

ti-TCR 20

a web folio



on collective care

Cover: Kristin Bjornerud, *Ghosts (Tender Medicine)*, 2023, watercolour and gouache on paper adhered to wooden panel, 48.26 x 53.34 cm. Photo by Paul Litherland, Studio Lux.

I come back
to wanting—

I want this poem to lower mother's voice, to return
the love I traded

for hurt

— Preeti Kaur Dhaliwal

The Capilano Review / *ti*-TCR 20

- 5 Editor's Note
- 6 **Belén Rios Sialer**
Remain Loving
- 7 **Leah CL**
Carefree Twenties I, II, III
- 10 **Dora Prieto**
Three Poems
- 14 **Christina Hajjar**
Edging in the Abyss
- 21 **Sneha Subramanian Kanta**
Two Poems
- 23 **Jasper Wrinch**
A Withering Fox
- 26 **Kristin Bjornerud**
From the series *The Fragile and Uncertain Hour*
- 30 **Amanda Hiland**
Residents Asked to Turn Off Lights as Birds Migrate North
- 32 **Mark Foss**
"Tiny raindrops to open my protesting heart": On Spoon Jackson, Art,
and Survival in Prison
- 38 **Alysha Mohamed**
Three Poems
- 42 **Preeti Kaur Dhaliwal**
Three Poems
- 47 **Penn Kemp**
Five Poems
- 54 Contributors

ti-TCR 20: On Collective Care is an exploration of the dynamics of grief and care inside communal spaces. As citizens living within frameworks of Western imperialism, we are often compelled—at times through ideology, and at times through overt uses of force—to abandon communalism for individualism, empathy for apathy, as a way of substituting the capital relation in place of the diverse interpersonal relationships that sustain us. We have seen the effects of this alienating substitution exacerbated by recent world events: the decades of inaction on climate policy; the divisive and isolating rhetoric around COVID denial; the ongoing genocide in Gaza that is being carried out by our governments without our consent and in spite our ongoing protests.

This web folio examines the potential of art and writing to be a potent antidote to this estrangement. Belén Ríos Sialer expresses this desire within the opening stanza of the folio: “Last week I heard a writer say, I am tired of being funny. I’m tired of being curious. I want to make people feel.” There is an intrinsic understanding in these works that art serves a purpose beyond individualistic self-expression—that art can expand our capacity for empathy and care, and further, activate tangible forms of community-building.

Sneha Subramanian Kanta suggests that we are mirrors to the care and dissonance present within our lives, writing: “To love / means to belong to the world as much / as un-belong.” The works collected in this issue investigate notions of shared responsibility and invite the reader to bring intention to how we nurture networks of care interpersonally and artistically. “I am brimming with the solace of surrender,” Christina Hajjar writes, articulating the power of language to alchemize grief and isolation, “the reverence of leaning in and seeping out.” Why write poetry during the apocalypse, if not for the hope of a kinder world?

—Emma Jeffrey

Remain loving

Last week I heard a writer say, *I am tired of being funny.*
I'm tired of being curious. I want to make people feel. Joy
is your mannerism, hand gestures, laugh hidden in your last breath
as a cough.

I feel nothing on my least favourite days. But then people
knock on my door, *may I come inside?* People hold so much
love. You are so full of love. *Don't tell me what I can or can't be.*
I am not commanding. I am just asking.
It's a question. Open-ended. You're *so* full of love
aren't you?

On my second-to-least favourite day, I call my mom crying. She says there is so
much to be grateful for. I realize so much has lost its meaning of quantity. When I
hug my friends, my fingertips whisper, *do you feel loved by me?*

To the strangers: *thanks for holding the door, which floor?*
For the eye contact that slams me open to realize I need to exist
not only by imagination. Thanks for not letting me dissolve.

To my friends, *I can't wait to see you, this picture made me think of you,*
let me carry your bag for you, let me know when you get home safe.
My hometown is your lips opened calling my name.

In case you need me
text, call, set a prayer, light a candle
throw a letter in a bottle, tell the ocean *to: the ocean*
throw the bottle, break the glass
let it roar once or twice before midnight
but it is always midnight somewhere
text me layers of how you feel
let me melt into your words
let me say I love you
and hear you say good night

Carefree Twenties I, II, III

Carefree Twenties I

This is the age
When we cook more food
Than we have plates for

When we gather in apartments, feeding
Cigarette butts to city garbage on the way in

When we pile coats on the floor because there is no closet

This is the age
When we start to feel
The effect of the drink

When we have a feeling one day
And it's gone the next
Or else it stays forever

This is the age
When our friends are getting married
When some clichés hold true
When we've seen enough dicks to know how we feel about them

This is the age
When we sit on subway steps
Arm around coat-covered shoulders
Waiting for the sobs to subside

This is the age when people die
Because everyone dies

But this is the age when we start to notice

I have puked in alleys before
I have done that
I have smoked to the end of the pack and still wanted more
I have wailed and I have sobbed and I have stared straight ahead

You were in those alleys
You gave me that pack
In each of my wails you held
My bag and rubbed my sobs
And now it is I
While you stare straight ahead
Who has your back

By the time I was out of rehearsal
(The winter air crisp like fall used to be)
S had hurt her face falling down
Last night
And later near the space for art
In 3 p.m. light
I had to tell K I did the same except without the
Fall
And this was right after M got evicted and my heart felt shrivelled
And orange
When she cried on the phone
But we did what we could
And she wouldn't
Miss eggs and pancakes.
Do you have what it takes?

Three Poems

Instructions for celebrating my life in the spring

Make someone uncomfortable by laughing or crying in the wrong grief moments. Remember: death is not silent, life is silent. Skip the hugs. Sit in the garden and smoke. (Now is a great time to take up smoking). Feel the hum of life in the garden rise up your body and consider the future memory of your own death; feel it hum in the material of your body, the molecules around you. Make plans for your posthumous material and write them into a free, online will service. Sleep too little, take sleep aids. Even though you've started to see the end in all things, seek a beginning or two: a new walk, a new taste, a new way to say spring is here. When you have finally finished remembering everything, look out the window. Get up, unlock the doors, fill in the tunnels in the living room—leave behind those details of your life that can't be cured. Text an ex to see if they want to catch up, not for romance, but to reencounter yourself, again, anew. Get tulips for your new table in your new life with the filled-in tunnels and remember how they're my favourite with their big sagging heads and succulent stems. Encounter yourself, again, anew.

poem that isn't ready yet

a handful of earth
 my original home is a photograph

the things we wish to leave
 unsaid

bone, nylon
 a vague threat of violence

a coarse farm brush



the dark aisle of Dressew

everyone who's
 missing

a shift in scale
 jacarandas, buganvilia

the last hug

“Latinas keep a lot of stuff hidden”¹

oh go off, persimmon

correlations, migrations

today I tried to get it all down on paper, but it scattered in my hands
 I will try again tomorrow

¹ *RuPaul's Drag Race*, season 15, episode 12.

me & my girls

after Reticulárea Cuadrada, Gego

metal, letters, syntax, sonnet, grid, pliers

let them fall through my net

let them be caught in my net

me & my girls are sad in the grid

we sip Colombiana & talk net under God

we're learning survival as metal on metal

rain, pliers, thrashing on the silvery dancefloor

"It's in your blood," say the men we dance with

we understand that this is supposed to help

our bodies are mean, our bodies break

a break is an opportunity for possibility

we sleep off the sonnet in the grid

wire-cut kisses dot our collarbones in the

grid grid

grid grid

God holds us up but also holds us down

his is a net we could be caught in

in our small portion of the Greater Plot

we wiggle to avoid getting gridded

syntax holds us up but also holds us down

it's everywhere, our hips sway, so are we

steel rods, metal joints, blood drawn, fabric bent

Edging in the Abyss

1.

Bodies activated. Bodies, a shape-changing storage room. My body is an endless fragmented story to uncover and reorganize. Multiple layers of violence, loss, and expectation are projected onto the body and handed down through generations. We are so porous, we can slip in and out of place and time. Sometimes I have no body. Bodying. To be a part of something. There is an overemphasis on penetration; bodies are translation; that is, bodies are not about filling holes, but about expunging from them. Puke and shit. Body as translation. Body as archive and archivist; gathering materials. Obsession with what enters the body.

Porous: (Of a rock or other material) having minute spaces or holes through which liquid or air may pass. Not retentive or secure.

The penetrated body is in crisis. Albeit archive and archivist, it struggles to hold and be held. Making language to make a bed, a place to dwell.

Lina Mounzer:

Of course I believe in language and its importance, even for survival! It's probably one of the few things I believe in without question or doubt. I come back, again and again, to Mahmoud Darwish's *Memory for Forgetfulness*, written about and from within the Israeli invasion and bombardment of Beirut in 1982. I look to it as a handbook on writing about war in many ways. In the book, Darwish expresses repeatedly the desire for "a language that I can lean on and that can lean on me, that asks me to bear witness and that I can ask to bear witness."¹

1 Lina Mounzer, in conversation with Mirene Arsanios, "[Writing in Crisis: A Conversation Between Beirut and New York](#)," *Lithub.com*, September 1, 2020.

2.

I ease my way out the door to walk the crying dog. The smell of heat makes it worth it and the sun always helps to sort things out.

Last night I asked habibi about Lebanon. She said we have nothing to compare it to in physical life. The power that went out the night before—only wifi lost. Across the street, no power at all and it's hardly a semblance. This is diaspora. Last family meal, I asked about Lebanon. Mom said she had one hour of electricity a day growing up. Her numbness grows my frustration.

I am in a constant motion of thinking about my thoughts. It is exhausting. Like the dog at the window sill ready to go off. Everyday I spell the bones of poems that will never meet their flesh. No essay. No photograph. No film. No collaboration.

The smell of summer is tinged with smoke. When the musk is not making it difficult to breathe, it is a ripe undertone awaiting its fervent decay. The sound of mowing lawns tricks my mind to forget about the smell of garbage. My dog investigates. My stomach hurts. What reverence does the sky hold today?

An image is just an image. What empathy may my skin bear? I am sick with longing and want Beirut back.

Sarah Rifky:

What is this writing? I wonder... We write it, because it helps us understand the world with the aid of narrative. Naming a curious incident allows it to be less strange. It contains it, in a word, a little box, labeled Curious Incidents. When I read news reports about current events, I wonder if there is a cache of feeling, a daily quota of empathy, that if used up too quickly leaves us devoid of feeling for days to come. Reading the news drains us of our empathy. Writing is restorative. There are more texts being written than ever before and more than will ever be read. Writers are not the diary keepers of uprisings, and even the best writing is corrupt, it steals time from other things, like making soup with filmmakers.²

2 Sarah Rifky, *The Going Insurrection / Der gehende Augstand*, 100 Notes—100 Thoughts (DOCUMENTA (13), 2012), 8.

3.

Let the record show, I did not go to work but I worked. I have been fired from so many jobs. Now I am chilling and doing freelance. I grow wiser. I grow more and more into a state-hating bitch. I write mental elegies and light the joint. I freefall. I am building a vision of myself in you. When I walk the dog, I take pictures of antiracist posters defaced in the neighbourhood. I find my FREE PALESTINE posters torn down. In the presence of absence, I point my sentimental lens. Today I found one, cradled in the grass. Shook down by weeks of wind and rain. A soft miracle. Yet even natural death is violent.





4.

Most days, walking is easier than writing. When I finally get outside, the effort becomes well worth it. Like as a child when I refused to shower. Writing is a false presence. No, writing is in motion. I write because I do not have words. Where does the artist/writer/curator turn? Multitudes of expression clowning for mere indecision. Co-star tells me I'm a non-verbal thinker and I feel seen.

My baby rests his head on my legs as I type. He rests his head and I count the years of his too-short life, always grieving with anticipated loss. I am learning to say goodbye because I am no good at goodbyes. I am learning to say goodbye because I know what it is like to not have the chance.

I buy countless books and read none of them. I buy bagged salad and it grows rotten in the fridge. The sunrise is putrid with the morning breath of regret. We all know growing wiser is a tired disillusionment. All my favourite people are bitter and even astrology betrays me.

The dog crying at the door. The cutest, most annoying sound.

5.

Sawako Nakayasu:

Say what is the smallest unit of translation, say word, say syllable, say phoneme, say orthography, say handwriting, say breath, say particle of thought preceding articulation. Say what is the largest unit of translation, say poem, say book, say all the books, say everything they ever wrote, say everything they never wrote, have yet to write, say the transit between everything they ever wrote and everyone who ever reads anything they ever wrote, or say something larger more vast.³

I can feel you trying to reach me, and I want to know what you are trying to say. My self-swaddle loosens its grip for your attention and affection. I shapeshift into a vessel of infinite starry nights, awaiting your grace. It's all here. We are looking for a language that already exists. The immortality of translation makes it so. No nihilism may survive the rushing waters of this plenitude. I am brimming with the solace of surrender, the reverence of leaning in and seeping out—that I might live another day to gaze at the altitude of desire, beyond the gardens of grief at my shore.

3 Sawako Nakayasu, *Say Translation Is Art* (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2020).

The first section of this text was written in a *C Magazine* workshop entitled “Perverse Conversions: A Workshop on Criticism, Translation, and Play,” during a one-on-one free-writing exercise in which Hajjar's partner read from Julietta Singh's *No Archive Will Restore You*. All photos courtesy of the author (2021).

Two Poems

Learning Silence

These days, I'm learning
the quality of silence—

(then these real spaces
in an unreal expanse)

an Air Canada pilot
captures the growing
wildfires in BC

over a vacuum appears
the burnt wing-edge
of a butterfly

tell me the world
is an insect
over circumferences

of burning lights, its
conspicuous suturing

of grayblue mixed
from early gloam

our minds go on tracing
nothing inconceivable,

then

whose hands have
made this world?

for Harsh

Forget absentia. How many times do our paths
cross before you seek me and I seek you?
Syllogisms in our holy book: when we walk among
the wildflowers forgetting grief for a temporal
moment amid sungreen patches sprout from earth,
the turmeric-ether cumuli rouses

everything smells of promise and tomorrow
at a time when we could not imagine it. Touch
my pulse, we incline towards tomorrow's history.
To be beautiful means to hold grace, elevate its
liquidity in a deciduous expanse. Years later,

leaves from the cherry trees will begin to
fall mid-summer, and every visitor will
leave. We can now stay longer, witness
petals drape the entrance. Beloved, the
fruiting sky is closest to us again like

when we were among Valparai hills 1,500
metres above sea level. Our first memory of
snow membranes a damp moon. Tomorrow, I
lean into the sunlight and touch

indivisible fragments. Your hands pull me like
the beginning of a sea. To love means to belong
to the world as much as un-belong, watch every
bristlecone and grasp a high altitude.

The metonymy of distance is a secret exchange like the
first flower would have bloomed without witness, and how
ectothermic animals assimilate sunlight. After five years, we
will arrive in a rainforest and the songbirds will invoke

swallowtail-ochre flowers, tulips and marigolds will bilge
soil after the storm. A woodpecker will continuously
chip against the bark of a tree, then the bird and I will
communicate through ambits of sound. To love means
to weld and cultivate. Even geography is made of bones.

A Withering Fox

I've been watching the mountains through the power lines. Snow sticking to the tips as May rolls in. Hazy with rain falling in sheets. A blanketing of late spring keeps the air too cold for blossoming. To be waiting to wander up, to elevate and be at the line where trees grow short and thin, and rock stays exposed year-round. A lichen on a moonscape, with a twinkling below. Better off this way than that, I say as I face a white-capped ocean of scarp and scrambles. I've been thinking about, but not really digging into a pristine beach, somewhere else far. Snow drifting into the water. A bottle tipped into glacial blue, not minding the sediment released from the last millennium's grasp. The milk of a time before a twinkling. Before that thin metallic purple lay over it all. Before a brick could be vacuumed out of the air. And to feel within the clouded slopes, away from a haze. Un-sinking. But the snow sits still on the mountain top as May rolls out. The air is cold down here. I've been watching an un-lipped basketball court flood before noon rolled around. A wetness seeping through the resistance. Pavement rippling, just after a highway was erased from the banks. Yet valleys are still to be filled to the brim in the name of sustainability. A tree can only do so much as to let us know it was here first, before a cone is propped onto the stump, as if we can't parse what a pile of wood chips really means next to orange paint slashed across the grassed boulevard. Seeing a beach splayed out and roasting and listening to a fox tell me that to be moving is the only way to survive. That we are fast becoming foxes, and the air is warming up around us faster than we can accommodate, but it's cold down here, and a feeling of seeing snow sticking still to the mountain tops, then by noon, crisp deep blue on the horizon. My vision shakes. I've been blinking at a pool of rainwater growing faster than a storm drain knows how to do its one job. A sinkhole opens beneath the cobbles, and no one does anything until Monday morning. One hundred days of water, washed away for want of an available machine. A chance to be making amends, but the valley is still filled to the brim. We all have to eat. To pay attention to the hues of leaves, boughing across. Watching yellow, so sharp it could pierce through the eye, settle into the shaded greens. But even the fruits are confused. The air is too hot. The dusting a mist now. I've been trying to make a pile of what I need in my life, and I'm left with a phone that is evading charge, a plastic card that lets the world know I haven't made the move away from dirty oil money flowing into my supposed retirement, a small set of keys, and shoes that just recently started making my feet bleed. I stood and watched a seal, nostrils opening and closing

like eyes blinking at me. The breath bursting into a foam on the surface of the bay. How smoothly they fly in the water. A sense of not belonging anywhere as well as the seal belongs in that bay, on those barnacles just outside the breakwater. I've been asking for ways out, or rather just to absentee myself. But that abjuration is only making it worse, speeding up the bluing of mountain tops. To be settling in for a quick rest, watching freighters from afar just idle in port, and trying to count up containers and divide up how many more motes of sediment won't be packed away, but flow into my tipped bottle. It will all have settled at the mouth of the river by then. A dam, a metallic purple, flooding the valley from which we've all decided to eat. But who really has a choice in the matter? Should I have chained myself to a tree? Set myself aflame on the steps of an important building? Sprinkled wildflower seeds on every spare square of soil in hopes of beautifying an urban coffin, and hope the bees might not all end up dead on my windowsill? Should I be shouting at the car that didn't look and bent my bicycle wheel? Or throwing cigarette butts back into parked cars, to at least keep something contained? I haven't a clue, so this absenteeism takes over me, this apathy, this abdication of a desire to keep moving. But a fox dies when it stops moving. I haven't seen any blackened tubs first hand. I want to know how it feels to be up and hot and down, but I can't seem to get the fingers moving fast enough to capture anything of the sort. To be next to a million activists and to sink to the bottom. To be settling into a dam, and scraped away after an inter-governmental coalition decides there are financial reasons to keep pulling fish out of a warming sea. That tailings can be remediated with time and subsidy. That a quarry is fine to sit and fester when costs go up and prices go down. That a tree is the value of its boards. I've been jumping around, but then again, so has the caribou whose life was cut through by power lines that aren't going to be used by anyone but a machine boring through the earth in search of gold that is more valuable as a figment than an object. But they are only wooden poles. I settle into a disbelief. I've been wanting to write a novel about the ways in which a town has the opportunity to devolve into rivalry and political posturing, to erupt into dispute and argument over how the future of it will be, and battle out a better world for themselves and the trees and the caribou and the stream water and the foxes running. But I can't write any narrative other than the town weighing its options, deciding what it needs, what it doesn't, what it's willing to sacrifice, and what it will gain, and then settling into a grey area for the route forward. Where gold remains in the ground under their feet, but is bored and blasted from the mountain not too far away. Where a job is as important as a stream being mercury-free at some point in the next fifty years. To be shocked at the moderation with which we go about our lives. We know things now. I think we know it's not going to be a good thing for the earth. But what is not a good thing for the earth can be a good thing for a neighbour. And who am I to tell you that you shouldn't eat? I've been thinking up incomplete stories, fables with no ending.

A film about the party at which it is screened, catching up to the moment, a breaking point, then a flash. A fire that burns off the skin. I remember driving through dark waterfalls for hours, watching red and blue lights flash from around a rocky corner, then flash past. How can a warning be perceived if that language doesn't fit? I saw what a layer of smoke does to the morale of a city, and I fear for the future we are heading toward. A crisp salt air pummelling the concrete. A chance never to see the lower half of a face again. An overturned cow, floating on the buoyancy built up from within, as a leisure kayak paddles around. The smell of a billion shells opened and roasting, broth rinsing sweat away. But the jellyfish don't sing anymore. Or never really did. That in looking for a glass-shattering voice, I will be left wanting and unable to perceive a pigeon sitting in a tree, dove-like and gleaming in the late June sunshine. That dew shouldn't be frozen this late on. That a telephone pole has no business being swept down three rivers to the ocean without some surrealism abounding. And still, this is not to be seen as anything but an anomaly. To be cold in the hot air. To be enamoured by the colour of a traffic circle in May, but feel alienated from the feeling of salal chest high and holding you still. I've been wanting to sink deep into that sea of sword fern, and let the verdancy swallow me. To be transformed into the red rot, into the loam that has always been here. Scratching my arms to the point of blood in trying to pull blackberry out of huckleberry groves, and clearing a small square of Mediterranean hillside so broom won't sprout until next week. A feeling of bark gaining texture under my palm. A strange calm that surrounds disaster. A withdrawal. A stillness. A withering fox.

From the series *The Fragile and Uncertain Hour*



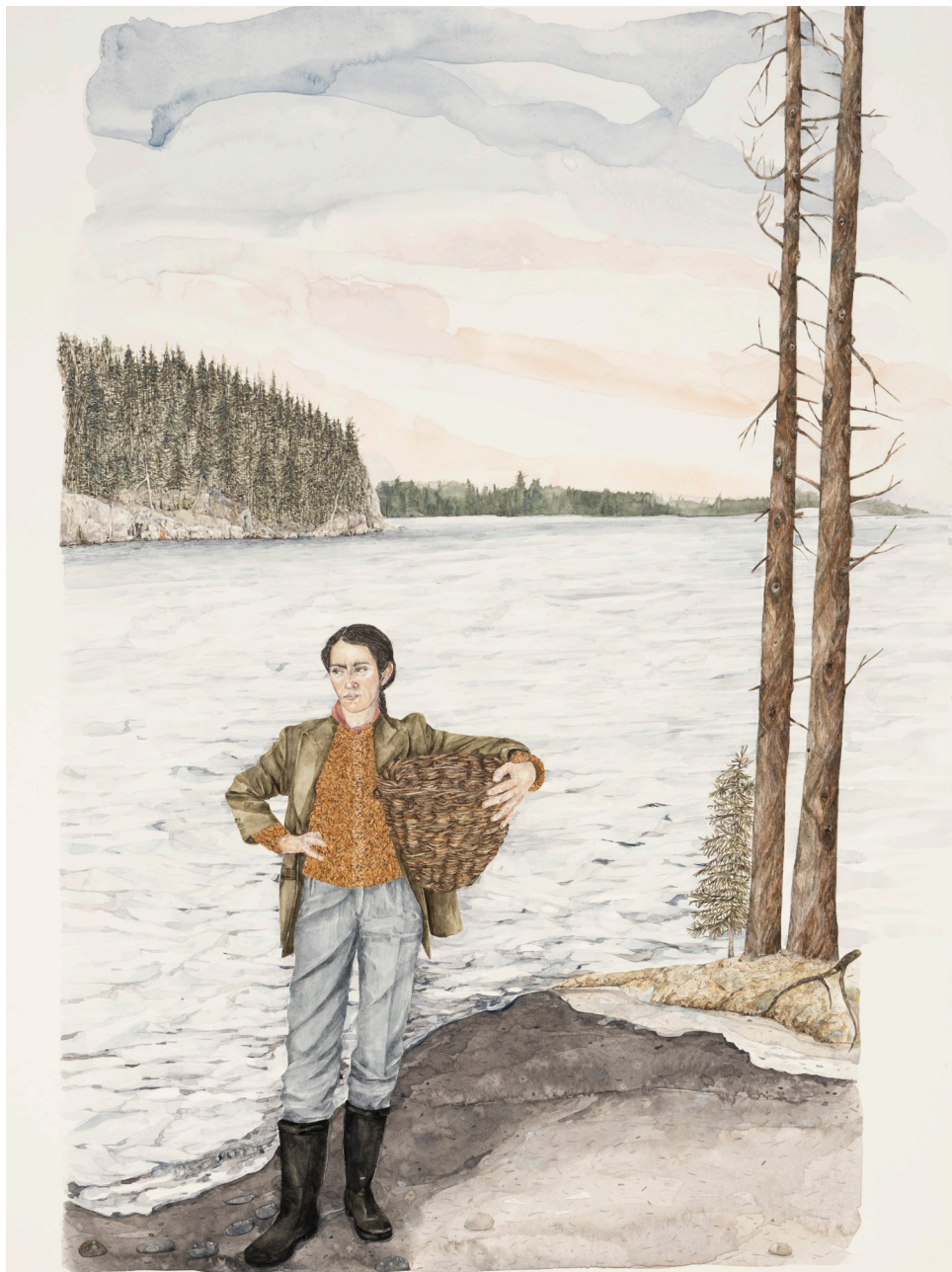
Our Brief Moment, 2023, watercolour and gouache on paper adhered to wooden panel, 48.26 x 53.34 cm. Photo by Paul Litherland, Studio Lux.



Wisdom, 2023, watercolour and gouache on paper adhered to wooden panel, 48.26 x 53.34 cm. Photo by Paul Litherland, Studio Lux.



Foraging (Hold Everything Dear), 2024, watercolour and gouache on paper adhered to wooden panel, 48.26 x 53.34 cm. Photo by Paul Litherland, Studio Lux.



The Narrowing Hours, 2024, watercolour and gouache on paper adhered to wooden panel, 48.26 x 53.34 cm.
Photo by Paul Litherland, Studio Lux.

Amanda Hiland

Residents Asked to Turn Off Lights as Birds Migrate North

You can't see them at night, but the sky is full of birds.

—*Bob Sallinger*

For them,
let us make the earth a mirror of the sky,
not a blazing soup of light
that stuns, that disorients.
Just pinpricks, distant candles
bedded in a sable wash of night.

Piping plover, roseate tern, cerulean warbler, Chatham albatross, blue-crowned laughingthrush—

For these species we may never see,
apart from weekly news bites
as they are placed on endangered lists,
let us make our nights dark as asphalt
so they can navigate smog-blurred skies
until they reach a place where moonlight
lies soft over clear lakes, where birdsong
sweetens the morning breeze.
We hope such a place still exists.

Whooping crane, Bengal florican, northern bald ibis, balearic shearwater, willow flycatcher—

As the globe warms, let us dampen
the glare of our fluorescence
so they can fly on urgent wings
away from summer's swelter;
each year the hottest on record.

Hooded grebe, sociable lapwing, grasshopper sparrow, northern curlew, storm petrel, snowy owl—

Turn off your lights. Let the darkness
come in from its long estrangement.
Speak aloud their names
like an invocation against empty skies.
Fall asleep under a night that ripples
with journeying wings;
feel their downdraft as
a breeze upon your dreams.

“Tiny raindrops to open my protesting heart”: On Spoon Jackson, Art, and Survival in Prison



A Joshua Tree in the Mojave Desert near Barstow, California, where Spoon Jackson grew up.

In July 2017, a few days after my wife Michka passed away from illness, the poet Spoon Jackson called with condolences. The two of them had made a documentary together in 2015 called *Spoon*.¹ I had worked on the film, driving Michka and her crew around the Mojave Desert in California, but I had never met Spoon. It didn't matter. He knew I was suffering and reached out from prison with words of comfort. Since that day, through a regular exchange of spoken and written words, we have sustained—in our own way—the dialogue he had begun with Michka.

Michka Saäl, born in Tunisia, spent her formative years in France before immigrating to Québec in the late 1970s. With films like *Far from Where?* (1989) and *The Sleeping Tree Dreams of its Roots* (1992), she brought an immigrant sensibility to Québec cinema. Some called her “The Queen of Exile,” but she preferred to see her work through the lens of what she called “art and survival.”

1 *Spoon*, directed by Michka Saäl (Independent, 2015), 65 min. www.michkasaal.com/spoon-en.

Certainly, for Spoon, the creative act is existential. In 1977, at the age of twenty and barely literate, he was sentenced to life without possibility of parole in California state prisons. Soon enough, a chance encounter with a teaching artist named Judith Tannebaum introduced Spoon to poetry. With Judith as his mentor, Spoon became enraptured with reading and writing, using words to discover and rediscover worlds inside and out.

In his poem “Look Away,” Spoon writes: “It took a life sentence / to show me how to live.”²

In print, Spoon’s poems, stories, essays, and articles have appeared in newspapers, journals, books, and anthologies. In 2010, Tannenbaum edited and published his first collection of poems, *Longer Ago*. That same year, New Village Press published their joint memoir *By Heart: Poetry, Prison and Two Lives*. Friends maintain Facebook and Instagram pages and a website for Spoon known as the Realness Network. Over telephone and Zoom, he teaches poetry to young students. He was a producer for *Uncuffed* (2019-20), a radio show and podcast that interviews inmates about their personal stories.³ His words have also been set to music by Ani DiFranco and others, and been the subject of several films.



"Red Light, Green Light": In Michka Saäl's film *Spoon*, dance sequences evoke the inner landscape of Spoon Jackson.

2 Spoon Jackson and Nicolas Snyder, “Look Away,” track 1 on *No Moon*, Freer Records, 2024.

3 See www.kalw.org/show/crosscurrents/2019-03-11/yoga-is-an-equalizer-at-solano-prison.

Michka saw her film *Spoon* as a poetic and political exchange imprinted on the dunes of the Mojave Desert and her interior landscapes. For all their essential differences—he, a Black American, she a Sephardic Jew—they both believed art offered consolation to heal trauma. She once said, “I see *Spoon* as a tentative answer to a question I still ask myself: does writing poetry erase steel bars, defy time, justify survival, and create space for inner freedom?”

Michka could not get permission to film inside the state prison. Instead, drawing on Spoon’s letters and countless recorded telephone calls, she constructed a film around states of absence. Black and white sequences—often with dancers—evoke Spoon’s inner world, while scenes in colour bear witness to how time is eroding his memories. The street where he grew up in Barstow, California, has been overtaken by sand. Images of the California desert are set against an arabesque soundtrack by tenor saxophonist Ricky Ford, further melding the Mojave and the Sahara.

In his poem “Where I Am From,” Spoon writes: “Black railroad bridge runs / Heavy across the dry river / I lie under it at noon / as trains pass and watch shadows merge into art.”⁴

In the three years following Michka’s passing, I completed two unfinished films and self-published a collection of her autofiction. I presented her final films at festivals in Montréal, Toronto, France, and England, and helped support homages to her work where I could. Whenever I introduced the film *Spoon*, I shared Spoon’s greetings and answered questions after the screening. “Yes,” I would say, “still in prison. Yes, still creating.” And later I would tell Spoon all about it.

In this way, Michka’s art provided opportunities to console us both. But eventually, the screenings ran their course, and I wasn’t sure how Spoon and I would continue. Did we have anything between us other than our love for Michka?

In 2019, Spoon suffered another major loss: the death of Judith Tannenbaum. A year later, in the midst of the pandemic, Spoon marshalled all of his forces in the outside world to pay homage to his former mentor. For *The Book of Judith*, Spoon wanted to invite close friends, colleagues, and former students of Judith’s to reflect on her legacy through poetry and prose. I saw the call for help on Facebook and, as an editor, knew I should step up. I hesitated, afraid it would take up too much time. But then I took the leap.

4 Spoon Jackson, “Where I Am From,” as it appears in *Spoon*, 00:16:35 to 00:18:11.

In his poem, “April Showers,” Spoon writes: “I trust in tiny raindrops / to open my protesting heart.”⁵

Like most of California’s state prisons, Solano is overcrowded. As a medium-security facility, it also houses inmates in dorms rather than individual cells. At the best of times, it is hard to be alone, which made it a perfect breeding ground for COVID-19.

In the summer of 2020, the prison was also on the path of the wildfires that raged through the state. The wall near the inmates’ telephone was hot to the touch. Smoke and ash had entered through the ventilation system, making it difficult to breathe. Masks were now protecting against two airborne threats. Spoon, who has diabetes, was at high risk for both.

When Spoon called, words would often get stuck in my throat, blocked by my incapacity to imagine his living conditions. Yet he would often respond with a dry chuckle. “You could either laugh or cry,” he said.

In his poem “Go On,” riffing on Beckett, Spoon writes: “I cannot go on like this / But I will go on / On and on / Even when on becomes off.”⁶

In the autumn, as the second wave took hold and the prison went on lockdown, Spoon’s tone changed to frustration and anger. All programs were cancelled, including his *Uncuffed* podcast series. Inmates were essentially stuck in their dorms. Meanwhile, the state was transferring infected inmates from other prisons to Solano.

In January 2021, Spoon called to say he had tested positive for COVID-19. They had moved him to a single cell for protection against the virus, but it had found him anyway. It passed through steel, like art.

Then silence. No one had news. Finally, his pro bono lawyers incited a flood of calls to the family hotline. Eventually, we learned he was in a hospital outside the prison with pneumonia. He was on a respirator. Then more silence. News slowly trickled out through Facebook. The nurses were treating him well, he had told someone. The food was much better than prison fare, he told someone else. But mostly we waited.

In February, Spoon called again, this time from the prison hospital. Since he was

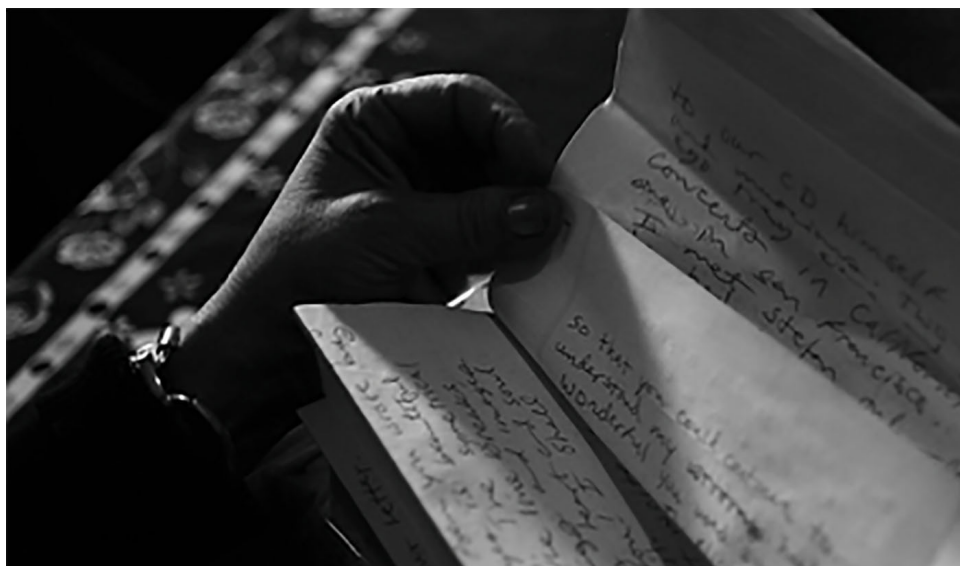
5 Spoon Jackson, “April Showers,” *Longer Ago* (2010), 45.

6 Spoon Jackson and Zai Baba, “Go On,” track 2 on *Go On—Calls from Prison*, Artache, 2017.

still struggling to breathe and walk, he rolled himself on a chair with casters to reach the telephone. He only had five minutes for the call. I didn't have time to tell him how contact with twenty contributors, even virtually, was an antidote to my isolation; how time spent working with them was paradoxically making me more productive with my new novel; how I felt moved by all these reflections about his friend Judith; how thinking of his steely resolve to overcome adversity was helping me put the minor inconveniences of "lockdown" in Montréal into perspective.

Somehow, he survived, and *The Book of Judith* found its way into the light in 2022 through New Village Press.

In his poem "Real," Spoon writes: "Realness eats raw meat / and does not waver / nor drift on the currents."⁷



In this still from *Spoon*, the filmmaker Michka Saäl retrieves a letter from her box of letters from Spoon Jackson.

I have kept all of Spoon's letters to Michka in the same hinged box that appears in the film. I haven't read them. One day, when he is released, I will offer them to Spoon, knowing he may not wish to look back, only forward. I will also bring a copy of Michka's film, which he has never seen. The prison now allows film clips,

7 Spoon Jackson, "Real," *Longer Ago*, 2010, 78.

thirty seconds at a time, but I can't figure out the phone app. More than that, it feels disrespectful to chop up the film into 130 increments of time as dictated by the prison. Instead, I will bring it with the letters, and Spoon can decide how he wants to experience it.

The way I share time with Spoon has been changing. For the first few years, I accepted collect calls and handwritten letters just as Michka once did. The calls are free now, although still limited to fifteen minutes. I can also send and receive texts of up to 2,000 characters at a time for five cents each. Yet I miss his snail mail letters written in ink on yellow paper. Once I send a text, it disappears. We have gained time but lost history.

When we speak, I always watch the clock on my phone so I'm not cut off mid-sentence. Spoon pays no attention to the sixty-second warning. He keeps talking until the seconds run out, as if he has no time to lose. Maybe he can't track the time passing the way I can. More likely, he understands time differently. Above all, it's a small way to push back, to refuse self-censorship, to insist on the importance of every word that gets out.

In his essay "The Bliss of Life," Spoon says: "If I didn't write, I would be a shadow boxing death."⁸

8 An excerpt from "The Bliss of Life" appears in the film *Spoon*, 2015, 00:48:39 to 00:48:43.

Three Poems

cracked rivers

at my worst, i open my mouth to a stranger's voice
feel every woman inside of me flinch

i have been alive forever
my stomach a sinkhole of
bitten tongues, kitchen drawers,
quiet acts of protest

residual anger leaks into tuesday afternoons
i pour decade-old trauma into my morning coffee
swallow the urge to scream when men spit on sidewalks

everywhere is a mirror if you look hard enough

on nights out, i stare into the eyes of strangers like the sun
slip into the rhythm of hometown streets
into the arms of the girls i've known
since we were twelve

the imprint of violence hangs
in the spaces between us,
cracked rivers of unclaimed guilt
run through our veins

we stitch every gap, linking arms, kissing knuckles;
hands are so obviously meant to be held

between sighs of relief, hearts lit by moonlight,
we feel it all
trading secrets in overlapping languages
only we can understand

hide and seek

Content warning: Discussions of violence and genocide.

what does it mean to be a symbol of resistance?

an olive tree set on fire. a young couple trading poetry under the branches.
they speak of freedom like an old lover—the reunion will be sweet.

somewhere, a child dreams of chasing her brother.
(they never found his body. he's still playing hide and seek.)

—

acceptable dinner conversations do not include genocide.
here, the stain of silence seeps into our bones;
we rot from the inside out.

the boss orders steak and red wine to celebrate the business.
i gag on my own privilege.
grip fork and knife: chew, swallow, stomach, repeat.
it feels like i'm slicing into human flesh.

across the restaurant, a father spoons cappuccino foam into his son's mouth.
the tenderness of it fills me to the brim, overflows from my eyes.

—

is it possible to be erased?

i try to imagine a city slaughtered.
bare feet, collapsed ceilings. the sky is an open wound.

better not to speak of it. it's such a polarizing, sensitive topic.
better not to speak of the war crimes. of the limbs being crushed under the
rubble.
(she's my mother, i know it. i recognize her by her hair.)

—

time moves faster than legislation. it stretches and spills, refuses to stop.
we go on living.

we make love against windows, drink our morning coffee, write meaningless emails.

my best friend gets a promotion at work—she says we have to go dancing to celebrate.

between songs, a woman's scream splits the jordan in two.

—

how do you start a revolution?

i google “where to buy a keffiyeh near me.”

someone mentions terrorism and tonight's party in the same breath.

watch. don't look away. please don't look away.

between syrupy glances, a small slit opens—
a crevice for lust to slip through

i wipe off the feigned intimacy from my day
undress until i am the symbol of a woman, a myth

flames lick the corners of my room, the curve of my spine
your hands, molten, press embers into my skin

some people carry a softness in them
so rare it's disarming
my eyes spark with revolution;
yours yearn for peace

the last time you came i borrowed poetry from your lips
scribbled your confessions into scraps of torn paper
marvelling at the words you can say out loud—
the ones i can't

i let you in, to my side of the bed
bend myself around you like the night sky
bleeding into a crescent moon

mouth full of secrets i won't spill:

i want to be split open

i want to melt, to run through your veins

i want to be loved by someone better than myself

Three Poems

Almost an ars poetica

the only way to translate time: an orange line
above my wing; a touch that loves me today and scorns me

tomorrow I could choose to be here
or 30 miles yesteryear, the last lover, the one before

I come back
to wanting—

I want this poem to lower mother's voice, to return
the love I traded

for hurt, to latch

onto the hollow at the base of my neck. I want poems
that can speak

when I stop—I come back to wanting.

To want to build thunder
a chamber, let it echo in another's heart

so we may divide our burdens and
return drumbeats to skin

after Joy Harjo, with an interpolation of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Praise prashad, my favourite part of going
to Gurdwara as a child Praise

taking off your shoes,
washing your hands, placing
coins in a slot and pressing
your matha to the floor

Praise sitting Praise kirtan Praise going to the front
as many times as I wanted

Praise pressing together the edges of your palms
making a bowl for sweetness that whispers

Waheguru, Waheguru, Waheguru
bathes your hands in butter

for sweetness Praise listening
to words you don't always understand
but feel,
know, remember Praise the spaces
where all are auntie and uncle
grandmother and grandfather Praise the hardships
Praise sometimes seeing a family member
who no longer speaks to you

Praise being adopted
by a Bibi who isn't yours
but recognizes where your suit is from, sees you
as her own

Praise Guru Nanak Dev Ji, Mai Bhago,
Amrita Pritam, Baba Farid,
Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Bullah Shah,
Waris Shah, Edward Said, Dalip Kaur Tiwana, Mahmoud Darwish

Praise the ways we can language
 between Hindi, Punjabi, and Urdu
 even when we can't speak them all
 fluently Praise the number five
 the way our people show up
 at protests with langar

Praise the way you learned to say
 Waheguru when you sneeze
 Waheguru when you feel lost
 Waheguru when you're hurt, Waheguru
 Waheguru
 Waheguru when you're joyful

Praise honesty, honest work, honest struggle

Praise justice Praise all the love
 love lost and love gone wrong Praise
 the worry that keeps me safe
 the worry that shows we care

Praise the women
 who love other women Praise the women who teach love
 despite hurt, who relearn love after harm, the women who survive
 Praise those who work to undo power at its worst
 so we can live with shakti and love
 at our best Praise the men who love
 other men Praise the ones who illumine this life
 as neither woman nor man Praise them
 Praise the ones who bear
 our children Praise their strength
 Praise the ones who didn't survive Praise
 Waheguru Praise

Praise land
 Praise farmers
 Praise Musqueam Praise Squamish Praise Tsleil-Waututh
 Praise Palestine
 Praise water Praise Blackness Praise harvest
 Praise freedom Praise seva Praise liberation
 Praise the rivers who name

us: Sutlej, Ravi, Beas Praise Jhelum Praise Chenab Praise
truth, Waheguru, the truth will guide us
Praise love Praise community Praise grief
Waheguru, Waheguru, Waheguru
Praise the light in each of you

More Lovingness

Spoon and spoon
rolling sand and sky until
your fingers, smooth—you
have my surrender
tummy to tummy, entangling

more lovingness: yes please, more lovingness

the unsexing of softness, sadness and stone
prayer, my radiance in your trenches
water and petal, light embroidered
care without defensive mirroring

Remember Hannah Arendt's line:

“Even in the darkest of times we have
the right to expect some
illumination”

Reading, we try to clinch
such disparity as better than
dismal hope
in an almost impossible
joyous anticipation

if only war would walk home

Follow the blues beyond
the barriers of history being
broken. Follow through
the minor sequence of
a garden's progress to
resolution yet unknown.

Lightning and hail
the size of dollars lit
up the sky at the blue
full moon but no frogs
are raining and violets
have not forsaken us

though left bereft with
only song and for solace,
the sweet return of spring
myrtle purples and sky-
brushed forget-me-nots
that pop resolutely through

damp earth. Grief is love
unexpressed, undeterred,
awaiting the next round,
the sound of a sax,
a chorus of frogs,
blues in the night.

Grief gives way to gratitude
that seasons remain though whole
civilizations collapse and fall.
The fall resounding rings hollow
down our ears. Will expanded
sanctions work? Will war ever end?

Tears are never enough. If only
poems could help. What words
would work? In our time and beyond,
let news not intimidate us to sink
down the slough of despond—but
into necessary action. Now.

Only the long view, wider than
self. Only your voice alive
at the back of my head. Only
presence, yours, with a tower
of gurus rising above you.

How can I be other than grateful,
when you so generously left (just
before they'd have carted you off
to endure some horrible hospice)
in timing that still confounds me?

No, I'm no longer lonely, with you
still here, surrounded by decades of
memorabilia to keep me company
though how I miss our meditations,
cuddled on the couch by the fire.

“But at my back I always hear
Time's winged chariot hurrying near . . . ”
Back of mind, between shoulder blades
where your hands (your sculpted hands!)
would squeeze away pain. If only they still could.

Because you live inside my head.
Sometimes I hear you speaking.
More often you nod approval or
shake your head to comment, no.

Do you live in my occipital lobe?
I don't know the brain's mechanism
well enough to tell. You live on in
replay, in dream, in glimpsed shade.

Of course you're apart from me, in
dimensions I cannot fathom until
I too have bit the dust—more a part
of me than ever you could be in flesh.

I scatter you as you would have wished
in the garden, to grow as spring greens.
I spread you on the surface of the pond.
Wind carries random ash onto my face.

I don't wash you away for another day.
Cremains remain. I'll serve myself next
season's sprouts, thinking about the cycle's
return. They turn out fine. You first.

Grieving, gift bereft of grit. Leaving
is best left. Well enough. Alone. And
yet in good company, a gathering of
poems meant as solace and comfort.
As displacement for personal sorrow.

has happened, the dead
assembled on the other
hand, *en la otra orilla*,
the opposite bank where
our ancestors still dwell
across that river Styx

over under over under

where currents flow too
fast for comfort, for who
ever can stop the flood?

We pick up sticks and
stakes, pick up a pace,
we pick up pieces and
stand *ex stasis* out
of place, the ground be
low our feet quivering

over under over under

—until unless utterly futile
at last, at least, at most—
we understand nothing
but necessity in leaving
well enough alone, far
from what we were want

to call home when we can
now no longer call home.
We must attempt utmost
care in the choice to carry
what is needed as opposed
to what we want. We want

nothing surely after all
these decades of desiring too
much. Left unsaid. Undone,
what's to be accounted for?
We count our hallows as
payment enough without
pennies for the ferryman,

pennies from heaven for
 ever in our pocket, for

tunes as yet unheard, for
 fortune's favouring bold
 souls who brave the deep

over under over under

leaving behind all we can
 not bear to part with, all
 our shoulder cannot bear

over under over under

What will anyway be left

over under over under

for pigeons and passersby
 to gather in the wake of
 the detritus: what was and is
 now not to be born, to be borne

over under over under

A poem emerges from the depth.
 Its tentacles inch out to community,
 to suffering strife beyond the hearth,
 intruding on the heart. Televised terror,
 two-dimensional on the screen, takes on
 new aspects, homing in. Tentative, we
 negotiate new rules of communication,
 new challenges in the face of all that
 encroaches, all that calls out. Until

over under over under

given this world we inhabit, we glimpse
 what gold may be harvested from grief.

Belén Rios Sialer (she/her) was born and raised in Lima, Perú, and currently resides in Vancouver. She is deeply inspired by people bold enough to be vulnerable, and aspires to do the same. Previously published in *SOMOS*, Brown University's Latinx magazine, and longlisted in *Room Magazine's* Poetry Contest, she holds a BA in Psychology with a minor in Creative Writing from the University of British Columbia.

Kristin Bjornerud's watercolours are open-ended poetic narratives that reflect on our complicated relationships to each other and to the natural world. Her artwork has been published in *Brenda*, *Canthius*, *Existere*, and *Room Magazine*. She holds a BFA from the University of Lethbridge and an MFA from the University of Saskatchewan. Kristin has received grants from the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council, and the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec. Originally from the Prairies, she currently lives in Mi'kma'ki/Nova Scotia.

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Poet and playwright **Penn Kemp** has been an energetic presence in poetry circles since 1972, with over thirty books of poetry, prose, and drama; seven plays; and multimedia galore. Out now is *Poems in Response to Peril* (Pendas Productions/Laughing Raven Press, 2022) and *Incrementally*, out as an e-book and album with Hem Press. See www.pennkemp.weebly.com, www.pennkemp.wordpress.com, and www.pennkemp.substack.com.

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