disappointed.

I was enjoying the silence. The shovel banging into rocks gets a little old.

Funny.

Was everything okay with your parents? Your dad?

He was in the tub again. Eyeballs deep in water, oblivious. And when you call him on it, he gets defensive. Like he didn't drift off or forget, or whatever happens.

So, you got him out. Disaster averted?

Until next time.

You mean tomorrow?

Right. And Ma won't talk about it. She's as bad as Dad when it comes to reality. At least he has an excuse.

They've been together since high school. Your dad is her world, and now he's slipping away. She's dealing with a lot.

I hate it too, but still. He's going to flood them out or burn the place down. It won't get better.

She'll get there in time. Try to be patient.

This is me being patient.

Oh, right. So, changing the subject, what's the deal with the hole? You've been digging it for a week.

Now you're curious? You've been ignoring it since I started. I hoped you'd stop, that it was a phase, but it's clearly not. So, what's your plan? Or is it just a hole?

No, it's not just a hole.

Then, what? Do you need to hide something? Stolen money? A body? I need to know. Otherwise, I might blow your cover when the neighbours start asking questions.

We don't have neighbours unless you count Mr. Peterson, a half mile down the road.

Come on, out with it. Why the hole?

Fish.

Huh?

Koi. A Koi pond.

Really?

That surprised?

No, well, yes. Kind of. I've wanted a Koi pond for years. You've always said no—too much work, money; it will bring the raccoons and the crows.... sound familiar?

Yeah, yeah.

So, what changed?

You can't just shrug, Rick. There's a big friggin' hole in our yard.

You got sick.

What?

You heard me.

That was two years ago. I've been in remission for over a year.

What can I say? I'm a slow processor.

Seriously?

What? That's the truth.

Explain, please.

I've been thinking about it for a while—since you were diagnosed.

Again, two years ago. Why now?

I didn't want it to seem like I was giving in or was okay with it—you being sick.

And? Because you know tomorrow everything might be back. I might be sick all over again.

I can't change what might happen, so I'm focusing on the present. You wanted a pond; you're getting a pond.

That's...

What?

Sweet? I guess. I don't know what to say.

Say thanks.

Okay. Thanks.

You're welcome.

But the endless shovelling is still annoying.

About the Authors

Nathalie Spaans lives and works in Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

In her daily life she finds it hard to convey what's going on. In writing she tries to make sense of it.

Her work has appeared on the front page of the Open Arts Forum. She likes looking at menus, and other things on the threshold.

Adédoyin Àjàyí is a young Nigerian writer. He writes from Lagos, the city that never sleeps. Nature is the biggest influence on his writing. His work has appeared in *Brittle Paper*, *Kalahari Review*, *Afrocritik*, *Livina Press*, *Nantygreens*, *Literary Yard*, *Fiction Niche*, *Literally Stories*, *Maudlin House*, *African Writer*, *Ngiga Review*, *Spillwords Press*, and *Arts Lounge*. He's addicted to cakes, books, and suits. He tweets @AjayiAdedoyin14.

Writer and novelist **Matthew Sam Praxmarer**, graduate of Vermont College of Fine Arts, is a Continuing Lecturer of English Composition at Purdue University Northwest where he maintains a steady output of radicals who learn to question the status quo and avoid the 'naked this' and other promiscuous pronoun usage.

Kirby Wright was born and raised in Hawaii. He was a guest lecturer at Trinity College Dublin. *American Dreamland*, his new poetry collection, is forthcoming from Bottlecap Press.

Angela Townsend (she/her) is the Development Director at Tabby's Place: a Cat Sanctuary. She graduated from Princeton Seminary and Vassar College. Her work appears or is forthcoming in *Arts & Letters*, *Chautauqua*, *CutBank*, *Lake Effect*, *New World Writing Quarterly*, *Paris Lit Up*, *The Penn Review*, *Pleiades*, *The Razor*, and *Terrain.org*, among others. Angie has lived with Type 1 diabetes for 33 years, laughs with her poet mother every morning, and loves life affectionately.

Michelle I Linder of Fort Wayne, Indiana wrote her first poem in grade school. The subject was deer. Though she aspires to write happy endings, things rarely work out that way for her protagonists. When not at her day job, she is working on a thriller set in Amish country in 1980s northern Indiana. A graduate of Wellesley College, where she studied in the Russian Department, and the Augsburg Low Residency MFA program with a concentration in fiction, she resides in the Washington, D.C. area with her son/Gen Z dialogue consultant. The deer in her poem survived.

Caroline Kerjean is a Quebec City-based author, artist and designer. She fell in love with art and culture at a young age and, after a life-changing experience restoring two medieval castles in France's beautiful Alsace region, enrolled in art history at the Sorbonne. After returning to Canada, she worked in the museum sector, and published a book as well as various essays. Kerjean now devotes herself full-time to her creative practices, aiming to pursue a rich and meaningful dialogue between past and present, one which evokes the weaving of a tapestry, an art form the author holds dear. You may find her at www.athreadofhistory.com.

VA Wiswell's work has appeared in *Writing In A Woman's Voice*, *The Lake*, *Smoky Blue Literary and Arts Magazine*, *34th Parallel Magazine*, and *OJA & L Magazine*. She has poems and short stories forthcoming in *Ignatian Literary Magazine*, *Sad Girls Literary Magazine*, and *Ginosko Literary Journal*. You can find her on Instagram at [@vawiswell](#).

About the Artists

Howie Good's newest poetry collection, *Heart-Shaped Hole*, which also includes examples of his handmade collages, is available from Laughing Ronin Press.

Hannah Weinstein is an adventurous analogue photographer who sees the world through a unique lens.

Through an experimental approach, Hannah pushes the boundaries of traditional photography, delving into conceptual realms that challenge conventional perspectives. You can find her at hannahweinstein.com.