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# MONTREAL WRITES.

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# CONTRIBUTORS

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ANABELLE ZALUSKI ("The Importance of Posture", p.20) was born in Toronto and moved to Montreal to pursue a degree in English Literature and Creative Writing at Concordia University. She finds strength in fiction and playwriting but enjoys all forms of art, and aims to explore the world both literally and through writing.

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It's June, and that means Pride is being celebrated in cities across the world. This month, we are dedicated to featuring LGBTQ+ writers and artists, whose voices are so often erased and under-represented in literature and art.

# EDITOR

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Although we celebrate, the fight isn't over. The first Pride is because of those who fought to continue to fight for those who come in countries where their identity is to continue to stand up for them, especially POC, women, and trans, and a greater risk of facing violence.

We hope that this issue demonstrates the LGBT community's strength and this issue is a celebration of its struggles and joys, and of its continued growth. We hope that our magazine writers and artists to showcase

# S' NOTE

---

we must remember that the  
le was a riot— we celebrate  
before us, and we must con-  
come after, for those who live  
ntity is still a crime. We need  
he entire LGBT community,  
l trans people, who are all at  
ace.

isplays even an ounce of the  
and resilience. We hope that  
LGBT culture, of its struggles  
d fight for existence. Finally,  
remains a safe space for all  
se their talent.

---

A big thanks to all  
of our contributors.  
You matter, your  
voice matters, you  
belong. Thank you  
to our editors and  
everyone else who  
has helped us along  
the way. You are  
what makes *Mon-  
tréal Writes* possible.

Yours,

Sara & Kristen

SUNDAY  
BRUNCH

*Agnes has great-grandchildren.*

*How's your love life? Any men  
in the picture?*

Something pleading  
almost desperate  
in my grandmother's ask,  
but lies do not flow easily today,  
they stick, they sputter  
like water from frozen pipes  
so I reply,

*Not really, I don't particularly  
enjoy their company.*

Cue wailing, as if the world  
would end

and she doesn't even know about the girl  
whose hair I braid and unbraided during finals,  
whose clothes I slide off  
every night, and it's not

that I don't sometimes dream  
of that warm, sticky, flour bag weight,  
the seashell pink of tiny fingernails  
the petal curl of brand-new toes  
the pulse of cottage-cheese brain  
in soft skull,  
an ugly little alien  
all my own.

But these days I prefer to hold  
the people I can't bring home.

sophie panzer

# LA MUSTANG

craig barron

Montreal, October 1968

**E**va faces the wall of sunroom windows, intent on her garden view: the unpruned growth crowding the peach tree, and beneath it the abandoned Mustang covered with leaves.

A trail of cigarette smoke drifts Eva's way but she doesn't move. The windows are closed on a warm autumn day—the aluminum outside storms too heavy to lift. Beside her Edith waves her cigarette with a circling motion. Edith coughs: “These new-fangled filters, there's something in them. Not good for the throat.” Edith is past forty and ailing, but Eva wonders at the strange energy in her sister's slight body.

“Look at the colours, the leaves, red and gold,” Eva says, “The city is on fire.”

“Aren't you going to be late for work?”

“It's Saturday, I start at twelve.”

“You don't need to sit in the window.”

“Why not? Such a lovely day.”

“Anyone can see you.”

“There's trees, the hedge and a fence. I can't imagine who would be watching.”

“You never know. We have 4000 hippies living in town.”

“4000? Have you counted them?”

“What Mayor Drapeau said. Yes, I read it. A scary thing.”

“They're not apt to wander into our boring neighbourhood.”

“You can't tell what is on anyone's mind these days. Temptations, you can't tell.”

Eva stands, her eyes still fixed on the garden. “The leaves are falling early this year.”

“The big tree is rotting. Just as well.”

“Why?”

“The house foundation. The roots, they must have reached the cinder blocks. Looking for heat.”

“I think roots look for moisture. The basement walls are fine.”

\*

Michel listens: the only English voices in the bar. Sometimes American tourists stroll in, or Ontario teenagers on a wild under-aged adventure, but too uncomfortable they rarely stay. Later in the evening there will be the inevitable drunken university students from McGill.

Quite the surprise to see Peter coming in the door, Michel at first not twigging to the fact that the woman following is with him. Michel watches as Peter choses a window view, then glances his way. Peter has never seen him on the job, but will understand it is a frantic place and expect no special attention. With her tweed skirt and plaid scarf, Peter's companion is certainly no regular to the neighbourhood. Michel catches her first remark before moving out of earshot: "It's like a birthday cake."

"What do you mean?" Peter asks.

"The lights, like candles. The excitement."

"Just another Saturday night on rue St. Denis."

"It's a different world."

"What would you like to drink?"

"Whatever you're having."

Michel has moved to a scruffy bunch of intense old men nearby. After a moment he looks over to Peter. "*Monsieur, deux cognacs, s'il vous plaît,*" Peter says. Michel winks and goes to get their drinks.

"That was lovely," Eva says. "When did you learn French?"

"I've changed neighbourhoods, you know. I live further east of here. A completely French neighbourhood."

"How exotic. I feel as if I've crossed the Rubicon. Peter, it's wonderful I ran into you."

"I was a bit surprised ..."

"Yes, things change."

"You haven't, not much," Peter says. "How is it, working at Morgan's?"

"I like the hustle and bustle. Did you find what you wanted?"

"I was just walking through."

"Yes, some men do that, they just walk

through. So, do you have a job?"

"No, I study. University, general arts."

"Nothing in particular?" Eva asks.

"Psychology."

"The science of the mind, right? There must be an extraordinary future in psychology."

Michel brings their drinks. Eva notes he is a bit younger than Peter, with shorter hair, very attractive and at ease. Michel notices her attention and she promptly turns away. Michel touches the back of Peter's neck. "*Des cacahuètes? Peanuts?*" Eva looks up and shakes her head.

"Have you ever thought about learning French?" Peter asks.

"What a good idea. Yes, it's something I must think about." She looks towards Michel. "I wonder if the waiter thinks we're on a date."

"No, he knows me a bit."

"A friend? So handsome. Why is it people are so much more attractive on this side of town?"

"His name is Michel."

"Handsome, and so unhappy. How can handsome young men be so unhappy? They have it all, the way things are nowadays: the new liberation, the freedom; he might have a half-dozen girls visiting his bed."

"I don't think so." Peter looks at the view through the window, the street traffic, long dusty Pontiacs and Chryslers rumbling by.

"Well, what do I know?" Eva sits up straight in her chair.

"Do you go out a lot?"

"The odd film from time to time... I'd go mad if I didn't. I've seen the Sound of Music four times. Did you see it?"

"Ah, no."

"What a shame."

Peter holds up his glass, looks deep into the amber liquid. “So what happened, that you’re working again?”

“Man and His World, Expo 67. A smorgasbord: hostesses, so much to choose.”

“Oh, you mean your husband?”

“Tony hightailed it to the West Coast with a girl from the French Pavilion.”

“That was one of the nice ones. It’s still standing.”

“It is?”

“Do you still have the house?”

“No, I don’t.”

“I heard about it.”

“Oh yes, lovely. Fieldstone fireplace, breathtaking, it covered an entire wall. Copper-tone in the kitchen, cushion floor, avocado fashion cookware. An avocado themed bathroom. All gone. Tony left nothing but debts.”

“I’m sorry.”

“The car, the Mustang, was the only thing in my name. A birthday present.”

“You should be grateful to the marketing campaign.”

“Why?”

“The Mustang was designed for women; the keys can’t be locked inside.”

“Yes, that would have appealed to Tony.”

“So you get around in style?”

“No, Tony never had time to teach me how to drive. The car just sits under Edith’s peach tree.”

“So you live with your sister again? How is she?”

“She smokes, she coughs; she eats bacon and ketchup sandwiches for lunch.”

“The same bat outta hell.”

“Yes, endless madcap hilarity at her hou-

-se. But I’m grateful, she cared for our parents, made sacrifices. And I was so much younger—so of course they left her the house. And now I have someplace to stay.”

“But an interesting case.”

“Interesting?”

“Shut down, if I remember. Your sister doesn’t adjust well to change.”

“You must learn so much from psychology.”

“Have you ever seen your sister laugh?”

“As a matter of fact, I have.”

“Really, what makes her laugh?”

“Nuns.”

“Nuns?”

“Nuns always make her laugh.”

“The Flying Nun?”

“The one on TV? Heaven’s no, she only watches Bonanza. No, nuns in the flesh. Oh, that sounds crude, doesn’t it? I mean the real thing.”

“What about them?”

“Anything at all, how they dress, how they walk or eat. One delightful day Edith saw a carload, a Falcon station wagon full of nuns eating ice cream cones. She found it hilarious.”

“There’s not that many nuns left.”

“Oh they’re still out there. Flapping about.”

“How about a coffee for the road?”

\*

The third floor of a narrow greystone triplex, the decor in Peter’s apartment is scant and restrained—except for one psychedelic print on the back of the bathroom door. Michel lies naked on the bed. Peter approaches with a bottle of wine and two glasses. “A drink for a French lesson.” His kiss is a small a

awkward graze. Michel pulls back as if in pain.

“Okay, *Minou*?”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Okay, sexy French boy.”

“Yes, that’s better.” They gently touch their glasses together.

“A toast to what?” Peter says.

“New York!”

“Michel, forget it.”

“When I get there.” Michel drains his glass.

“It’s not so bad here.”

“This city, Montreal ... I don’t know, nothing’s happening. What am I, a waiter?”

“You’re something to me.”

“Maybe.” Michel rolls over, falls off of the bed. He lies face up on the floor.

“Draining bottles at the restaurant again?”

“Yes ... drain-ing.”

“To drain, how’s that translate?”

“*Drainer... Purger. Égoutter. Vider. Yes, vider, that’s it.*” Michel sighs. “Having to listen to my customers, les intellectuels. Fatiguants. And they never tip.” He holds up his glass for another drink. “So who’s your Jackie Kennedee friend?”

“Kennedy. Stress the first syllable.”

“Kennedy, Kennedy, Kennedy.”

“And her name is Onassis now.”

“Your friend?”

“No. Jackie Onassis: you haven’t seen the news? My friend’s name is Eva.”

“*Elle a l’air perdue.* Lost in Space.”

“Don’t you think she’s gorgeous?”

“Yes, so? Who is she?”

“We dated.”

“No!”

“No, it wasn’t like that.”

“Like what?”

“In high school, we sort of protected each other from the masses.”

“Not like this?” Michel crawls up on the bed and kisses Peter.

“No.”

“But she was special?”

“Of course.”

“And she’s not married?”

“Divorced.”

“Rich?”

“No. Just has a car.”

“A car, that’s something!”

“And she can’t even drive.”

“What kind? What kind of car?”

“Mustang, 1965 or ’66, I think.”

“Oh yeah, Mustang? *Incredible gaspillage.*”

“What?”

“A waste. Ask her if she will sell it?”

Peter kisses Michel. “This is so strange.”

“*Quoi?*”

“You.”

“Relax. *Tu es homosexuel.* Homosexual. Some of our words are the same you know.”

“Either way, I don’t like that word.”

“Then find one you do. Can I see her car?”

\*

The next morning Edith watches her sister in the garden, distractedly sweeping the leaves off of the car’s front hood. “Do you want a rake? For the leaves?”

“No, Edith, it’s something you enjoy doing. Good for your arms you used to say—if you take your time.”

“You were gone a long while last night?”

“Was I?”

“I put your dinner in the fridge. You can have it for lunch.”

"I'm really not hungry."

"You're too thin. Do you want to look like that Mia Farrow? A skeleton. Are you dating someone?"

"No, of course not."

"I assume you will, sometime."

"Do you? Just as I assume you will not."

"Please. I'm an old woman."

"You're forty."

"Forty-one, yes, too old. And sick. What, discotheques, getting turned on ... to the, what's it called, the pop scene?"

"Yes, yes, and I'll become a gay divorcee."

"Date, why don't you? Find yourself a man."

"What sort of man?"

"One like that Pierre Trudeau fellow. Or that other one."

"What other one?"

"Tom Jones."

"What a nice salad of men."

They are both startled when the phone rings. Inside, Eva takes the phone. When she hangs up she sees Edith waiting in the kitchen door. "Someone is interested in the car. You met him a long time ago: Peter from my high school?"

"Peter, the one you should have married?"

\*

Eva sits on the back steps in the falling evening light. Edith meanders through the garden, cigarette in hand. She draws close to the Mustang, reaches out to almost touch the car when she sees Peter and Michel enter the garden from the side of the house.

Eva waves. "Hello! Edith, you remember Peter?"

Edith looks closely at Peter. "Is it? Under all that hair? Not a Smothers Brother? At least there's no beard."

"This is Michel."

"*Bonsoir.*"

"*Ah ... Oui!*" Eva says. "Of course we have met."

"We don't speak French around here," Edith says.

Michel ignores her and walks towards the car; after a moment Peter follows. "*Elle est belle, la Mustang.*"

"Go ahead and have a good look," Eva says.

Michel opens the driver's side door and sits; Peter settles beside him. Michel snuggles back in the bucket seat and strokes the dash, "Man ... look at this. Perfect, it fits me. Can I say that?"

"Sure."

Michel kisses the back of the leather bucket seat. "Beautiful and practical."

"I think you need to look at the motor."

It takes some effort to open the hood and Peter helps. Up on the porch Edith is fascinated by the activity, Michel bending beneath the hood. "Not so bad," he says, "I have a friend who can have a look."

Peter pulls Michel up, puts his arms around him. They go back inside the car. Edith tries to catch a glimpse: "They're not men."

"Pardon me?"

"Look at them, clutching."

"Clutching?"

"Kissing. A couple of hippies. Mixing things up, messing things up. That Peter pansy, no wonder he didn't want you."

Michel is focused on the contours of the dashboard and speaks softly, "I'm going away. A magic place. I need a car to get me there."

“New York? A pipe dream.”

“A pipe ... Please translate?”

“I don’t know how.”

“Mr. Psychology student, how did you find your way into my bed?”

“You dragged me there, remember?”

\*

Edith has disappeared inside the house. Eva and Michel lean against the car, while Peter sits brooding inside. Michel observes the rear of the house. “This is a weird house. But you could tear off that sunporch, bash out the wall: *les fenêtres panoramiques*; big windows I mean.”

“It’s not my house.”

“Your mother is really ... bizarre.”

“She’s my sister.”

“Oui, okay. So do you have the keys? I want to try the car.”

“I’m sorry, I’ve no idea where they are. Is there a hurry?”

“I’m moving away.”

“Are you sure? It’s your home here.”

“I don’t always feel like that. Sometimes it feels cold and crazy.”

“Maybe Peter has been a bad influence on you.”

“You think so?”

“You’re very masculine.”

“Merci bien.”

“I won’t pretend to understand your relationship. I knew Peter was different. He only kissed me once. He was fascinated with Montgomery Clift.”

“Who?”

“Never mind, someone from New York.”

“New York? Ah, *bien*.” Michel memorizes:

“Montgomery Clift, I should look him up.”

“He’s a dead movie star.”

“What do I know about anything? It is why I should go away.”

“I’m thinking,” Eva says, “Maybe I could keep the car.”

“You can’t leave something like this here! For the winter? *Merde!*” Michel begins to stroke the car.

“If I could find someone to teach me how to drive.”

“Do you know about the clutch?” Eva and Michel hear the back door open as Edith comes outside.

“Eva, do we have any ice cream?”

“We have never, ever, had ice cream in the house.”

“If you’ve made a deal for the car we could buy some ice cream.”

Peter steps out of the car.

“*Non*,” Michel says, “No deal. *Je préfère les décapotables*. I like ...”

“What, you need to go to the bathroom?” Edith asks.

“Convertibles. He likes convertibles,” Peter says, “Very American.”

“Have you ever watched *Bonanza*?”

“I’ve seen parts.”

“Watch it all. You could learn a few things about how real men behave,” Edith says.

“Like little Joe?” Peter asks.

“Of course.”

“Oh, I watch him. Those are the parts I watch. I want to taste his dusty sweat.”

## Vancouver Island, October 2008

The ivy-covered Mustang sits in the lush garden, the tarp folded neatly on the car's roof. The dog is nestled against the flat back tire and grey-bearded Michel bends to touch the Labrador's nose. "Impossible, isn't it Brewster?"

"No, it isn't, Michel." Michel looks up to the weathered deck where Peter brings two cranberry cocktails through the sliding glass doors. "And with important matters, it would help if you addressed me, not the dog. Isn't that right, Brewster?" Peter puts the drinks down on the metal café style table. Moving spritely down the steps he pauses briefly to inspect a patch of moss. He approaches the car, puts his arm around Michel. "It's not impossible, you know. There's quite a few of these fellows still roaming around out here."

"Yes and there are guys who are into that, Peter. Mostly straight. They spend their lives fixing and fixing up. Not me. Not you, for sure."

"Yes, so we find someone to restore it. Total rebuild. There's places for that. The Trudeau Mercedes, they shipped it out here, didn't they?"

"You're talking \$20,000 or more. And we need a new kitchen."

"We can go back to the original colour, that green-y gold."

"When did we paint it blue?" Michel asks.

"Sometime in the 1990s—our lost decade in Ontario—where did we find the spare cash?" Peter puts his boot on the fender, gives a light push. "So do we haul it away then?"

"It could just stay part of the garden. Look, the ivy growing through the rust. Beautiful."

"Remember the first time we saw it? Buried in leaves. Nothing but leaves in Eva's backyard."

"Not her house. It was la grande folle-crazy bitch's place! Remember how we lost it? Eva wouldn't sell."

"You lost it. It was for you, to leave me."

"No. Not really. Did Eva ever drive it?"

"Yes, I asked at the funeral—only making conversation—Edith standing there in her cloud of smoke, hating me. *Yes, of course she drove*, Edith said. And then I thought I could go ahead and ask: *What did Eva die from?* A hard question to fit in. *Female trouble*, old Edith said. As if that explained everything. Then in the same breath she asks me if I knew someone who might want the Mustang."

"I like that. Oh my god, remember what she wanted: her own car; what she used the Mustang money for?"

"A Falcon station wagon."

"And we saw her once didn't we, one day out driving. The car was white."

"No, Michel, wasn't it baby blue? There's a few of them out here on the island."

"Crazy bitches?"

"No, Falcon station wagons."

"How it all worked out, sort of incredible. You and me, forty years." Michel leans back against the car.

"Oh, my god. It's been hard to be with someone 40 years. Ups and downs. You and me."

"And all our friends that died along the way."

"What about the Mustang?"

"Yes, change the subject."

"Michel. *La Mustang?*"

"Impossible."

Peter threads some ivy into a bit of rust. Another strand into Michel's hair. ■

# A WOMAN IS AN ISLAND

andres garzon



# QUEER HEARTBREAK HOTLINE

nikki donadio

*-your call is important to us-*

My purple love.  
knuckle resting on lips, the  
liminal space of just-before coming

*-someone will be with you in one moment-*

Loneliness is a game of closed eyes,  
or blindfolds, or thumbprints  
smeared across lenses

*-please hold-*

Yes, please. Please hold  
me, feel the way my chin  
fits in the nook of your shoulder

*-all of our operators are busy-*

make some coffee. Hand me the  
first ready cup, hot. I hang on,  
blister, shake.

You're already  
no longer there.

# VESTIGIAL

Cut me out. A hollow sinus,  
a swollen tonsil,

wisdom teeth jamming  
up your jaw.

Cut me out. An appendix  
inflamed, ready to burst,

a grasping reflex that  
can't keep hold.

*I ain't the one.*  
Once tight and inside

I've grown vestigial  
cut out of your evolution.

From Spoon's "I ain't the one," found on the album *Hot Thoughts* (2017).

nikki donadio

picked up on our  
last trek out

after the leaves lay tired,  
a summer leaning over us.

empties, backs flattened to the  
earth, tops and bottoms

folded in, like reaching to  
do a sit-up, sun-bled colours

changed blue to bloo to bl-  
back to silver.

tabs missing, undersides  
quilted with dirt

dirt that'll catch under  
my nails, the earth

we fucked on, the beer I  
licked from your palms.

empties. mouths opened  
ready to howl

nothing pouring out.

nikki donadio

# THE IMPORTANCE

“**S**top slouching like that, Katherine. There’s no man I’ve ever met who married a girl with poor posture.”

My grandmother, beside me at the table, ran her gnarled finger up my spine as though just her touch could straighten it. It was summertime, and my family was a group of sardines in a too-big dining-room tin, sat together to eat dinner. The thermometer by the window read thirty degrees, and I wished I was in bed with the standing fan pointed straight at me. It was hot enough that I wanted to be naked all the time, and I resented the fact that I was thirteen—too old to take off my pants in the middle of the living room. I also resented my grandmother’s insistence that I sit up straight. I disregarded her threats that no man would ever love me if I continued to slouch, and made a point of showing how little I cared. I ate my white chicken breast in silence and sunk in my chair even lower than before.

My family spent our summers at the cottage. It was an old building, painted burgundy, and it was bigger than any other on the lake, but didn’t have to be. My father was my grandparents’ only child, and I was his only child, so it was just my parents, my grandmother and I who came to stay in the summer. My grandfather had

passed away a couple of years beforehand.

But my family was social and we often hosted barbecues and campfires for the other cottagers. We owned a weak little motorboat, and for every event my father would bring me along as he went around the lake, door to door, inviting our friends to whatever we’d decided to host. This weekend, the first event of the season, we’d be shooting fireworks off of our little dock.

One cottage was always empty when we passed by it in the boat. It was wild-looking, with long grass and deep green ivy crawling up its white walls, and a dock at its shore with soft, faded wood. My dad would never let me get out and explore the vacancy. But on this run, inviting people to our Saturday night firework show, there was a woman planted on the now-manicured lawn in a red Muskoka chair, a shiny magazine in front of her.

“Hello!” My father slowed the boat down and waved with one hand.

“Hello, who’s this?” The woman looked at us from under her sunglasses. Then she shouted in the direction of the cottage: “Marley, sweetie, come down and say hi! We’ve got visitors.”

As my dad introduced himself to the woman, a girl about my age had come out the front door and was running down to greet

# CE OF POSTURE

anabelle zaluski

us at the dock. She had straight dark hair in a ponytail and wore a long dress with blue flowers on it. I suddenly felt inadequate in shorts and a faded button-down. I sat up in the boat, and watched her—Marley—as she went beside her mother. She stood with one knee bent and the other straight, which made her ponytail sway to the side, and I watched it like a pendulum. I was hypnotized. The exchange of words between the adults went directly over my head.

My father tapped me on the shoulder and raised his eyebrows at me. I'd forgotten to introduce myself.

"I'm Katherine. Kate for short," I recited.

The woman smiled down at me. "I'm Miss Vamos, with no short form, and this is my daughter Marley."

Marley didn't say anything, but took a step forward and stuck out her hand. I reached up and shook it, and hoped she couldn't feel the strength of my pulse through my palm. Something about the formality of the handshake made me feel like we already knew each other, as if this was an inside joke of ours. She'd looked right into my eyes and now she knew everything about me, or at least I knew that if she asked, I would tell her. I was still in a haze as my dad said goodbye and our boat pulled away from the

dock, and I stayed that way for the rest of the day. I ate quietly and slouched at dinner that night, which wasn't out of the ordinary, so I got away with it. As my family chatted over ice cream sandwiches afterwards, I stared off into space and thought about how Marley's feet had been bare. She must have been fearless, so unafraid of splinters and sap sticking to her toes.

That night, the summer heat continued, and I slept with my blankets kicked to the bottom of the bed. The window was open and night air blew onto my skin, which cooled me down in combination with my sticky sweat. The haze had stayed with me. It was like everything in my brain had reached out and noticed Marley, showed her to me, and as those figurative pointed fingers wiggled at her they were trying to say something. I didn't know what it was, yet. I just knew I wouldn't stop thinking about her until I saw her again.

The next day, I obsessively anticipated the firework show, when Marley would come over. I didn't have a watch, and the only wall clock in the cottage was in the kitchen, so I spent half my day pretending to be interested in cooking so that I could mentally count the hours until eight o'clock. For the other half of the day, I jumped in and out of the lake, and always sat near the dock in case Marley ever

found a reason to come nearby. Our lake was rather small, and if I squinted, I could see the white gleam of her cottage from across the water. My parents claimed it was too hot to go swimming with me, which I thought was ridiculous, but I secretly relished my solitude at the lake, my perch. At one point my mother walked down to the water and brought me strawberries straight from the fridge. I flicked the stems into the grass beside me as I ate, still in my wet bathing suit. The soft, undergrown hairs by my forehead stuck to my face with leftover lake water.

My mind was overwhelmed with decisions to make. Would she notice or care if I tried to become more tan that afternoon? If I wore sandals or sneakers when I saw her? If I had my hair up, down, or braided? I can't remember now how I decided to present myself in the end, but I do know what the stress was there, and it was how I passed the time sitting by the lake.

There were other cottagers and family friends scattered around the lakeside by the time Marley and her mother arrived. People sat in folding lawn chairs or on pool floaties or towels on the grass. The air reeked of bug spray and humidity; the heat soldiered on but lessened as the sun set. Every adult had a can in their hand. My father let me take sips of his Radler and, naively, I hoped it would get me drunk and therefore less nervous. That's what I'd heard alcohol did.

It did nothing, and I watched Marley paddle up to our dock in a dark green canoe.

"We followed the lights!" said her mother, excitedly, dragging the canoe onshore and extracting a cooler. Marley held a flashlight in one hand and helped with the other.

I could have helped, too, but I didn't know what to do with myself. Since yesterday, the Marley in my head had blossomed and grown into a whole person; I loved the idea of her, but now that the real Marley was in front of me I realized I knew nothing about her at all. The haze broke and turned into a quiet panic in my heart.

My father had already taken Marley's mother under his wing and started introducing her to my mother and the other adults. Their half-drunk laughter echoed across the lake. Both Marley and I were still standing beside the canoe, awkward, and I realized I didn't know where to place my hands.

"Somebody littered," she said, pointing with her flashlight to the pile of strawberry stems I'd left in the grass that afternoon.

"Must have been my dad or something." I made a mental note never to eat strawberries again.

"Will you give me a tour of your place? I haven't seen any other cottage on the lake except mine. Well, not inside any. Jeez, yours is huge!" Marley marveled at the building, already starting to walk the stone path that led up to the door.

"Sure."

She walked quickly and I had to do the same to keep up with the light she was shining in front of her; otherwise I couldn't see ahead and got scared of stepping in the wrong place, even though I knew the path inside and out after walking it so often. But I took an extra step in front of her and opened the door. She thanked me. It sounded like a curtsy.

Our front porch that overlooked the lake was just to the left of the entrance and Marley immediately wandered through it. It was a fairly spacious, screened-in room, with

a couple of couches and chairs. It took me a second to realize my grandmother was sitting in one of them, staring off into the darkness of the lake at night.

"I'm not a fan of the noise," she warbled, motioning to the fireworks and commotion outside. I'd already known this, that she'd be distancing herself from the event, but maybe I'd chosen not to remember, wandering the cottage alone with Marley. She and I stood there, still, for a second, not really waiting for anything, but also not knowing what to do.

"Go have fun." My grandmother flippantly waved her hand at me, smiling as she did so. I turned to Marley, who shrugged, and started making her way to the door that led inside. I followed her, looking back at my grandmother, who was now back in the same position as before, unmoving, looking out at the lake. I wondered what she was thinking about, an observer of the commotion, and of my new friend and myself.

On the ground floor, I showed Marley the kitchen, living room, dining room, the works. I was scared she'd think poorly of it. I was still entranced by the wildness of her cottage, the enchantment and the untouchability. If whatever she had, whatever she was, was so great, I had to be inferior. At least, it felt that way. But my cottage had a second story, and hers didn't, so she insisted on walking up the stairs. I dreaded showing her my bedroom but at the same time I was ecstatic.

The claw-foot tub in the bathroom didn't interest her, nor did my grandmother's or parents' room, because I was never allowed to go in, and therefore neither was she.

The wooden door to my room was alrea-

-dy open, which I thought was odd because I normally closed it, but it must have been the wind coming through the open window. If we kept them closed the house would become an oven, or a sauna, depending on the way you looked at it.

I sat down on my bed and watched Marley wander my room. I knew I kept nothing incriminating around, but I was on edge nonetheless.

"I liked that shirt you were wearing yesterday," she said, planting herself beside me.

"Thanks. I liked the dress you had on."

"My mom bought it for me. It's not really cottage-y. It's too new. I wish I had a shirt like yours."

Marley started leaning towards me and my insides went crazy, until I realized she was just reaching for a book that was on the end of my bed.

"Harry Potter?"

"It's not the coolest book to read, ever, but I like it."

"Don't say it's not cool. It's really cool. I think you're really cool, you know."

"Really?"

"What makes you think you aren't?" she said, challenging me.

"I don't know." I spoke but it felt like the words were disconnected from my mouth.

"You read books, you wear cottage-y clothes, your family does firework shows for people. Your grandmother's sweet. And you have really pretty hair."

"You're cool too."

"Oh yeah?"

The sounds of the fireworks outside stopped.

"My mom said we'd leave once everything

was over, so I should go back,” said Marley. The reluctance in her voice matched the way my face fell.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. I’ll go. But I’ll see you again.”

Marley kissed me on the cheek and swiftly walked away. Some of her lip balm was left on my skin and I could feel it tingle there, even when she was out of sight, even when she was gone.

I didn’t see her for the rest of the night, because once she left, I sat dumbfounded on the bed. It was like my body was stuck in the seconds after you wake up from a deep sleep; I was confused, delirious, and sated.

After a few minutes in thought I wandered to the porch, where my grandmother was still sitting. I took one of the empty chairs beside her, silently crossing my legs and slumping myself down. It was only then that I realized my cheeks hurt; I hadn’t stopped smiling since Marley had left. I also noticed that the night had become cooler, here on the screened-in porch, with the air gently floating through the windows and onto my skin. There was noise, too, and I could hear Marley’s mother’s loud voice saying goodbye, and telling my parents that they would come back soon.

My grandmother turned her head toward me. She lowered her lips to my ear, and said quietly but in the same nagging tone, “No woman will be attracted to you if you slouch, either.” I straightened my back and could see her smirk from the corner of my eye. I never slouched from then on. ■

I'm a contortionist to your  
extortion habit, your  
blind assumptions bred from over consumption  
Of your thought process; that mad mess, from  
over obsessing, living in sadness.  
Fake politeness, behind which hides  
the viscious, tearing snap, unexpected  
leaving teeth marks,  
snarling and ripping  
right through my bloody heart.  
With your lofty ideas, a galleria  
of thoughts marbled by patterns, wrought  
by knots,  
wrapped so tightly. But you see,  
I've been here so many times, different  
versions of you, different signs.  
You're not special, just a lesson, the universe  
has been pressing, testing me  
Showing me how to rise again,  
I almost did once. Ruminating, posturing,  
trying to fit in, trying to find my place in  
This salty mess, maybe in excess, often  
supressing, almost aggressively.  
I'm losing my fear of falling  
though, focused on the climb after  
I spent too much time crawling.  
I am finally exhaling all the  
bullsh\*t and I won't quit  
Speaking. Up. For. Myself.  
Your low lies won't survive in my atmosphere.  
It ends here.

# LEARNING PATTERNS

shannon mastromonico

*MW.* |