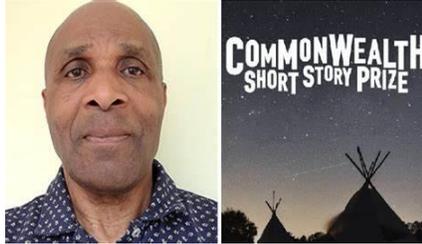




# KOLA MAGAZINE

VOLUME 34 NUMBER 1 SPRING 2022

VINCENTIAN WRITERS RECEIVING RECOGNITION ABROAD



Winner Canada and the Caribbean <https://granta.com/a-hat-for-lemer>



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**Founded in 1987 by The Black Writers' Guild (Québec)**



# **KOLA MAGAZINE**

In many regions of West Africa, guests upon entering a home are served kola nut and palm wine. This act symbolizes that they have received the same rights and privileges as members of the family. It is in this spirit that *Kola* founded. At its inception and until 2015, *Kola Magazine* was a publishing outlet for literature that focused on African diasporic and continental ways of being. The focus has since become multicultural.

**VOLUME 34 NUMBER 1 SPRING 2022**

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## EDITORIAL

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We are pleased that in keeping with our multicultural focus, the content of *Kola Magazine* 34:1 is comprised of writers from many cultures. Some of them are publishing fiction or poetry for the first time; some are still learning the craft of writing. We are confident that they will learn from our editorial assistance and from perusing the work of the well-established professional writers in this issue.

No single theme was chosen for this issue. None of the contributors felt forced, therefore, to alter their original work to fit an established theme. Each piece contributes something to our understanding of ourselves, our interpersonal relationships, to the world around us, to natural phenomena... the issues that have preoccupied artists for millenia.

We welcome more book reviews. Many of our readers post mini book reviews on social media, Bookshelf, and Amazon. With minor edits these could easily be book reviews, which we would gladly publish. We would like to add a section on news about local writers. If one of our readers would undertake to do so, you will automatically become a member of the editorial board.

Please send us your feedback. Our contact information is on the subscription page.

# **POETRY**

## George Elliott Clarke

### ELEGY FOR ALEXA ANN (SHAW) MCDONOUGH (1944-2022)

---

#### I

A Kindergarten is what a proper  
Legislature is, where the Treasury  
Is *Sharing*. How else do humans prosper  
If not by *Charity* beyond measure?

To parcel out fairly peanut butter  
Cookies, sluiced down by lemonade, and teach  
That *Policy* is *Rhyme*—never stuttered—  
And *Law* is verses versus what pirates preach,

So the bee may hopscotch, dipsy-doodle,  
And songbird serenade (like Portia White),  
And poutine mash well with apple strudel,  
And finger paints mirror stained-glass delights....

#### II

So did you model such *Wisdom, Beauty*,  
O Miss Shaw, sprightly and winsome, laughing  
In your lessons, the chalked-letter duties  
Lightning cross blackboards, sea chanteys puffing

From a record player, or flared spirituals  
Hymning out of sing-song mouths and cherry  
Or ebon cheeks? Pure, Mother Goose minstrels—  
Our alphabets sloppy, dictionaries

With crayon-crazed pages half-torn-out—  
We well-versed citizens are, who do trust  
That *Magic* is possible when we vote,  
And *abracadabra* rhymes with *must*.

O my teacher, an essential element  
Of the *Superb*, so you were—in plaid skirt,  
Working daily such endless astonishments:  
Crafts to soothe bruised egos, kiss-salves for hurts;

So intrinsically sensitive, or stern—  
To cure misdeeds with sharp look or a hug,  
As you could, so we civil rites would learn  
And our human rights never would we shrug.

### III

You always said I was a rascal boy  
In that pre-school legislature of yarns,  
Tall tales, short naps, where ideas were toys—  
Pixie-dust dreams, such *Nonsense* that discerns

Better ways of thinking, being, doing,  
While *Charity* ushers *Euphoria*.  
(What's a rainbow save all colours hewing  
To-and-from gilt phantasmagoria?)

O my teacher, the first politico  
To breathe my *Poetry* into Hansard,  
News of your passing stirs my vertigo—  
'Til tear-cracked eyes and tear-wracked voice (censored

No more) now weep for you—liberator  
Of gulag-tortured man or downpressed mom—  
Opponent of each troop-backed dictator;  
Sister to each feminist from the womb!

### IV

O my teacher, to the assembly born—  
The whole people's parliamentarian—  
You took my mom and me boating one morn  
On waters smooth, egalitarian.

After, as the sun washed its beams in froth—  
And you and my mom talked of schoolbook things—  
I spooned clam-chowder's buttered broth,  
And chewed cookies, slurped juice, and soared on swings.

That was one day distinct from thousands since—  
One moment of momentous radiance!  
The lesson taught? O *Joy* is *Insolence*  
Upsetting all vile, petty governments.

The House of Commons' most uncommon *Sense*—

Intransigent, insurgent *Eloquence*—  
O my teacher (*Grammar* all future tense)—  
You taught—I witnessed—deathless  
*Magnificence*.<sup>1</sup>

## FOR HEATHER SPEARS

---

It is an unapologetic juxtaposition—  
Herself and Eternity:  
For so long as *Justice* is an imposition  
Rather than Heaven-shaking *Mercy*

Or *Liberty*, then so are her words no exaggerated  
Insurgency nor redundancy,  
But obstinate, never understated—  
Nor the gossamer gossip that's *Punditry*.

Shakespeare flung a lance down to our time,  
And sure it multiplied exponentially, became "Spears":  
We discover her *Poetry* as one discovers that rhyme  
Can lampoon—harpoon—each tyrant into a hearse....

When *Verse* breeds conscientious *Subversion* and *Sabotage*—  
And dictator drowns in tidal sand, Spears stands the prescient sage.

## Claire Sherwood

### INCANTATION AFTER A PANDEMIC WINTER

---

I am related to vegetables

I am tangled in the voices  
of rogues  
and silver,  
in grape vines

I am the transmission of thorny things  
leap of faith  
apple  
hanging dignified at the top

I grieve

I am related to vegetables

I am dredged in the ashes  
of fairy tales  
and rootstock,  
in gold dust

I am the conflagration of brittle things  
sparkplug  
goddess  
dancing sunburned at the top

I burgeon

## ADVICE FOR AN APRIL PUDDLE

---

Look for a dip in the sidewalk  
a crack, joint  
shifting foundation  
that moment of imperfection

Sink into it after the rain  
drop by drop  
with the quiet patience  
of nature

Collect the laughter  
of toddlers  
in yellow boots  
their first splashing spring

Dissolve the tossed pretzel  
flush cigarette butts  
decaying leaves  
from last November

Drain and dry and reappear  
reappear  
and reappear

## Lorna Reddick

### LOCKET IMPRESSIONS

---

Ages of past, look in on us.  
Looking outside there is  
    an impression  
                    of Black velvet and lace.

    Sitting on the porch,  
        a woman is rocking in a chair,  
                    laughing loudly, while  
                            knitting  
  with  
chocolate brown wool.

An orange cat brushes past  
    the chair of her friend  
                    who's sipping pink lemonade  
                            out of a tall clear glass.

Propped on the side of the glass  
    is a green lime wedge,  
                    sour enough to make a mouth  
pucker.

This summer's day could last  
    for ages.

## **rae marie taylor**

### WHAT CAN WE SAY OF TREES?

---

How the cloned Aspen bends   supple  
quakes   gold  
then   green   harbors  
wild purple Iris  
below its slopes

How the Crab Apple buds and buds and can't quite bloom without the sun  
yet   its bark damp with silver lichen

and what of the Juniper with its fragrant berries at home  
but, in the canyon, its bark loose and haunting under the perch of Turkey  
Vultures?

What can we say of trees?

How Maple stands through wind and storm

How sinister the landscape when their arms are broken   on trunks   split  
fallen

How they are meant to stand

the "leaping greenly spirits of trees"\* in their calm winter reach  
naked in the sky

like the Beech, smooth and silvered, bearing two golden   breathless   leaves  
alight on the branch in January

or, so different and far away, the sparsely scattered Pinon on dry, buff hills.  
Sentinels of shade

and the Black Cypress   stately under plumes of rare snow

or distant groves and groves of Ponderosa, long clumps of pine needles hung  
like orchids on quiet trunks   brightening the whispering wind  
on that night of the blue moon

What can we say of trees, beckoning us to breathe by their rivers?

There's a forest vast, and thickly grown here  
that rotted under the waters, felled, battered, no time to harvest  
when the Prince Rupert was being diverted.

What can we say of forest?  
of Red Wood sheltering a thousand years of quiet?

\*e e cummings

## Evadne Anderson

### THE FRAME

---

Enamelled token, picture frame from a friend  
Your lines and curlicues, a wordless sonnet

in exquisite and perfect symmetry.

Whose practiced hand has crafted you with amber and topaz,  
plucked from the bounty beneath my feet?

How often gems like yours blind bulging eyes to other beauty:

A dancer's breathtaking trust  
as she seems to boldly leap over the earth's edge;

The insistent throb of countless songs impatient for their singer;

The swirl of sky birds and sea spray;  
earth after rain;  
the humble fragrance of onions;  
and summer's dazzling finale,  
captured in a single wayward leaf!

pungent

Mine-blasted ears ignore the squeal of piglets and hatchlings,  
the babble and gurgle of whelp and colt and new-sprung child.

These are my priceless first loves from Nature's cornucopia.

## BANDITO

---

Like a thief in the night  
pilfering,  
a confidence yesterday,  
a kiss today.  
Trifles, inconsequential baubles to you.  
Padding softly into my dreams,  
breaking down resistance,  
you absconded with my heart  
never to be sighted again.

You've topped the most wanted list, my man,  
You've made off with things that are mine:  
Exhilaration—brand new;  
Self-esteem—frayed around the edges;  
Trust—priceless.

Pardon's possible,  
Amnesty's . . . available,  
but don't pawn my stuff!

## Maria Crooks

### HAVANA BLUE

---

Magnificent city of crumbling splendour  
Of century-old colonnades and secret passageways  
Recalling colonial Spain  
City of mulattas and *trigueñas*  
Of scraping by and making do  
City washed by foaming seas  
Beautiful Havana, Havana Blue

City where Spanish is spoken with fervour  
With Caribbean rhythm and flair  
City of dreamy-eyed men  
Whose beauty rivals that of women  
Black men, White men and other made-in-Cuba-hued men  
Sugar cane sweet men

City haunted by ghosts of buccaneers, corsairs and black marketeers  
Of mafiosi, conquistadores  
Taino chiefs and Spanish grandees  
The air quivers yet with the screams of slaves

Literary city of Hemmingway, Greene and Lorca  
Of *puros*, *putas* and poverty  
Of rum and *aguardiente*, fire water that flames the throat

Embargoed city of old Chevies,  
Revolution and defiance  
Of pulsating rhumbas that make hips sway  
My Beautiful Havana  
Havana Blue

## **jlb izzaak**

### **WHEN POETS DIE**

*(Michael DeGale (41), 26 January 2006)*

---

When poets die  
does the landscape heave a sigh  
or exhale relief?  
Do trees on the ridge mark time,  
or is the moment so brief  
that the day settles into its mundane rhythms?  
From the cock's rattling to the unsettling heat of midday  
and ladies go their usual way,  
a way so easy to forget  
because the painting hangs in the living room,  
the same painting since you moved in with your things,  
and nothing has changed

in all these years—  
16 of them.  
Except more houses built  
(and they're erecting steel to corral the river),  
cricket's been played,  
the birth of new babies  
(we hope there are new voices among them);  
and dreamers still speak of Africa  
as a place of hope  
while we try to cope  
with our place on this island, Grenada.

I have stopped wearing the black turban of grief.  
Exchanged it for an inner religion rimmed by deserts  
where I quote verses out of duty  
from questionable memory.  
I did not remember, until someone told me.  
Who really reads poetry!  
Except on the BBC.  
And I'm not sure you belong there  
although you also wrote about England.  
You would not feature in that canon.

So I return home  
via the same waterway  
as years ago  
and for the same reason.  
Death,  
without the flowers,  
stripped of any majesty;  
and it is not lost on me  
that tomorrow I will join you too  
in the place where poets go,  
if that is what we really are  
or, at least, we'll still hold the view.

## **Dasilva Arthur**

### IN THE WORDS OF AN 18<sup>TH</sup>-CENTURY ROPE

---

I am a link between good and evil;  
I am a rope.  
I bind hands and restrain feet.  
I pull and rub on flesh  
until it becomes raw and bleeds.  
I hang.  
I choke.  
I hold back potential  
and prevent freedom.  
They call them slaves,  
and assume they are all the same.  
Yet I know each one is different.  
I hear them cry the names of their loved ones  
in anguish.  
Whisper their dreams of escape when alone.  
They will soon tie me into a noose and use me to hang.  
When they are done,  
and he is hanging limp, body swaying in the calm breeze,  
they will loosen me and use me again and again  
until I wear thin  
or they cut me in two.  
But much like the spirit of those I bind,  
my fibre can never be broken.

**FICTION**

## Judith Elaine Cowan

### A SECRET TRADITION

---

Jean Duclos de la Chevrotière was stuck in traffic a kilometre south of the Pont Laviolette. Driving back from the Eastern Townships, watching as a band of golden sunset narrowed along the horizon, he'd been listening to Bellini's *Norma* on the car stereo. But the opera finished in a whirl of plangent resignation, the sunset was snuffed out by layers of dark clouds, and it began to rain. Then traffic came to a halt. Something had happened on the bridge. Jean braked automatically, skidded a little, and stopped, unconcerned about the rain or the road or the line of cars ahead, because he was facing a different problem.

This year his annual hunting trip, from the same camp and with the same companions, had come to an end. His deer-hunting days were over. Blocked, he looked ahead at the bridge lights towering into the evening sky, and thought of Lac Saint-Pierre upstream, reeds tossing in the wind. Maybe next year he'd stay closer to home, go duck hunting. He should see about getting himself a Brittany spaniel.

What had happened was that on the last day of their hunt, Diane, his long-time mistress, had let him know that their affair was over. She never wanted to hear from him again. And he'd been insulted. They'd met—he no longer remembered how many years back—at a land-management conference. And although the attraction had been mutual, he'd always made it clear that their contacts were casual, intermittent, and without commitment. She'd seemed uncomplicated, and he'd kept it that way. He simply called her when his work would be taking him down to Sherbrooke overnight, and they'd meet in a motel room. Diane was small and dark-haired, with enormous blue eyes and fine freckles on a pale skin. He'd never asked her age, but supposed that she'd be about forty-five. And it hadn't been until two years into their affair that he'd discovered she was an experienced deer hunter. In her teens, she told him, she'd hunted with her father. So Jean had introduced her to his hunting group, and for years the annual hunting trip had become their one occasion for meeting, a secret tradition.

Traffic inched up a bit, and he frowned into the gusting rain, the taillights of a horse trailer ahead blurring and clearing with every sweep of the wipers. The only other way across the Saint Lawrence was the ferry at Sorel, fifty kilometres upstream, if it was still running. The pair of bridges at Quebec City were more than a hundred kilometres downstream. He watched as the pickup truck with the horse trailer hobbled down into the median, fighting the wind. The driver

backed and angled it, jolting, towards the southbound lanes, which were empty because nothing was coming down off the bridge.

The night before, Diane had demanded that he leave H el ene and marry her. He'd refused, of course. H el ene was his wife. And Diane had dropped the subject, only to bring it up again in the morning.

"But you love me," she'd said, boots planted in a swirl of yellow leaves by the knobby tires of her Jeep.

"I love my wife," Jean told her.

"I thought you loved *me*."

"My feelings for you have nothing to do with it. I am married."

"But you can't love her and me too."

"You'll never understand."

Facing her, he'd been forced to recognise that there were things he hadn't understood either. About his pretty mistress, he knew only that she worked as an executive secretary with a Sherbrooke timber company. Never trying to find out more, he'd chosen to believe that she was one of those unusual women whose view of sex was as pragmatic as a man's. After all, she drove that Jeep, wore proper boots, and looked after her guns. He'd enjoyed hunting with her, sleeping with her, and sharing the meat. Unknowingly, H el ene had even roasted venison shot by Diane. And from the start, Diane had agreed that what passed between them was to remain secret and south of the Saint Lawrence—until last night, when she'd changed her mind.

Tears in her eyes, she confronted him. "I could phone her, you know." The tears ran down her cheeks. "Your wife, I mean. I could call her up, tell her all about us, and make trouble for you."

"Yes..." and he stared back. "I suppose you could do that. And do you think that would be a good idea?"

"I think she'd kick you out."

Expressionless, he said, "I don't think so. She's my wife. She knows that I would never leave her. If you were to call and tell her about us, yes, it would be a shock, and she would be hurt. I should have to confess and apologise, which I would do. Our marriage would never be the same, but I sincerely hope that we would stay together."

"That's what you think."

"It's not that I don't appreciate you. But I am married to her."

"You can get a divorce." Diane wiped her cheeks with both hands.

"I don't want a divorce."

"If I tell her about us, then *she'll* want a divorce."

"If you tell her about us," Jean said, "I promise you that I shall never speak to you again."

"That's what's going to happen anyway," said Diane. She climbed into the Jeep, slammed the door, and drove off.

Sitting in traffic, he pondered the possible reasons for her change of attitude. Had some gossip been talking to her, giving her exaggerated notions about his status? He'd never mentioned his seigneurial ancestors. But had she found out, and was she motivated by a silly dream of becoming a great lady? Life was never

easy, and if Diane were to start telephoning, things would certainly become difficult. He turned the stereo on again, and the overture to *Norma* poured out of the speakers. What was opera but a glorious codification of human emotion? Earlier, the portentous resignation of Bellini's heroine had echoed the sunset's drama. Now the opera's autumnal sonorities were accompanied by a chorus of sirens. Flashers blinking, two police cruisers roared up the bridge, going north in the southbound lane, and vanished over its blind spot. Once they were gone, the truck hauling the horse trailer clambered out of the median and turned south. When the car ahead moved up a couple of feet, Jean also pulled out of line, crossed the median, and headed back towards the village of Saint-Grégoire.

Outside the tavern there, the horse trailer was parked in a rear corner. Inside, Jean took a table and ordered a beer. Others from the traffic jam were dashing in through the rain. Pulling off their jackets, a man and woman joined the large man sitting at the table next to him.

"*Y as-tu sauté?*" the large man asked, apparently wanting to know if someone had jumped from the bridge.

"*Pense pas...*," said the smaller man. "*Mais il se passe de quoi là-haut. Y a des chars de police partout.*"

So not a suicide, but police cars all over the place. While the small man ordered club sandwiches and beer for the group, Jean eavesdropped on their conversation. These were the horse trailer people. They'd been on their way to the harness-racing track in Trois-Rivières, but also had an appointment to deliver a horse somewhere else. The woman was worried about leaving the animal alone in the trailer.

"He's not used to it," she told the men. "He's not like your trotters. He's going to kick up trouble."

"He damages that trailer," said the small man, "and I'm selling him for his meat price. Poundage. That's it."

The woman said no more. Even with her back to him, Jean could picture the anxiety on her fierce little face. There was silence while the three of them ate.

Then the waitress came to their table to ask if they were the people who'd parked that horse trailer outside. "Because it's rocking back and forth, really bouncing around," she told them.

"*Eh ben, Christ...!*" said the small man.

"Told you," said the woman.

The couple pulled their jackets back on and rushed out.

Jean turned to the larger man, who was slowly chewing his sandwich. "So he's a competition horse?"

"*Ummph...*" The man swallowed. "Maybe, big one anyway," and looked intently at Jean, taking in his pronunciation and his hunting jacket. "Riding horse, supposed to be...what do they call it? Dressage...you heard of that? They bought him for their daughter, the kind of kid who loves all horses. But this one's too tough for a little girl, no matter how good she thinks she is. She wanted a high-class horse, now she can't handle him. They should have bought her a pony. Same old story."

"Oh," said Jean. "That is sad."

“For the horse.” The man picked up another wedge of sandwich. “Not his fault, but they haven’t found a buyer, so they’re going to try leasing him out for the winter, at one of those riding places.”

“A western rental ranch...?”

“Guess so. Place like that’ll feed him nothing but hay for a couple of months, then slap a western saddle on him, put a stiff bit in his mouth, and rent him out to the public. That’ll settle his hash.”

“What kind of horse is he?”

“French saddlebred. *Une selle française*. You heard of those?”

“I’ve heard of them.”

“Well, I never had, but I’m told they use them for military parades...or maybe for those competitions you see on television...ridden by pros anyway. The problem is they paid too much for this guy, and they’re never going to get their money back, not even if they sell him for dog food. Which is saying something because that animal must weigh close to thirteen hundred pounds.”

“And he’s a mean horse? A rental ranch can’t use an animal like that.”

“Well, mean...” and the big man shrugged as the couple came back in. “Get him straightened out?”

“Ginette here talked to him, gave him a carrot from the kitchen. He wouldn’t eat it. Dropped it on the floor.”

“He ate it as soon as he saw you leaving,” said Ginette.

The big man nodded in Jean’s direction. “This gentleman was asking about him. He knows all about those kinds of horses.”

Instantly, the couple were interested. “You an expert on horses?” It was the small man’s turn to size Jean up.

“No, I am not,” he told them, “but I used to ride.”

“English...,” said the small man.

“Usually.”

“Well, listen, I got a good horse out there, papers and everything. He gallops in curves and circles and backwards and forwards. He changes lead, that’s what they told me. But he isn’t right for my daughter. So I’m hauling him to a dealer who’ll try to find me a buyer. Which’ll take all winter. While I pay board. And now that crazy animal thinks it’s his job to wreck my trailer.”

“*Ah, bon...*,” said Jean.

A thoughtful silence followed.

“Care to have a look at him?”

Jean looked out into the night. He thought of his ex-mistress, probably staring into the rain herself, weeping and waiting for him to call. Leave it, he thought, drop it, forget about her. And he swallowed the last of his beer, watched intently by these hard-working horse people.

“No harm in taking a look,” the man said.

“Okay,” said Jean.

Approaching the trailer, they saw it shift on its suspension, and heard a hoof hitting it inside, with a crunch. The small man strode up and slid a front window open. “Whoa, easy...,” he growled as the horse’s nose came thrusting out.

He was a big dark bay. His nose had a slight arch. Jean held out his hand, and the horse snorted chewed carrot at him.

"He's healthy," said his owner.

When the horse stretched out his head, looking them over, Jean took him by the nose and reached up to his ears. He refrained from looking at his teeth, but saw from the big, bold, glossy eye that this was an animal with character.

"Paid thirty-five hundred for him, let him go for a thousand," the man said.

"Hey, wait a minute," said Ginette.

"A thousand?" Jean asked.

"Anything less than that, I can get from the abattoir."

"You understand that I can't look at him here, not in the trailer."

"We're not letting him out!" Ginette said.

"No," said the small man, and the couple looked at each other. "Tell you what. We aren't going to make it across the bridge in time to meet the dealer tonight, but outside the village here, I've got a friend with a barn. I can call, see if he's home. Maybe I can leave the horse there for tonight. You can look him over in the barn."

The three of them stood in the rain, which was stopping, while the horse stamped in the trailer. He pushed his head farther out and shook his wet mane, whinnying a fluting call into the night.

"He's not a stallion...," said Jean.

"No, no way, not for my daughter to ride. He'd be worth a heck of a lot more if he was. But all you can do with this guy is ride him, and I'm afraid my little girl is going to get killed."

"He threw her?"

"Twice," said the man.

"Three times," said the woman.

"And he's how old?"

"Eight," said Ginette, "and strong as an ox."

"Leave me the phone numbers," Jean told them, "yours and your friend's."

A hesitation passed between the couple. The horse slammed the inside of the trailer again.

"Hey!" The man slapped the side of it.

"I'll go ask them for another carrot," said his wife.

"I'll carrot him!" The man turned back to Jean. "Sorry. I can't do it that way." But he looked at Ginette.

"We'd really need to know tonight," she said, "if we're going to leave him here, you know? The place is just a couple of miles up the road."

"And they've got lighting in the barn," her husband added. "You can see him there. For the price, a thousand *piasses*, it's not much. And it's a one-time offer."

"No," said Jean. "I'd have to see him trot and gallop. I'd have to bring a saddle and try him out. What's his name?"

The question was an embarrassment. They exchanged a glance, and Ginette said, "We've been calling him Billy. His real name is something fancy ...it's all in the papers. I've got them at home."

In the dim light, Jean studied them, a weathered, work-hardened couple strangely eager to sell a horse they didn't know much about. "*Bon*," he said, turning away, "just leave me the phone numbers."

The pair of them looked despondent.

"Or call me tomorrow." He pulled out his card and handed it to Ginette, then headed for his car. On the way, he heard her sounding out his name: "Duclos ... de la ... Chev-ro-tiè-re." But mainly he was aware of the horse back there, a presence both imperious and imploring. He heard a snort and more ruckus in the trailer, with shouts from the harness-racing couple. The animal whinnied after him into the night.

## Dasilva Arthur

### A BOY NAMED PETER

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I never knew his last name, but Peter was his first. He was this kid, this shy kid with a head that somehow seemed too big for such a little body. Small for his age, he had thick, blond curly locks and looked like one of those cherub angel statues you see in rich people's gardens, or those sculptures and paintings found in big museums. He never said much, I could count the number of times I heard his voice on one hand, but he would always be there with the rest of the gang from 23rd Avenue every morning, his mother at his side, equal in stature and demeanour, waiting for his orange school bus while we older kids waited for the city bus. Someone asked him a question once; Cheryl, I think. He just cocked his head to one side, squinted, and looked up at her, as if staring into the bright summer sun, contemplating, before giving a sheepish grin. But he didn't say a word. I wondered if he ever talked at home.

Despite living only a few buildings away from each other, I never paid much attention to Peter. He was four years younger than I, so I saw him as one of those bratty little kids playing in the street (something I had long outgrown)—an annoyance—as I made my way home. Nothing he ever did made any real impact on my insular world. Until that one summer night.

Summer on "the street," my street, was an array of visual gross-outs and a cacophony of police sirens, screeching tires, and screaming kids. Leftovers from garbage day littered the corners and alleyways. There were factories across the way that never seemed to close. One with billowing smoke which made God knows what, while another emitted a low constant humming. Another made bread and pastries, and sometimes the faint sweet smell of fresh-baked goods permeated the air while we played. I liked those days the most. People sat on their paint-chipped and rusted balconies smoking or drinking beer all hours of the day, music blaring out of their open windows, sweat dripping from their temples, the air as thick and heavy as their Quebecois-French twang. As day turned to evening, parents would shout to their kids to "*Viens souper*" (come inside for dinner) or "*Rentre dans l'maison. Y mouille*" (get in the house, it's raining). Nighttime meant anything but silence. The symphony of sounds

continued with an endless number of kids playing outside. For a while, I was one of them. Skillfully avoiding who was “it” in tag, playing hide and seek, or inventing new games like “The 23rd Avenue Kid Olympics.” We’d shout at the top of our lungs while running up and down the street, staying outside until well past midnight at times.

As I got older, things started to change. Not the crooked and cracked sidewalks or the factories bordering it. They would always be there. I began to hate everyone and everything on that street. I resented having to live surrounded by people that didn’t seem to want better for themselves, who’d given up on life a long time ago while most of my school friends lived in two-storey houses with green front lawns and backyard swimming pools. My parents, relatively poor Caribbean immigrants working menial jobs, gave us everything they could, but I knew they were never going to be able to give me the same life my white friends from the suburbs had. It felt unfair and it made me angry. I avoided my street as much as I could and stopped talking to any of the kids I used to play with. I would take the two-bus, two-hour ride out to the suburbs to hang out with the kids from school. I didn’t mind it so much, except in winter when waiting in -20 degrees Celsius, and it felt like the busses would never come. I welcomed the temporary escape being at my friends’ houses provided. On the bus rides over I would lose myself in daydreams or my two favourite activities on long rides on public transit.

I would eavesdrop on the passengers’ conversations and make up stories about who they were and where they were coming from or going to. You’d be surprised at what you can find out about a person just by listening. One time, this pretty Indian lady was on her phone, blabbing away as loud as she could for the entire bus ride. By the time we reached the last stop, I knew her entire life as well as some basic Hindi. The second thing I loved doing was stare out of the window at the suburban houses in all of their grandeur zipping by, and imagine what it would be like to live in one of them, not having a care in the world. One of my favourite places was on Lakeview. Surrounded by all the big and fancy mansion-like structures, this place was simple and quiet. It looked like a home. The front porch was made of wood and painted a pale blue. In summer, the front lawn was a lush green and always well-trimmed. In fall, piles of crisp brown leaves covered it. Occasionally I’d see a toy truck left out in the rain, or a pink shoe on the doorstep, and in winter a snowman no doubt made by little hands. I never saw who lived there, but I imagined who they were. Jim, business owner and loving husband to Maureen, who stayed at home and looked after their kids John and Katie. If I lived there, my room would be upstairs, with posters on the wall and a stereo. I would leave my window open at night, letting fresh air and silence float in. Just outside would be our backyard with trees to climb and swing

from. But just as I would really start to enjoy my dream, the bus would come to a sudden stop, jerking me back into reality.

When I couldn't escape from my neighbourhood physically, I escaped mentally, losing myself in endless hours of mindless television-viewing night after night. It was on one of those nights that I first heard it. That sound. It cut through the broken car mufflers and angry voices shouting obscenities in French, so common in my neighbourhood. Faint but consistent, rhythmic like a heartbeat, it echoed through the night, almost blending in with the usual sounds of summer.

*Thump...thump...thump.*

I ignored it at first and continued watching TV, wishing my life were as interesting and as funny as the sketch comedy on the screen instead of it just feeling like a joke.

*Thump...thump...thump.*

Eventually, my curiosity got the better of me. I picked myself up off the sofa and went to inspect the source of the disturbance. I peeked through my mother's 70s faded orange lace curtains onto the street below. There, in the middle of the street, was Peter bouncing a basketball. He was alone, the other kids having already gone inside. A small solitary figure, his silhouette standing out in the darkness. He bounced that basketball up and down the street for the entire summer, as I watched from my living room window, the sound soon becoming synonymous with the boy. It annoyed me at first. It broke my concentration and pulled me out of TV land. But that wasn't the real reason Peter and his ball bothered me. It was because I was jealous. Each bounce on that pot-holed pavement reminded me that I couldn't play. And as a black kid not knowing how to play ball was the worst because people always assumed that not only did you know how to play, but that you were good at it. But despite growing up near a court and with lots of kids, basketball somehow escaped me. I was too shy and embarrassed to go to the courts alone, afraid I would be made fun of. So I asked my older brother to teach me and he promised that he would. I waited. But he was always busy with his friends, and eventually, he moved away. I remember finding an old brown basketball he left behind in the closet, stuffed in a duffle bag. Sometimes I would take it out and think about going over to the courts to play. It felt awkward in my hands as I slowly spun it around, inspecting its battle wounds. I was always busy playing other games, or had my nose stuck in a book.

I could get away with a few bounces before my grandmother would shout out in her thick Caribbean accent: "NO BALL IN DEE HOUSE! HOW MANY TIME I HAFTE TELL YUH? BOUNCIN' A BALL IS FUH OUTSIDE." But I couldn't go outside. Not to the court. I didn't know what I was doing and was sure that the

older kids there would laugh at me. And so I would return the ball to where I'd found it and watch TV or read a comic book.

Sometimes my brother did call to tell my parents he was coming home for the weekend. When I heard the news, that whole week I would be full of anticipation, hoping this visit would be the one when he had time to take me to the court and teach me how to play. But he never had enough time. He had friends to see and places to go with them. Eventually I stopped believing in my brother and his empty promises, much like a kid stops believing in Santa Claus or magic. I hated basketball. It was a stupid sport. Who needed it anyway?

I guess Peter did. The more he bounced that ball, the more my anger turned to admiration for his determination to accomplish something that I was never able to do.

Years later, I saw Peter one day outside the grocery store when I went back to my old neighbourhood to visit my mother. He had grown up some and was almost taller than me. But he still had that curly blond hair. I wondered if he would remember me as well as I remembered him. I decided to find out.

"Is your name Peter?" I asked, blocking his path.

"Yeah," he said, looking at me a little confused.

"You used to live on 23rd Avenue, right? With your mom?"

"Yeah." By the confused look on his face, I could tell he had only a vague recollection of me.

"So did I," I said. "I remember you. We used to wait at the same bus stop when we were kids. You never talked much. But I remember you." This brought a smile to his face as though surprised that someone would remember him. I wanted to remind him of his days spent bouncing the basketball up and down the street. I wanted to tell him that he taught me an important lesson. That *he* was important. That he mattered. I wanted to thank him for inadvertently teaching me to never let fear force you to give up on the things you have a passion for. I learned from him to just try. Try and you'll see that sometimes you don't need someone's help to achieve your goals. All you really need is yourself. Instead, I fell into stale pleasantries and asked him about what he was doing these days, then wished him luck for the future. I stood there for a while as he continued his way, watching him grow smaller and smaller in the distance, thinking about how sometimes people leave an imprint on our lives while they continue to live theirs, none the wiser.

## Janielle F. J. Browne

### MOTHER SHE WROTE

(Winner: H. Nigel Thomas UWI Open Campus Fiction Prize—2021)

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By the time my brother was fourteen, he had had his first woman. Perhaps it was in the way that a bit of his teenage awkwardness was replaced with a mannish confidence. Maybe it was the way he now swaggered instead of dragging his feet, or suddenly had the boldness to maintain eye contact during conversation. Whatever it was, my mother knew immediately and asked, “You use protection?”

He sheepishly shrugged, and I waited for her to force-feed him handfuls of his tightly patted afro.

Instead, she just sighed and told him to come. My curiosity blossomed as they stood in my mother’s bedroom, I in the doorway. She took a box of condoms from her top drawer. My mouth could have fallen to my feet as I watched my mother grab a banana from her fruit display on the mahogany chest of drawers and patiently demonstrate to my brother how to put on a condom, then handing the now offensive banana and a new condom to him to try.

I didn’t know which was more disturbing—that this was my brother whose backside I had washed when he was a baby, or the fact that my mother kept condoms.

“Cho. Don’t worry, Davonte, you would get better at it.”

Her voice brought me out of my disturbing thoughts. “Lemme try?”

They both jumped and turned, staring in silence before Davonte started laughing until he cried.

“Wey, wey you wan’ try for? Is who and you—?” his own laughter cut him off and I could feel my face getting hot.

“Why you nah shut up! You need something smaller to practice wid. Look the pin cushion right dey,” I retorted angrily.

Before he could respond, my mother intervened, shaking her head. “You must be mad,” she muttered, brushing past me.

I froze. I was five years older than my brother and yet I was the one being treated like a child. Davonte was already pulling at the waistband of his joggers and sending the poor banana in it. Me, I stayed rooted in the doorway from sheer embarrassment.

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I am thinking of this while I am once again frozen in place. This time, however, it is because the police instructed me to stay right there. My bladder begins staging a small protest, and looking around the vast building with elegant flyers and signs, I am beginning to question my belonging as always. This is not like the little competitions I used to enter when I was a teenager. This is big. It means something.

I am reminded of just how much it means, when a man with an earpiece and microphone approaches me. In his black turtleneck, matching slacks, and loafers, he looks like what I envision a high school drama teacher to be; or maybe someone's underpaid assistant.

"Miss McDowald?" His voice is a lot less dramatic than I expected.

"Yes, that's me," I confirm, nodding perhaps a bit too vigorously, earning me a raised dark eyebrow and perfectly pursed lips.

I realize my mistake. Of course, he knows who I am. My dark, slender face is all over the fancy flyers. For once, people are here to see me.

"Right. They're ready for you. Just follow Miss Jackman through those doors; she'll show you to your seat and give you a program. Is there anyone accompanying you?"

The question unexpectedly confuses then embitters me. That's the whole reason I am outside. I glance at the non-dramatic drama man, then at Miss Jackman whose five-foot frame seemed to materialize out of thin air. "Give me a moment, please."

I text Davonte again, begging him to come. He responds to my slew of frantic texts with, "Call mommy." I suck my teeth in frustration.

I love my little brother, but sometimes he pisses me off. He knows how important this event is to me, and yet he is insisting that he cannot come because he is painting. I think of chastising him, but I would be alone.

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At seventeen, my brother decided that the St. Vincent Community College was not for him and dropped out to pursue art full-time on his terms. I did not understand Davonte's decision, but I respected the rebellion behind it. I had

gotten seven grade twos and one grade one for CXC, and my mother had asked if I was a toilet, and where was I going with all those twos.

We were in the Terios when he broke the news to us. I wondered if I'd heard right. I was riding shotgun and began looking for the nearest bank over which my mother would probably drive us all, out of sheer rage.

"Who is going to pay for this?" she asked, gripping the steering wheel.

Davonte held onto my seat and eased his lanky frame forward, so that his face was between us ladies. "I saved up some money from when I worked gas station summer and Christmas. I already start buying supplies and I can use the small room in the back as my art studio."

I tried not to snort at the audacity of Davonte McDowald. Not only did he feel a temporary job made him a man at seventeen, he had also unceremoniously christened the small room in the back of our humble abode as his art studio. When I'd asked for that room to be my writing studio, I was turned down. My mother used it as her sewing room, and she kept all the boxes of our baby pictures and family albums in there. Davonte would be lucky to get a space. Bless his heart.

"Well, is up to you. You is man now."

Had I been teleported to an alternate dimension where my schoolteacher mother allowed her teenage son to not only drop out of college, but also take over her precious back room? Davonte leaned back into his seat, and she kept driving as if it was the most normal conversation ever.

I must have made some sort of ungodly noise because my mother was glancing at me now.

"When I asked for the back room," my voice came out so scratchy and low, I wished for some brake fluid to help me, "you said no."

"You could write in any room, Idalya. You think I want Davonte dropping up paint all over my good carpet?"

A block formed in my throat then, so big it sat on my chest. That block became the latest addition to the great wall that sat between me and my mother. That block impeded every opportunity that involved informing or including my mother in anything that happened to me. I do not know what it was a block of, but I do know it never crumbled.

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I am following Miss Jackman, whose backside accounts for half of her frame. She takes me right up on stage and my long legs almost entangle themselves as my six-inch heels try to bite the hem of my pantsuit. I had convinced myself that a cream pinstripe pantsuit was feminine, yet powerful and would go nicely with

my larger-than-life black curls. However, here on the stage I feel like too much of a spectacle and simply want to disappear.

The seat I'm in looks a lot like a throne and the lights are blinding, which is great because I don't want to see the audience. My practiced smile makes its way onto my face as the man sitting across from me begins describing me and my body of work to the audience. I feel like I am listening to him talk about someone else. He begins describing my childhood, telling lots of funny stories about Davonte that I mentioned in my book, *Davonte's Inferno*, which explores the often-hellish journey that is siblinghood and the bonds formed throughout. The audience is laughing and having a good time listening to my brother's antics.

"Your work generally seems to center around you and your brother. Although you're five years apart, the two of you seem very close." The host smiles encouragingly at me.

"Yes, Davonte is my brother, but he's also my best friend and sometimes feels a lot like my son." The audience laughs. "I've always been the responsible one, but in many ways, he's taught me how to live and achieve a level of carefreeness I never thought I could."

They display a recent photo of my brother and me. He's twenty-two, but still manages to maintain his boyish charm. It must be those dimples. I hear ladies swooning and cheering in the audience and I shake my head in amusement.

"Well, who wouldn't love a guy like that!" The host wiggles his eyebrows, earning laughs. "But strangely enough, your most popular work is from the poetry collection about your mother. It's rumoured that you weren't going to publish it at all, that your brother sent it to publishers without your knowledge. Tell us about that."

I am enveloped by their expectant silence. I expected him to ask about my latest book and how my relationship with Davonte inspired it. I didn't do interviews specifically to avoid talking about this collection and talking about her. Yet my most successful piece of work was centered around her. My work and my mother. I couldn't separate the two, regardless of their desire to stay separate.

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"Idalya, your lecturer from college just called telling me that I should be so proud. How I going be proud, if you never tell me you win a writing competition they had? The school having an award ceremony and want you to read your work?"

I couldn't believe my ears. My mother had never referred to my writing as "work." She always said, "Your thing dem."

“I could ask for the morning off so I could come hear you read it. Is a poem or a story?” She looked at me with a small smile. She had always been shorter than me, but now it was even more obvious with her looking up into my face. I noticed, for the first time, creases in her forehead and the grey curls escaping from her nightcap.

I stared at her in silence. I wished I could say something. I really wanted to, but instead I just stared. I watched her smile falter then quickly fade; I swore I had imagined it. She never said a word about the ceremony or my writing after that. She pretended it never happened and that set the tone for the rest of my career as a writer.

I was nineteen then, and that year I threw myself into writing, trying to exorcise myself of my mother. She was on every page, hiding between every line, and I hated her for it, but I hated myself more. I produced more poems in the next three years than I knew what to do with. The ones I liked, I put in a binder to build my portfolio. The ones about my mother, I put in a box to burn.

I never did remember that box, and when I permanently returned from university with my doctorate, I finally developed the courage to get my own place at twenty-six. It was when Davonte was going through my old things, while helping me move in, that he came across my box of poems. He collected my poems, used a picture of a portrait he'd done of our mother for the cover and sent my collection off to a publisher under the name *Mother* by Idalya McDowald. It wasn't until I received a call from an interested publisher that I was forced to take ownership of my work. I was only angry at Davonte for a second because the collection turned out to be wildly successful and my agent insisted that I put out something else while I was still a hot topic. I published my other poems in various magazines, and as I built my reputation, I tried to shove the memory of *Mother* into the recesses of everyone's minds and overshadow it with my other work. However, *Mother* could not be eclipsed-- not when she was the entire universe.

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Somehow, they have convinced me to read a poem for them from *Mother*. I select the one that I wrote after the award ceremony.

“This poem is called, 'Letters to Home.' I hope you enjoy.” I take a deep breath and try to focus on the blinding lights before I begin.

“Dear mother,  
I'm writing to let you know that  
I'm four years clean from

A five-year-long addiction  
To starving myself.  
It wasn't so much about the weight  
As it was about control—  
The satisfaction of feeling  
The pain of hunger,  
Because you can control pain  
If it's self-inflicted, right?

“That's four years of hearing  
How much weight I've put on  
Without being asked  
How all this time I've kept it off.

That's four years of controlling  
My need to control  
Instead of my calorie intake.  
I'm proud of myself.

“It's also been two years  
Since my last serious urge to kill myself.  
Sure, a lot of the times  
I have to convince myself  
That another breath is worth taking.  
But at least I'm not the one  
trying to unplug my oxygen.

“Dear mother,  
I am exhausted.  
I'm tired of fighting  
demons only I can see,  
Yet having them be  
The only notable thing about me.  
I just want for once  
To be seen clearly.

“But the only time  
You see me in a different light  
Is when I'm too far away  
For you to see

The darkness consuming me.  
You only see me differently  
When I'm across the sea,  
So I'm a little bit blurry,  
And my tears make me look bright-eyed,  
And an open-mouth sob  
Looks an awful lot like a smile...  
Isn't that how nearsightedness works?

"Dear mother,  
I'm writing this letter  
That you'll never read  
Because these letters on this page  
Only make sense  
When not directly addressed to you.  
So that's about it.  
I'm doing great thanks for asking."

The audience is quiet. I fear that I have been too vulnerable, that I've turned them off. The silence reminds me that when I was eight I told my mother that I didn't like the boy next door to watch over me and Davonte; that he would ask me to do things that made me not want to say my prayers before bed. She stayed frozen listening as I explained that sometimes my throat hurt after and he would give me orange juice before making me watch movies so I would "do better next time."

My mother sent me to bed then and that was the last talk there was of the neighbour boy. It was the last talk of many things for us. It was then that I learned to freeze—to play dead in situations I wanted to escape from. It was also then, as I brushed my teeth and drank water, that I felt like I was swallowing cement. That was the beginning of the concrete flower blossoming inside my throat; the one whose thorns ripped my words apart before they could escape the tunnel into the light outside my lips.

The sudden roar of applause pulls me out of my childhood bathroom and brings me back into the packed auditorium. I am overwhelmed that they love it, that they love me. Most of all I am grateful.

After my interview I am high on applause with expensive wine and a gift basket strapped in the back seat of my little Swift. My right hand is cramping from handshakes and signing books, but adrenaline keeps it steady on the wheel. I am on my way to Davonte to gloat, celebrate and give him a piece of my mind.

When I pull up to my old house, unsurprisingly the back room is unlocked as I'm sure the front door is as well. Somebody can steal the entire house and Davonte will only notice if they take his easel from in front him.

"Wasteman! You here?" I call with a grin, shutting the door after me.

"You should've come. It was a good time and I have some—" The words die on my lips when I take in the scene before me.

Davonte is there filthy with paint, his afro out of place for once. He has paint in the beard he has been so carefully growing, breathing hard. However, for once he is not the centre of attention. Standing between us is my mother. She is holding a painting of me wearing what I am wearing right now, but painted me is on the auditorium stage laughing with the host. Davonte has captured the light bouncing off my curls, my head thrown back and a look of pure rapture I've never even seen on myself.

"I-I, don't understand." I am a stammering mess, and my mother looks uncertain while Davonte grins.

"Is you, Dalya, mommy ask me if I could do it while you were on. So, we watch the programme and if you see me, booooyy. Paint flying, mommy shouting and you doing your thing." Davonte's animation breaks the ice and prompts me to take a few steps forward.

She heard my poem. She asked him to capture my moment. She listened to my words. My mother holds the painting up for me to see, but I am looking past it, at her. It is as if I'm seeing her for the first time, how desperate she looks for me to approve. Davonte carefully removes the painting from between us but neither of us seems to notice.

"I'm proud of you," she whispers.

For the first time in my life, I feel a petal of the concrete rose in my throat wither just enough for me to respond, "Thank you."

## Lynda U. Bailey

### HURRICANE

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I celebrated my fourth birthday in the middle of August. Everyone told me, "You getting to be a big girl now...you ready for nursery school." That was good news. As far back as I could remember, I yearned to go to school with my big sister. Anna was ten, and she seemed to know everything. I wanted to be like her. I had my blue and white school uniform all ready and hanging on a hanger in my room. My new schoolbag had a brand-new copybook. Dad had printed my name boldly on the front of my book. My new yellow pencil was neatly sharpened. It even had a pink eraser on the top of it. But most of all, I loved my white soft-mash, which was the name Mom called my running shoes. The last thing I did every night before going to bed was look at my new school outfit to make sure it was still there.

First day of school came. The morning went by quickly. Just after recess, Miss Thomas, our headmistress, came to our class to tell us that school was closed for the rest of the day. I was so disappointed that I missed the rest of what she said. Most of the children were happy, but I was sad. I had waited so long for this day to come.

Anna came to my class to get me. "Hurry up! Hurricane a come."

I knew we could take the shortcut across the river, where we would skip on the stones; but Anna insisted we take the long road across the bridge and along the main road.

"Feel that wind. And look how the sea getting rough," she said.

I couldn't believe my eyes. All the blue in the sea was gone. The water was dark and grey. It broke in high waves far from shore. The waves shot up and curved over, and you could see the black underbelly before they crashed past the shoreline. They roared as they crashed against the concrete barrier. Then all that

was left was the foam like a frill of white lace along the top of the barrier. I was afraid they might come onto the road.

We walked quickly along the far side. Then suddenly a car screeched alongside us. It was Dad's blue Toyota. He was coming to the school to get us. My brother Tyrone was already home. His school was closed too. He was fifteen and went to Grammar School in town.

"We have to prepare weself. Florence a come," Mom announced in her authoritative voice, as soon as we stepped into the house.

"Tantie Florence a come visit us?" I asked, but she had already moved on, and didn't hear me."

I repeated the question to Anna.

"Lawd, na mek me laugh." And she held her sides as she erupted in stitches. "De hurricane name Florence. Strupid!" It was her favorite name for me when Mom was out of earshot.

Before Dad set about to board up the glass windows and securely lock the doors, he gave orders to everyone.

"Eva," he said to Mom, "leh the children-them help you bring up enough food from the storeroom."

"And Ty, you go get the storm lantern, and the flashlight and battery-them. Make sure everything working."

"And the battery radio," Ty added.

Our neighbor, Miss Rosie, was out in her yard when Mom called to her, "Yo have to come over here, Rosie. Yo can't stay in that house."

Miss Rosie lived with her daughter. Stella was in regular school, in a higher class. She told me her birthday was in two weeks. She was going to be six. Their house was small and old. There were some spaces on the roof where the shingles had fallen off. And their step was old and breaking down.

I went down to the storeroom with Anna. She was taking down bottles of "Mountain Top" water, and cans of sardines and corned beef. She placed a jar of peanut butter and a box of crackers on the table in front of me. *We must be having a little party*, I thought. But she walked to the door, and with her hand on the light switch, she shouted to me, "Come on, hurry up." I rushed to the door before she switched the light off.

"Yo dotish or what? Bring de biscuit and peanut butter. Strupid!"

But she hadn't told me to bring the biscuit and peanut butter. How was I supposed to know?

We all huddled in the living room, Miss Rosie and Stella with us. The wind blew stronger and stronger. It kept on blowing. It shook our house and rattled the windows. The rain pounded the roof. Water came off it like a waterfall. Outside

lightning flashed. Loud thunder shook the house. Dad kept checking the jealously. It got very dark outside. All night long the strong wind blew. We could hear it whistling along the electrical wires. There were loud noises outside. Dad had turned on the radio. The reporter said the eye of the storm was passing us.

“Can the storm see us?” I whispered to Mom.

“No, honey, it’s not like that. The eye of the storm means the strongest part of the wind.”

I snuggled up to Mom, and she held me close.

Suddenly, there was a loud crash and a bang. The electric light went out. I screamed. Mom held me closer and rocked me.

“Sounds like something fell in our backyard,” Dad said to Mom. Then wind picked up again, just as strong as before. It was a long time before the wind died down and the rain stopped. Dad lit the storm lantern. The radio reporter said the storm had passed us, but we all stayed in the house.

I fell asleep. Then it was morning. Dad told everyone to stay in the house. He went outside to check.

When he came back, he said we had to stay inside or close to the house. The electrical wires were down. We had no electric light for two days. The men had to come to fix it.

Our banana field was gone. All the plants were lying flat on the ground.

The roof of Stella’s house had blown off. That was the loud crash we heard when it fell in our backyard.

“The Government going help you to fix it,” Dad told Stella’s Mom. “They get money from oversea to help with these things.”

“I hope so,” Miss Rosie said. “Ralph know I always vote for he.”

On the radio, the reporter said there was extensive damage to property all over the island. No reports of deaths.

“Thank God,” Mom said. “St. Vincent is really the home of the blessed.”

But Dad continued to talk about the loss of his banana field. “You know how much money I done lose on them plants?”

“Did Dad bury his money in the banana field?” I asked Ty.

Ty picked me up and sat me on the table facing him. He told me that Dad sells the bananas to get money. What he meant was that there were no bananas for him to sell this time.

“But I have money in my piggy bank. I can give Dad some of my money.”

I rushed off to find my piggy bank. I love my big brother. He is always so good and kind to me.

Stella and her mom stayed at our house for two months. Stella slept on my bed with me. I liked Stella because she was kind to me. And she didn’t hog the covers. I liked to sleep with a light sheet over me. Stella didn’t like to cover with

anything at all. She just stayed in her corner of the bed next to the wall. She told me a lot of Nancy stories that her mom had told her. At night, when everyone else was sleeping, she would whisper another story to me. Then my brother Ty would come in and tell us to stop talking and go to sleep.

During the first week, Dad repeated to Miss Rosie that the Government would help her to build her house back. I was excited. I would finally see what Government looked like. I pictured him...a fat man with glasses and a moustache, as well as a big round belly.

Then one day, Stella told me that the Government gave her mom some money, and galvanize, and paint to help her build back the house. Stella's two uncles came to help too. And Dad worked with them every day until the house was finished. But I wondered why I never saw Government.

"What Government look like, Anna?"

"What stupidity you asking me? Strupid!"

I was happy for Stella. They got a nice new house with galvanized roof, and new front steps. They painted it a bright yellow that made it very pretty.

But most of all, I had made a big, new friend and I eventually found out that Government wasn't a person.

## **ESSAYS**

# Maya Khankhoje

## THE PROJECT

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### Foreword

The events are factual, the names are fake, the sentiments are personal.

### The Picture

Grigori's email has a picture attached to it. It shows him, dressed in a hospital gown, holding a newborn in his arms. To his left stands a woman. She is neither young nor old. She could be the child's mother, a relative, the obstetrician. She is in the picture but not part of it. Her expression is blank. Grigori is beaming. The email has a one-liner: This is the project I've been working on.

### The Phone Call

-Maruca, how are you? I'm using the phone at the hospital reception.

-Hospital! What happened, Grigori?

-I've just had an operation, just to buy some time. It's the kind of cancer that can't be cured.

-So sorry to hear that. And how is...the baby?

I couldn't bring myself to say *your baby*. Grigori is a loner and I've never seen him with a partner, male or female. Did he go back home to adopt? In his late sixties! Did he suddenly get married? Who is that woman anyway?

-I left him back home with his godparents because I had to rush back for my surgery.

-Is there anything I can do for you? Don't hesitate to ask for help.

-That's what my friends told me to do, not to be shy to ask for help.

-Remember, anything.

-Thanks, Maruca.

### The Walk

Summer is over and the trees have started shedding their leaves. Grigori is crossing the park. His gait is unsteady, his cheeks hollow, his skin has a yellowish tinge. But he's smiling, a smile that clashes with the rest of his appearance.

- How have you been, Grigori? It's been weeks since I've heard from you.

-Much better, thanks. I went back home to fetch the baby. Glad I didn't fly business class. They put me in the baby section of steerage and the other mothers helped me change diapers. With my treatments I never got a chance to learn how to do it myself.

At the mention of *the other mothers* I smile.

-Pop in to meet Anton one of these days.

-Will do.

## **Adjoining Condos**

-Come on in. You can take your shoes off here and I'll take you to the nursery next door.

-I didn't know you had two condos!

-Well, I had it rented out, but when my tenant left I decided to keep it empty for...my project. Meet Alice. She and Daisy are helping me look after Anton, 24/7.

-Does he take more after you or his mother?

Grigori remains silent. What a dumb question! By then I should have known better. There is no mother to compare him to, no official mother at least. What do you call the woman who donates her egg to be implanted into another woman's uterus? The donor, of course, because she has donated her eggs, just like a hen. But she hasn't really donated, she has sold a part of herself to an unknown man from a rich country because she is an unknown woman from a poor country. That is a simple transaction, a win-win situation. She gets enough money to build herself a little cottage in her village or buy herself a food stall and he gets a cheap deal, or at least less expensive than in his country. In fact, in his country commercial surrogacy is most probably not allowed or very tightly regulated. And what do you call the woman who carries the fetus for nine months, provides it with food and warmth, cradles it in a warm liquid, suffers from morning sickness and backaches, puts up with his kicks and hiccups, and risks her life for its sake? Margaret Atwood might think of an appropriate name when she writes a sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale*. I find the word surrogate difficult to negotiate. A mother is a mother is a mother. She, like the egg donor, is also a mother, they are co-mothers if you wish, although they may have never met. Fancy words like gestational surrogacy, intended parents, donors are a publicist's legerdemain, a pseudoscientific construct, a social cop-out. My mind goes back to O. Henry's Christmas tale in which the young wife sells off her lovely locks to buy a fob chain for her husband's watch while unbeknownst to her, he sells his watch to buy a pretty comb to adorn her lovely locks. A morality tale that O. Henry could have written today, but certainly no Christmas tale.

## **One Year Later**

The nannies have hatched a plot.

-Anton must have a birthday party.

-But he's too little to understand what a birthday is.

-There must be cake and ice cream and coloured balloons.

-But I don't believe in all that stuff.

-We could invite his friends from the playgroup.

-But I just want to take him to the mountain and meditate.

-He needs to have life with dad documented.

-But...OK.

## **The Birthday Party**

A gaggle of women sit around the cake trying to make Anton laugh. Anton is bewildered but plays along. Grigori smiles, he has finally warmed up to the whole idea. Somebody takes pictures for posterity: father and son cheek-to-cheek, son on father's lap, father gazing tenderly at son, son blowing out a single candle with father's help. Everybody sings happy birthday slightly off-key. The jollity is a bit forced. Anton hasn't a clue and his father is pensive. He's trying to etch the image in his mind's eye hoping it won't vanish after death. As Dr. Siddhartha Mukherjee wrote in his bestseller, cancer is the emperor of all maladies and we all know that emperors take no prisoners, not often anyway.

## **Fall again, then winter, then spring...**

I'm in the States visiting my grandchildren. Whenever I pass a Starbucks, I order a chai and log in. The dreaded email arrives: *Grigori left us last night*. I remember my last conversation with him just before my trip. I had told myself I wasn't taking leave of him, just checking in, but of course I was fooling myself.

-Just came to say hello before going to Kansas, I said.

-Have a safe journey and don't forget to take your boxes.

-My boxes?

-Yes, your food containers.

So everybody's efforts to make him nutritious appetizing food came to naught. His lanky frame looked tiny in the cumbersome hospital bed in his master bedroom. Meticulous as ever, Grigori believed in tying loose ends, even those of cheap plastic containers. That's the kind of man he was. What he neglected to do

was to tie the loose ends that he left behind for his friends, acquaintances, social workers and caring adopted “aunties” to sort out. His family back home was baffled and saddened. Their peripatetic brother and cousin and nephew and uncle had chosen to bring a son into the world but alone, on another continent. Granted, material and social conditions were better there, but his real family was elsewhere. To make matters worse, Grigori’s executor resigned shortly after his passing because he couldn’t untangle the tangled skein that Grigori had left behind.

## **THE OPTIONS**

Why would such a meticulous man ignore the legal requirements of a child he brought into this world against all odds? At first, I couldn’t understand. But now I think I do. Not making plans for when you’re gone is one way to ignore that the grim reaper is hurriedly on its way. Not thinking about what is euphemistically referred to as “if something happens” was Grigori’s way of spitting in death’s face. He had been so obsessed with scenarios for a trust fund for Anton—schooling in his alma mater, getting him admitted to a fancy university—that he never found time to provide for the most important thing in life for a child: a loving, caring family. I, like others, had urged him to appoint a legal guardian whom he could trust and who could start enjoying life with his son.

-You can’t micromanage, I had urged.

He finally appointed somebody, *in extremis*. He appointed Kiran, the woman with whom he had shared many travels back home, the woman who looked after his flat when he was away, the woman who nursed him with great devotion in his last days, the woman with whom he’d had a past.

We, his circle of friends and acquaintances and well-wishers, were shocked. Not because we didn’t like her. We did. Not because she wasn’t a good and loving woman. She was. Not because she lacked intelligence. She was actually very bright. Not because she professed a religion different from Anton’s. Well, maybe that a bit. Is a very devout mature woman, we all wondered, the best person to look after a young child from another continent, another race, another culture? Will her staunch religious beliefs interfere with her care of Anton? Will her closed community accept him? And if it does, will this not shut him off from his father’s world? Might not a young family with siblings, preferably from Grigori’s side of the world, be a better option for Anton? But then again, she had loved Anton’s father deeply and she adored Anton, of that there was no doubt. And who are we anyway, the self-appointed custodians of this endearing child, to voice opinions on what is best for Anton? Biological parents have been known to fail their offspring whereas cobbled-together non-traditional families

sometimes do a better job. The jury is still out. The only thing that was clear was that bureaucracies had to be staved off at any cost before they did any harm in their attempts to do good.

What about the family back home? Those of us not in the inner circle knew very little, so I decided to do some research of my own. With an unsigned obituary published in Grigori's hometown in hand, I googled his brother. Armed only with his first name and his surname and the address on the obituary, I managed to locate him and sent him a registered letter. I wrote it slowly by hand to better voice personal sentiments that get lost in electronic bits and bytes. In any case, there was no email address listed on the web.

Below are some extracts from that letter:

*About a couple of years ago I received a cryptic picture of Grigori with his son and a woman by his side. "This is the project I've been working on..."*

*And this is how I was inducted into the circle of women who tried to help Grigori and who are now trying to help Anton.*

*Anton needs help. He needs a large family circle and the possibly bright future that is his birthright. Regardless of the circumstances and the reasons which might have led Grigori to father him at such a late date in his life, Anton does not deserve to have doors closed on him.*

*I hope you all would love and care for this child and would act in accordance with love and duty.*

*He is, like all children his age, a lovely, joyous child, even though his name was not mentioned in his father's obituary. He deserves better. He deserves the best.*

A couple of weeks later I got a phone call from a man with a heavy accent. The following is the gist of what he said:

-I'm Rodin, Grigori's brother. You needn't have registered the letter to make sure I got your message. I'm in constant spiritual contact with my brother and I wait for him to speak to me. He shall show us the way to follow. Here there is a large home that includes four generations where Anton will always be well received. He can come to visit as many times as he wishes. And that includes you, Maruca, if you happen to come to our town. I was never estranged from my brother as some believe. It is just that our lives took different paths that sometimes intersected and sometimes not. There was a small number of concentric circles. Anton is best where he is, over there in your country, where the laws and conditions will protect him. He will be spared the agony that our country is passing through at present and perhaps when he grows up, he will come to his ancestral country and help liberate it.

Anton's birthday is around the corner. There will be a memorial in honour of his father on the day Anton turns two. Perhaps his relatives from his home country will be present, perhaps not. But the circle embracing this motherless and fatherless child will certainly be there. To remember a life extinguished and to celebrate a life ignited.

P.S. Several years have passed since this account was penned. Anton is now a healthy and happy child thriving in school and enjoying a loving relationship with his ageing foster parent.

## Veena Gokhale

### I'M EARTHY, YOU'RE EARTHY

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At the very same instant, somewhere on Earth...

She stands on the platform tapping her heels; the subway is late again. He cradles his firstborn in his arms—proud, joyous, overwhelmed. He glances quickly through the exam, anxiety turning to relief. Please hold, she says, going back to the earlier conversation at the switchboard. He picks up the bedpan and places it on the trolley. She tries to breathe, the pain like a fist in her stomach. Clad in a sequin dress, she stands on the deck, looking at the endless stretch of foaming wake. He breaks the egg over the pot of soup. She buttons her dress, takes the money from the sideboard, leaves. Kneeling on the mat, he prays, facing Mecca. In the alley, he picks up a discarded cigarette butt. Eyes closed, he sings into the microphone, swaying, the lights flashing, the crowd now silent. He sits on the riverbank, chewing on a pen, contemplating a poem. As she cautiously enters the building, she pulls the gun out of the holster. She puts down the paintbrush and steps back from the canvas; no, the clifftop house needs a little something; she is not done yet. He drives up the winding road, his Ferrari over the speed limit, then turns the wheel suddenly to the right and plunges off the cliff. She feels the pressure building in her bladder but continues at the sewing machine; it is not yet toilet break. He nods off to sleep, elbows on desk, chin in the cup of his hands, as the teacher drones on. She sets the pail down, squats on the ground and pulls at the cow's udders. She licks the envelope and seals the letter; her ticket to freedom. He is quick at the coffee machine, even on his first day as a barista. Hearing of her son's death, she pulls madly at her robe, ripping it. He takes the syringe and plunges it into a vein; any vein will do. The little girl braids her doll's hair, singing a tune. She scrolls through her e-mails, telling herself that she needs to do some unsubscribes...

The crow sits on the telephone wire, cocks his head, as if listening to a call, then flies away. The dog strains at her leash towards an exciting, new smell. The squirrel leaps into the pot of newly planted flowers and starts digging. The cat lays the dead mouse at her owner's feet and looks up at her. When the light bulb comes on, the moth flies straight into it. The snake slithers by, causing the woman to drop her pot. The monkey in the cage is tossed a banana. The green shoot manages to push itself out through a crack in the sidewalk. The deer jumps gracefully over a backyard fence. Beside the safari jeep, the hyena poses for a

photo. Having lost hers, the penguin tries to steal another mother's chick. The stream slows down, blocked by accumulating garbage. The eagle soaring high in the sky sees the mountaineer as a speck on the rock face. Finding the cage door open, the parrot flies out into an uncertain future. The sturgeon is slit open by the fisherman to harvest her eggs. The Baobab seed floats on the waves, on its way to the African coast. The skunk slinks into his den and settles down. The spider continues building another strand of his web. The grey wolf pees on the boulder, marking territory. The loon takes a deep dive, two hundred feet all in one go. The platypus lays her egg and curls around it. The bee dies after ingesting the herbicide. A small meteor crashes in the desert...

She looks at her sister, sucking her thumb; she is saying something, but she does not understand her. She watches her pull her skirt down, turn to the mirror and pick up a comb. They run down to the beach, hand in hand, dash into the sea, splashing each other, squealing. They roll on the ground, blindly throwing punches, dust rising around them. Push, she says, push, push hard, and she does, sweating and groaning. She leans over and whispers in her friend's ear, releasing a cascade of giggles. He unlocks the door of the cell and puts an enamel plate on the floor, ignoring the man sitting against the wall. The baby sucks lustily on the breast, tied to the mother with a piece of cloth. They dive into the pool and perform their turns, swift and skilful as seals, their movements perfectly harmonised. Her head snaps back and tears sting her eyes, when he hits her, hard. No, you can't eat that, she says, taking the bun that had fallen to the ground from him. She opens her purse and puts a few coins into his tin. From the cockpit they see the sun start its ascent over the horizon. She puts a blanket over her mother, who has fallen asleep on the sofa again. He holds the flashlight steady while she picks the lock. Their hands move in rapid gestures, talking soundlessly. They pause outside the temple to buy a coconut to add to their offerings. They sit on the sun-dappled park bench enjoying their ice cream. He sits on the edge of the hospital bed, feeding his father beef broth. The bus driver lowers the platform so the man in the wheelchair can get in. They cuddle on the sofa, munching popcorn, bored with the movie but reluctant to turn it off. He points the machine gun at the customers in the bar and pulls the trigger...

The prize-winning rose smiles at the sun. The sun bear opens wide his mouth and the female he is playing with imitates him. The wombat dives into a tunnel she has made and uses her rump to block the dingo attack. The elephant takes a trunkful of the river water and sprays her calf with it. The guinea pig is lovingly stroked by the lonely, only child. As the ox pulls the plow through the field, the farmer walks behind him, scattering seed. The peacock spreads his fan and dances on rain-scented earth, the peahen watching. Horse and man race around the track, their sweat meeting. When the Tasmanian devil lets out a

bloodcurdling wail a dusky robin takes wing. The woman and her seeing-eye dog walk down the street. The calf cries when it is separated from its mother, her milk intended for humans, as is his flesh. An iceberg collides with a ship. The mosquito settles on the baby's arm and draws blood. The buffalo walks through the paddy field, an egret perched on his back. The crane plunges into the water and comes up with a fish in his beak. A jellyfish stings a diver's hand when he collides with it. The female seahorse deposits a thousand eggs in the male's pouch. The tiger cubs chase each other around. The pelicans skim over the surface of the sea waves at high tide. The male cardinal puts a seed into the female's beak. Pressure starts to push veins of magma up towards the cone of the volcano. In the dark, two earthworms mate. The pig climbs on another to keep warm. The Douglas fir and the fungus under its roots exchange nutrients. Water splashes as a pair of sparrows land in the birdbath....

At the pub they lift up their heads and sing out loud, loud and bawdy and bonded. They march in the cold, dim dawn, their thick shoes making hardly any sound on the moist ground. They dance in a circle, to the sound of the drum, their long skirts swishing. The air is electric as they watch the ticker tape, their fingers poised over their keyboards. They pull in the net, heavy with fish, waist deep in water, standing firm as the sea pulls the sand from under their feet. They bring their sticks down, on his head, each taking his turn. In their tiny, old, village church, they attend mass. "Goal!" they shout in unison, as the ball crashes into the net. They sit around the long table, raising their glasses to the newlyweds. They are all focused on the bid; this painting has already crossed the one million mark. They march through the streets, resolute, chanting, some have banners with slogans written on them. They sit at their computers, in their own rooms, from morning till night, playing with their friends through the Internet. The firemen direct their hoses at the burning building. Though they can barely see each other among the tea bushes, they are linked like a fence, as they deftly pick the leaves and toss them into baskets strapped to their backs. They stand in neat rows, as they turn and extend their right hand, always together at six AM, doing Tai Chi.

The humpback whales protect the grey whale calf, lashing the attacking orca with their tails. A flock of Canada geese come down on the wheat field. The bacteria stay ensconced in radioactive waste, thriving. In the pine grove, a set of trees send a message of hope, through a web of minute underground roots, to an undernourished pine. More chemicals seep into the coral reef. The vultures descend near the dead body. The monkey sits on the highest branch, keeping a watch for his sleeping companions. The red ants pass a grain of sugar, from one to the other, in a crooked line. Through the long night the frogs croak, keeping some of the campers awake. The lemurs leap rapidly from tee to tree. The herd

of goats bring the cars to a standstill on the narrow, mountain road. One more plastic bag joins the plastic island floating in the ocean. Five long, hairy pods of soya bean fruit, clustered together, sway in the breeze. The clownfish swim among the tentacles of the sea anemones. (I cannot talk about a tectonic shift, because it takes a very long time, but the plates move infinitesimally in that instant.) Through an underground root system, the spruce trees send carbon to each other. The wind sandblasts the cliff. The bats fly among the plants, pollinating them. Under the new moon, the sea waves swell gigantic....

I'm earthy, you're earthy, we're all earthy, in it together.

## Maria Crooks

### LEAVING

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It was a May night in 1959 and people were gathered in the living room of our house. Funny I can still remember our street address: Calle Cisnero 129. My grandmother was there, my favourite aunt, Tia Felina, who always allowed my sister and me to play in her hair; her daughter Zenaida, whom everyone called Clarita (fair of skin in Spanish), which was ironic because she was very dark; Juanita, my mother's Haitian friend who always had plates of food laid out on an altar in her home for the orishas and saints; Boli, our next door neighbour whose withered right arm dangled uselessly by her side; and her two daughters, China and Yolanda, with whom my sister and I played and fought constantly. There was a story that in her youth Boli would go dancing, and when her partner spun her around the room, the withered arm would swing out wildly and wrap itself around the man's body in a weird involuntary embrace. We used to laugh at the strange image this created in our minds. Despite her handicap, she kept her house spotlessly clean – when sweeping she would wrap her good arm around the broom handle and managed handily, pun intended, to accomplish the task. They and many others were the friends, family, and neighbours who had come to bid us farewell.

I could not see their faces distinctly because the room was dark. There were some oil lamps, but they cast more shadows than light. In their wavering flame people's faces appeared distorted, their silhouettes blotted along the bare walls like shapeless, magnified characters out of a child's fantasy book. The remaining rooms in the house were in total darkness, a sort of no man's land; my parents had sold the house and the electricity had been suspended for the new owners to reinstall.

I observed these people with a longing in my soul, the shadowiness of the room reflecting my feelings accurately. My grandmother was the first to leave; she was an old woman, probably the age I am now. As she said goodbye, I sensed that I would never see her again. I was not close to her and yet...

At some point that night Tia Felina said what no doubt many in the room believed, that we were leaving just when things were finally going to start getting better in Cuba. Cubans had so much hope then and they pinned them all on the

brash young leader who so enchanted them that huge audiences would remain standing in stadiums to listen to his long, frenzied speeches that sometimes lasted eight hours.

It's been 62 years since, but that shadowy sepia-tinted tableau persists in my memory because it was the night my childhood as I knew it was severed. The decision to leave was the right one for my family and I am forever grateful to my parents for making it, and yet...

## Derrilyn Morrison

### CLAUDIA RANKINE: ON SPECTATOR POLITICS IN POSTMODERN USA

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Claudia Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric* (2004) and *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014) both speak to the terror of twenty-first-century culture in the making, as the poet lives it from day to day. Both collections reflect on the media representation of events across the nation, and on the underlying structural bias that hinders the most basic of human interactions. In retrospect, readers are perhaps even more conscious of the timing of these poetic collections, as history has relentlessly projected the will of what passes for mainstream society to silence the voiceless and further disempower the dispossessed in brown and black communities across America. The subtitles, *An American Lyric*, speaks to the public nature of these poetic works and evokes a movement beyond poetic traditions. In *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*—the focus of this essay—the subtitle is a frank declaration that she wishes to touch the heart of the American people. As speaking subject, Rankine offers a poetic *dramalogue* that takes readers on a tour of the postmodern American social landscape, as she performs a lyrical account which gruesomely depicts a society that is already dead on several different levels.

Refusing to take a spectator position on life, Rankine's poetpersona in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* interchanges perspectives on events that unfold in contemporary American society. Through personal recollections of the poetpersona, composed of her lived experiences and the experiences of her community, she creates a mosaic of events which counterpoints the conventional record of mainstream media. Rankine deliberately places images of the televised accounts of the painful experiences of death and dying against the white noise of empty space on the page. Cynthia Dobbs' description of the unifying structure of this collection highlights the "carefully curated images and fragments...blank pages, silent pauses followed by images of mostly static-filled television screens" (174). This manipulation of space, image, and blank page nudges readers into assuming a conscious frame of mind.

The first page of the collection positions a comment from Aimé Césaire, Martinican poet, playwright, and politician, as epigraph at the top of the page. The blank spaces at the bottom of the epigraph merge with the blank spaces three pages over, where there is nothing but white space and, then, at the bottom

of the page, the photo of the black screen on a television set. The entire collection, so structured, reads like a stream-of-conscious representation of the undercurrents driving communal responses to living history. In Rankine's text, the quote from Césaire speaks to the spectator position that social media facilitates. It reads:

And most of all beware, even in thought, of assuming the sterile attitude of the spectator, for life is not a spectacle, a sea of grief is not a proscenium, a man who wails is not a dancing bear....

Framing her collection within Césaire's discourse, Rankine introduces a conversation about the dangers of complacency and unquestioning acceptance of the media's propagations of the lived experience; an experience that becomes mere spectacle for the American society. She questions the attitude that allows the grief of even one individual within a community, referenced here as "a man who wails," to play itself out for the entertainment of gawking onlookers. Furthermore, by rejecting the "sterile attitude of the spectator," the epigraph is encouraging active participation in life, in the making of history.

Rankine's lyrical device, introduced here in the epigraph, and in its layout on the page, aligns readers with the poetpersona who proceeds throughout the collection to contest the media's representation of the docudrama of life unfolding before our very eyes. In the first fragment of writing following the epigraph, the narrator portrays the experience of death or dying as unfamiliar to her from as far back as childhood, and the third grade in school: "people only died on / television" (5). The suggestion is that "death," as an experience, is only real when the media portrays it as an event worthy of mention, a happening or a fact. Another childhood memory in the same fragment counterpoints this idea. The poetpersona notes that there was something distant and foreign about the experience of death even when a family member died, as in the case of the death of her paternal grandmother who lived "back home" in Jamaica. Struck by her father's "aloneness," she says: "I climbed the steps as far away from him as I could get," and then she explains: "His mother was dead. I'd never met her. It meant a trip back home for him. When he returned, he spoke neither about the airplane nor the funeral" (5). The mental and emotional disconnect that the child experienced at that moment frightened her. As a child she was being taught that death is a lonely experience, and the one experiencing this learns to move on without public displays of grief.

Readers experience these two childhood accounts of the death of an individual as a frame within a frame, moving between the inner consciousness and outer consciousness of the poetpersona. Following Césaire's instruction not to "assume a sterile attitude," her poetic collection is a mosaic of grief intended to shock her readers. They cannot maintain complacency but must become

active participants at the events, personal or historical, that the lyrical accounts replay. Conversations in passing; personal interactions with friends, colleagues, neighbors; immediate thoughts and musings that follow televised accounts of social, political, and historical – all are replayed to offer up new ways of linking reality and fiction and history, poetry, and the imagination.

In *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, the collection moves relentlessly forward in a cinematic roll, recreating televised snapshots of news accounts and documentary, forcing the reader to review them critically through the eyes of the poetpersona, to see them anew first as fragments and then as a collective whole. It is hard to drag the eye away from the photoscreen projected by the lyrical *dramalogue*. Rankine's poetpersona recalls to memory the untimely deaths of countless lives that matter to the poet. In the thirty pages that follow her Bush account, she represents American society as being already dead or dying. Rankine's collection criticises "the American fantasy" of life (25) and especially the complacency with which some individuals participate in the wholesale production of culture that the media promote.

American television is depicted as the babysitter of the nation and the purveyor of fantasies. The poet highlights the mindlessness that comes with postponing the moment when we start living; and with ironic humor she points out the false sense of control the television screen gives to viewers, for they can choose life, any life they want, by changing the channel: "YOUR LIFE IS WAITING," says the television screen, the image of which she posts at the bottom of the page (29). This is the attitude, subliminally imposed by the media-driven society, that pushes individuals to step safely around sociopolitical issues as if they do not exist, or as if they do not personally apply. Highlighting this issue, critic Emma Kimberley comments: "The viewing public's openness to certain messages, especially those that can be used to manipulate us, and our unwillingness as an audience to see the conceptual frames within which they are presented, are seen by many American writers as the symptoms of a dangerous tendency toward passive and uncritical spectatorship" (780).

Marking her refusal to participate in this culturalization of social paralysis, the poetpersona's anger grows incrementally from one lyrical fragment to the next in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*. The female body as receptacle for pain dominates the horrifying retailing of history, not just as the media resources archive it, but in the physical embodiment of the poetpersona herself. The memory of events exists long before they are televised, in the pain she has always imbibed and which she describes graphically throughout the collection. She explains it as:

Not quite a caving in, just a feeling of  
bits of my inside twisting away from flesh in the form  
of a blow to the body.

...

Sometimes I look into someone's face and I must brace  
Myself—the blow on its way. (56)

*Don't Let Me Be Lonely* underscores for readers the way the television commercials allow pharmaceutical companies to dominate and destroy the lives of millions of Americans, whom they target during these advertisements. "They advertise in the middle of the night," the poetpersona tells us, "When people are less distracted and capable of tuning in more and more / and most precisely to their fearful bodies and their accompanying anxieties" (29). Between fragments of her words on the page are photographic images of prescription labels with their warning of danger clearly visible. These televised, commercial representations of everyday life are used to highlight the mindlessness that has overtaken Americans, making them easy prey for the state of panic and terror that eventually takes America by surprise.

In a later fragment in the collection, the poetpersona turns her attention to the September 11 (2001) terrorist attack on the World Trade Center which ushers in the twenty-first-century recognition of America's vulnerability by state media. The death toll and its effect on the nation are beyond human imagination. In her reflections on a news interview between a reporter and Rudi Giuliani, then mayor of New York City, Rankine's poetpersona recalls Giuliani saying that the number of dead was "more than we can bear" (81), a comment that she then echoes for its simplicity and truth. She elaborates:

Physically and emotionally, we cannot bear it, should in fact never have this capacity. So, when the number is released, it is a sieve that cannot hold the loss Giuliani recognized and answered for... a moment that allowed his imagination's encounter with death to kneel under the weight of the real (81).

Three days later, in her memory, the poetpersona reviews the site of terror; and as she watches the rescue workers moving the wreckage piece by piece, she thinks to herself how "they shadow the dead" and, as they move among the dead, "are themselves deadened" (82).

Examining the relationship between the world of art and the art of writing the lived experience, Rankine's collection of poems poses questions and hopes that readers will at the very least acknowledge the issues that engendered them. At key moments throughout the collection, readers are made to participate in the poetpersona's act of self-scrutiny in which she examines her reasons for writing about death and loneliness as an individual experience, that marks the social crisis of twenty-first-century America. In the fragment reviewing the death of Amadou Diallo, she explains her purpose in writing this collection. She says:

"The poem is really a responsibility to everyone in a social space...it [is] okay to cramp,

to clog, to fold over at the gut, to have to put hand to flesh, to have to hold the pain, and

then to translate it here. "(57)

Asked about her "relationship" with the landscape which she offers in her poetic *dramalogue*, Rankine responds:

I believe that where we are, how we are allowed to live, is determined by the politics of the land—the big politics and the little politics. And it varies depending on where you're located. I'm very interested in the landscape in general as the site of living, of a place created out of lives, and those lives having a kind of politics and a kind of being that is consciously and unconsciously shaped. Decisions are made that allow us to do certain things, that give us certain freedoms and "unfreedoms" (Rankine, Transcript: "Claudia Rankine in Conversation").

At first approach to *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, readers are overwhelmed with the chaotic feel of the text. There appears to be a subconscious force gathering bits and pieces of materials from every sphere of our lives, things we toss away lightly as refuse, but which the poet uses as building materials. This fragmentary experience takes readers on a journey through a frightful world where light and hope no longer dwell. Speaking on her multigenre approach to the work, Rankine opines that as a poet she has the right to include material from "all the bits of [her] life when she needs it." The act is as natural as living:

[T]here's no conscious sense that I'm engaging in this because I will use it later. You're just living it. You just happened to see it on television, you just happened to see it in the paper, and you just happened to have read that book and loved it. And I think, on some level, all of those things must have touched me in some way, because they did come back to me. So, on some level, I connect with everything that I end up using (Rankine, Transcript: "Claudia Rankine in Conversation").

In the closing pages of the book, Rankine comments on the importance of paying attention to the linguistic structure of the work: "I tried to fit language into the shape of usefulness" (129), she says, as she laments the way the "world" (readers everywhere) tend to ignore what they refuse to acknowledge, so that they "move through words as if the bodies / the words reflect did not exist" (129). Poets and writers outside of mainstream literary or cultural circles are conscious of this behaviour that excludes them, even when they are anthologised as belonging. Rankine offers the collection of poems in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* as a handshake, a gesture that affirms the individual's dignified presence. Citing Paul Celan's theoretical discourse on poetry, she explains, "The handshake is our decided ritual of asserting (I am here) and hand- / ing over (here) a self to another. Hence the poem is that—Here. I am here. [...] Here both recognizes and

demands recognition” (131-32). The collection closes with a sense of goodwill, of hope that readers will reach out a hand to receive the gift; a gift not sought yet extended.

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## BOOK REVIEWS

## Robert Edison Sandiford

Knowing What Matters: *Harriet's Daughter* (by M. NourbeSe Philip, Toronto: The Women's Press, 1988) and Other Issues

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One of the first books I gave my daughter to read during our first COVID-19 lockdown in March 2020 was *Harriet's Daughter*. M. NourbeSe Philip's 1988 classic young adult novel about useful legacies and the resilience of teenage friendship among girls had been in my library for some time.

Not necessarily for Aeryn; well, not for her initially. But as part of a series of books in bookcases between Canada and Barbados that include writers long of interest or importance to me.

I've been sampling Philip's poetry in Donna Bailey Nurse's *Revival: An Anthology of Black Canadian Writing* (2006). "Salmon Courage" is about the great and possibly unreasonable expectations of a father for his daughter. Told from the daughter's perspective—"My scales shed, I am Admiral red,/ but he, my salmon father, will not/ accept that I too am salmon,/ whose fate it is to swim against the time,/ whose lodestar is to be salmon."—the piece helps me to relate.

I ask Aeryn again for her impressions of *Harriet's Daughter*.

I get the reticent response of a teen.

"Good," she reminds me, stretching the word the way Bajans can to make a syllable into two, a calypso cadence.

She's now reading *Redemption in Indigo* by Karen Lord, a speculative fiction narrative inspired by a Senegalese folk tale. It's also "Good" when I enquire how that novel's going.

It has been a time to read or reread. Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, Malorie Blackman's *Noughts & Crosses*, Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War*—each has been Aeryn's first encounter. During the height of the pandemic, when we all seemed to have become bakers, I was revisiting *Comfort Me with Apples*, Joe Fiorito's collection of food columns that's as filled with fine recipes as delicious storytelling.

If only there were more such days.

I'm not talking about pandemics or lockdowns, curfews delineated by curtilage. These all end. I mean time to read: but to read with her, alongside her, after her, and still, even at the age of soon-to-be-sixteen, to her.

We sometimes do have something resembling a conversation about the books. Sometimes, I get to learn what's so "*good*" when Aeryn allows me to tease it out of her.

It's the shifting points of view in Blackman. How Cormier turns confusion into conflict. Characterization in Philip carried her. Much the same way the familiarity of the Caribbean Sea called to her in Hemingway.

This is what I want to hear about, what I want always to have time to hear about: what matters to her.

Like baking—which we do together from time to time, orange cakes and shortbread cookies (Fiorito's recipe!)—books help. So does more time to read. We're trying to keep it going, well after the lockdowns, which will probably be with some of us awhile yet (most prominently China and South Korea at present) as the world finds its way to healing. At least from that assault.

What literature will Russia's invasion of Ukraine make us reach for? A vintage Oxford University Press edition of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* already rests to the left of my desk, between books by Roberto Bolaño, Ann-Marie MacDonald and Salman Rushdie....

Life sometimes feels like those Capital One credit card commercials, the ones with Samuel L. or Jennifer Garner. But instead of "What's in your wallet?" I'd be asking, "What's in your home library? What's on your bookstand? What's that you're reading? What are you really sharing with your friends and family, your neighbour or would-be enemy?"

Right now, at this moment, faced with another year of living dangerously in the first half of the twenty-first century, knowing what matters to us never seemed to matter so much.

## H. Nigel Thomas

The Changing Same: A Review of M. NourbeSe Philip's *Bla\_K: Essays & Interviews* (Toronto: Book\*hug), 2017, 337 pp.

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*Bla\_K* can be described for the most part as a miscellany of previously published essays and letters taken from *Frontiers: Essays and Writings on Racism and Culture* (1992); *Showing Grit: Showboating North of the 44<sup>th</sup> Parallel*; and *A Genealogy of Resistance and Other Essays* (1997). A couple of the essays, "On Michael Coren: Amnesia and the Everyday Embrace of Racism and Sexism" and "Riding the Bus with Rosa in Morocco," are first-time publications. To most of the republished essays Philip adds a coda that updates the reader about the issues explored in the essay.

The title *Bla\_K* is intriguing. Philip offers an explanation for choosing it in a subsection of "Jammin' Still," her introductory essay to the collection: "Some readers may be inclined to read the title as Bla K; it is both *Blank* and *Bla\_k*. *Bla k*, the colour of the ever-expanding universe whose apparent blankness belies the plenitude of black holes, stars . . ." (26). More interesting is the latter part of her explanation: "Bla k, a word we fled from, hiding in coloured, in light-, brown- or fair-skinned, in shabine and brownin', until we embraced it in all its power" (26). This reflection, as careful readers of Philip's works would know, continues her preoccupation with the theme of erasing Blackness.

For this reviewer, the value of this book is that it sent me back to reading the essays. Much like it did for Philip, as she crafted codas to them, it made me reflect on the issues the essays explored and the extent to which those issues endure or have been corrected. Interesting scenarios emerge. One is the Royal Ontario Museum's apology to African Canadians in 2016 for its "Into the Heart of Africa" exhibition in 1989 (*Toronto Star*, November 9, 2016). The opposition to that exhibit placed African Canadians in a firestorm of racism from the white media, including the state broadcaster, the CBC. Philip's essay on the exhibit, "Museum Could Have Avoided Culture Clash," along with "Disturbing the Peace" (or what I would call "The Encounter with June Callwood") as well as her highlighting the exclusion of Blacks from arts funding elicited hostility from the Canadian literary establishment. (I was privy to that: I had requested that my publisher ask her to blurb my first novel, and when it wasn't acted upon I was told long after the fact that she was someone to be avoided.) That opprobrium culminated with Michael Coren's on-air vitriolic attack on her. She relates it here in her essay "On Michael Coren: Amnesia and the Everyday Embrace of Racism and Sexism." (Coren too

has undergone a metamorphosis and suffered his own backlash for challenging the hegemonic structure he once defended. See “From Bigotry to Benevolence: the Conversion of Michael Coren,” CBC Radio, February 3, 2019.)

One area where there have been changes is in the functioning of the various arts councils; from being all-white they are now ethnically diverse. Most recently, Jesse Wente of the Anishinaabe nation was named to head the Canada Council for the Arts. Will this amount to more than window dressing?

Philip quotes J. M. Coetzee on the superstructure of the publishing industry. It could be argued that the publishing industry has further consolidated. A handful of publishing houses and their literary agents control the portals of publishing and open them to a handful of new writers, a few of whom admittedly are non-white. However, as the print and electronic media drastically reduce the space for literature and as the number of readers shrink, there is fierce competition among authors and publishers for both.

*Bla\_K* is a timely book. Racial discrimination against Blacks is again claiming our attention as both oppressors and oppressed are forced to examine the issues arising from police brutality against Blacks and other manifestations of pernicious systemic racism. *Bla\_K* will help those contending with these issues to get a deeper insight into racism’s hydra heads.

(This review was written in 2020. Since then, in 2021, M. NourbeSe Philip received the Canada Council John Molson Prize for the Arts.)

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