WHEN WE DISAPPEAR

BY EMILY YU | ILLUSTRATION BY JASMINE LESPERANCE

FOR US ACROBATS, IT WAS A CIRCUS RULE TO CHOOSE OUR PRIMARY apparatus at the age of thirteen. The doors opened to the Big Top and I entered alone. The leftover sawdust on the floor stuck between my toes, the air scented with rain, instead of the usual smells of animal dung and stale popcorn. Each piece of equipment was illuminated with the magic of the Circus—the only spots of light in the dark space: trapeze, tightrope, hoop, silks, chains. The darkness filling the rest of the tent felt tangible, as if all that existed in the world was me and my choice.

Each apparatus had served me well during my training, suspending me high in the air as I contorted my body. The choice was easy—I wanted the hoop. The perfect circle that supported me, spinning high above the crowds, the comfort in knowing I was the same through and through, no matter how many times I rotated. My hand landed on the hoop and I pulled myself up, settling my body against the wrapped steel. It fit in the curve behind my thighs as if I was born to have it there. A spotlight snapped on, focusing on me, and the light from the other apparatuses extinguished. I rose into the air, and my Circus family streamed in to celebrate. I thought my mom would be the most excited by her only child making the biggest decision of her life; instead, she looked frozen, her brown eyes wide and unseeing, her face pale. She was in stark contrast to the others as they ooh-ed and ahh-ed at my tricks. I didn't think much of it—tonight was about me and the hoop.

Grasping it with both hands, I flipped upside down and stretched my legs into a front split. Long ago, my body registered this as pain, blooming bruises wherever the metal contacted my golden skin. Eventually, the hoop became an extension of me. I hooked the back of my left ankle onto the bottom curve and released my hands; I released everything, letting the single point of contact hold my weight as my right leg floated back behind my head and into my grasp. I smiled into the warmth of the spotlight, my skin glittering as it did when I was in the air.

The Circus had its own magic system, but there was a different magic that bound us Blackbirds to our art. It made us stand out from the other acrobats. We were unafraid, as if the air would never drop us, as if gravity didn't affect us. If we fell, maybe we wouldn't even get hurt, but I didn't know because I never fell. I was born in the Circus and I would die in the Circus; this was where I belonged.

When my performance finished and I dismounted, my mom was in the same spot. As I approached, a mask came up so quick and convincing that I wondered if I'd only imagined the strange expression on her face. She hugged me. "Congratulations, Althea. Wonderful choice."

IT WASN'T UNTIL FIVE YEARS LATER THAT I THOUGHT of my mom's reaction that night. I was watching Vesper train his new hippogriff, creatively named Griffy. An annoyed flick of Griffy's tail sent the metal trash can skating across the centre ring, scattering its contents all over. While helping to clean up the mess, I uncovered an amber glass bottle hidden amongst the greasy popcorn bags and peanut shells. My name was emblazoned on the peeling label: *Althea Blackbird*. The instructions read, *Administer three drops once daily to maintain memory suppression.* I knew this bottle—I'd seen it on the top shelf of my mom's belongings, higher than I could reach in our shared trailer. The faded text was too small and faint for me to read from the floor so I never suspected that I was its intended recipient.

"Thea—" said Vesper. His cloven feet sent up little puffs of dust as he tapped them nervously.

"Did you know about this?"

"Um." Vesper was born into the Circus a few years before me, to the family of Fauns that had existed as the Circus's animal tamers for as long as my family had been aerialists. Griffy lay down at his feet with an audible sigh.

"What memory is she suppressing?"

"Um," he said again. "Maybe you should ask your mom."

I DIDN'T ASK HER, BUT IT WASN'T DIFFICULT TO figure out how she was drugging me. Besides the occasional snacks from our vendors, all my meals were prepared by the staff in the Dining Car. The only refreshment my mom ever offered me was a steaming mug of peppermint tea that she brewed nightly. I valued our bedtime tea session, usually on the steps outside our trailer if the weather was nice. Besides this ritual, I hardly saw her—she organized the acts and travel schedule, while I trained or helped the others with their shows. She was once an acrobat too, but she quit long ago, something I could never fathom. Sometimes, she trailed her gloved fingers over the seat of the trapeze, closing her hand around it as if she could feel it through the velvet.

After that, I stopped drinking her tea. I'd cradle the mug in my hands, warming my callused skin and taking small sips to appease her, but I'd spit it into a handkerchief hidden in my sleeve when she wasn't looking. The remainder was discretely poured on the ground between my shoes.

Memory was an odd thing. The smell came first—I woke with the echo of perfume in my nose, like a word on the tip of my tongue. There *should* have been this scent in our trailer, honey-sweet and floral, swirled in with sandalwood from Mom's soap and the mothball musk of our costumes. I found the broken bottle in the back of a cabinet full of old cosmetics. The aroma of osmanthus flowers filled me, and I cradled the etched glass, wondering how a smell could make me feel so safe.

That same day, as I inspected the carabiners of the outdoor rigs, I remembered a slender hand, callused and long-fingered, directing mine over the metal links. A female voice said, "Don't forget—always screw them downwards, never up."

A shiver travelled down my spine, and my hands shook too much to continue the task. I didn't know what to expect when I stopped taking that potion, but it wasn't this sense of emptiness, of *missing*.

The next morning, I watched the trapeze artists from the bleachers. Across the tent, the movement of air sent an empty hoop swaying, and my mind supplied the vision of a girl in that clear black circle. She could have been me with her long black hair and shimmering skin, dancing effortlessly high above. The differences were subtle—a heart-shaped face instead of my oval one, thinner eyebrows, and a single freckle on her cheek that she absolutely hated. I knew those details were there without seeing them. A wave of nausea hit me, and I keeled over, vomiting into the space between the seats. I yelled an apology before dashing to the cleaning closet and locking myself inside to be alone. Part of me rejected the memory of her, because there was no remembering without hurting. But I couldn't fight it; the floodgates were open.

Her name was Elyse, and she was my sister. Once the Circus's star performer, Elyse was one with the hoop. Her skin sparkled as she flipped and hung and twisted, sometimes with other acrobats, suspending each other in ways that made the audience hold their collective breath. She was weightless when she flew through the air; I wanted to be just like her. I thought the aerial hoop was my autonomous decision, but maybe deep down I remembered.

I didn't notice when it first started—Elyse always looked dreamy when she was performing, but one night she held a particularly ethereal quality. It took me a moment to realize she was translucent. It wasn't an illusion; the spotlights refracted through her like foggy glass.

She was Fading—something else my mom made me forget, something she herself suffered from, hiding her see-through fingers inside her ever-present velvet gloves. The first night when it was clear Elyse was Fading, she and my mom had a vicious argument. I was outside our trailer, watching their quivering silhouettes scream at each other through the thin curtain, Elyse's shadow fainter than Mom's. Their heated words were muffled through the wall, but I heard a smash, the sound of glass breaking. I didn't dare go in, so I sat under the window with my knees tucked beneath my chin until their voices ceased with one final shout. Elyse ran out, slamming the door behind her, and I followed.

She climbed to the tightrope platform where she curled up and sobbed. She was seven years older than me, and I thought she knew everything. I didn't think her self-assuredness and calmness could give way to a sadness so profound. She startled when I wrapped my arms around her trembling form. She still felt solid.

"Thea." She held me tight, and I buried my nose in her hair, breathing in sweet osmanthus. "Mom wants me to quit before I fully Fade."

"Why do we Fade?" I asked, examining the shape of my hand through hers.

"Humans weren't meant to surpass gravity."

Back then, I didn't understand what she meant. Now I knew that magic was a changing quality that grew the more we mastered it, the closer we got to true weightlessness. But our mortal bodies weren't made to hold a magic so strong.

"Are you going to quit?" The tears that collected in the corners of my eyes spilled over; I knew her answer.

"I can't." She sobbed and I wished my grasp on her could be enough to hold her in my life forever.

ONCE I REMEMBERED ELYSE, THE LOOKS MY MOM gave me made sense: the expression on her face the day of my thirteenth birthday when the hoop carried me high into the air, the way her gaze blurred every time she watched me until she stopped coming to my shows entirely. I looked too much like Elyse on the hoop, tan skin sparkling, black hair plaited into endless loops behind my head, a mirror image of the daughter she'd lost.

I'D BE LYING IF I SAID I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT WAS coming. The first day I noticed the tips of my toes were faint, I cancelled my show. The Circus was unhappy with me—I could tell from the way my trailer lights flickered and how the animals walked wide circles around me like I repelled them. A knock sounded at my trailer door after the show, and I prayed that it wasn't my mom.

Vesper stood in the doorway with two candy apples, an offering I couldn't refuse. We sat on the floor, eating our treats in silence. Once we were half done, he asked, "Are you going to quit?"

I can't, was Elyse's answer when I had asked her the same question. The ghost of her words hung on my lips. Instead, I said, "I don't know."

This was why my mom made me forget—so I could enjoy the art for as long as possible before I faced this turmoil. I could take the route that she took, hanging up her invisible wings to continue on in this world and start a family, or I could take the route of Elyse.

True to her word, Elyse never quit. She kept spinning that endless circle night after night until I could make out the striped inside of the Big Top through her. I watched her until one night, she was so transparent that I could see everything behind her with perfect clarity. It was then I realized she was no longer there. She was gone, and that hoop continued to spin without her. Murmurs rippled across the audience and then they stood, thrilled by the seamless vanishing act, their deafening applause drowning out my sobs.

"If I quit," I twirled the stick of the apple between my palms, "would I stay here or would I leave the Circus?"

"Where would you go if you left the Circus?" The Circus was the only life we ever knew.

I shrugged. "Where would I go if I disappeared?"

Vesper chewed, cleverly waiting for the moment to pass, then he changed the subject and gave me his take on tonight's show, the first I'd ever missed, and it was a welcome distraction from the inevitable choice that awaited me.

IF I SAID ALOUD THAT I WAS QUITTING, THE CIRCUS would write me out forever. I told my mom it was a break, and she nodded knowingly. When I watched the other aerialists, my heart folded in half. The idea that my mom turned her back on her trapeze and stayed here, watching them every night for years, was unfathomable to me.

The acrobats danced above me while I set up the magician's equipment on the ground below. Even though I kept my eyes downcast, their shadows taunted me with their tricks.

One night, Vesper approached me with a furrowed brow. He said, "You're fading."

"What?" I dropped the cables I was carrying to look down at my body. My toes hadn't reverted to opacity but there were no new signs of Fading since I stopped doing hoop.

"You never smile anymore."

"Oh," I said. "Don't scare me like that."

"Well, it is scary, isn't it? To think that you would live the rest of your life like this?"

Like this. Flightless. I felt heavier lately, the pull of gravity stronger than ever before. Maybe it would get so strong that I'd be dragged into the earth as I continued to reach for the sky.

"I don't want to Fade," I whispered.

Vesper folded his goat legs beneath him and sat down. "I was glad when you said that you'd stop, because I didn't want you to disappear, but this is worse. You're fading on the inside. You were meant to be up there."

I followed his gaze. An acrobat launched himself from the platform, sailing through the air until he grasped the metal chains waiting for him, and my heart ached to watch. My hoop hung empty, the tape wrapping around steel worn from my frequent use. It grew closer and closer until I realized that I was walking toward it. My feet carried me to the ladder's base. I climbed rung after rung until I was on the platform, level with the hoop.

Without thinking, I discarded my shoes and leapt. The distance was farther than usual, and I doubted myself for a moment. Did I still have my magic? Or was I earthbound now? I missed my catch, fingers grazing the base of the ring. Gravity was a force that I underestimated.

As I started to fall, I remembered Elyse's last show. The thought of her spinning, bound by the love of her art until the very end, slowed my descent, and I stretched one inch higher to grab the bottom curve. I steadied my hold and pulled myself up. Everything was right. My skin glittered. I was grounded, as the circle reminded me that with every rotation: *I'm still here. I'm still here.*

One day I wouldn't be, but for now, I kept spinning.

EMILY YU *(she/they) is a second-generation Chinese Canadian with many pets and far too many hobbies. She is an editor and illustrator for* Heartlines Spec *magazine, and her work has been published in* Ricepaper *magazine,* Hearth Stories, Luna Station Quarterly, Landed: Transformative Stories of Canadian Immigrant Women *anthology, and* the tapestry of my existence *anthology. She welcomes you to connect with her at www.emily-yu.ca.*

POEM TO MY MOTHER AND MY POTHOS PLANT

When I'm done, I look to you for my goodness.
A cloud can be a mountain. A leaf can be a sky.

Piano keys just rung, strings vibrate unease—
you are a green thing, alive in here with me.

I look to you to tell me *Goodness, you are something!*
We're both alive in here, and isn't that a living making?

I always want to play something different.
You gather dust, you shed skin, you weep;

never the same twice. I look to you for permission—
I'm an echo of myself—you're a sky full of mountains

telling me *Good, you've done the thing. You can be.*
You're beautiful; I want to tell you for the first time.

ANA RODRIGUEZ MACHADO *is a Cuban diaspora poet living in Toronto. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in* Hooligan Mag*,* The Malahat Review*,* CV2*, and elsewhere. Her poems have been finalists for the CBC Poetry Prize and the PEN Canada New Voices Award. She holds an MFA from the University of Guelph.*

CLIMATE DISPATCH FROM SASKATCHEWAN, CANADA *AUGUST 2021*

The fish in the Qu'Appelle Valley
are washing up dead. The lakes are
too hot for them to breathe.
Residents must puncture the bodies
with shovels and throw them back
into the water, while children wade
in chunks of white cartilage
floating like poached eggs.

In the cities and towns, every
outdoor surface is syrup-sticky and
brown, because the aphids are out of
control, because the ladybugs didn't hatch
this year, because there hasn't been enough

rain. This week is the first of many
where the sky is blue again, instead
of smoked grey from fires up North
and out West. And yet, triumphantly,

people have spotted river otters
returning to the lake for the first
time in decades. This is good,
the scientists report. This is a good sign.

LEONE BRANDER *is a writer and artist from Saskatchewan. She holds an MFA from Boston University. Her work has appeared in* Grain*,* Wigleaf*, the* Texas Review*, the* Bellingham Review*, and elsewhere. Find her @leonebrander or at leonebrander.com.*


RUBIES™

PROFILE

The swimsuit issue

RUBIES creates gender-affirming sporty fits for trans girls

BY BB BURNETT

AS JAMIE ALEXANDER PREPARED TO TAKE HIS family on a vacation to Panama in 2019, he worried about the lack of bathing suit options available for trans girls like his daughter Ruby.

"We were heading to a country where they are less accepting, so we were concerned about personal safety should she be 'outed,'" Alexander says.

Alexander and his wife decided Ruby would have to wear her old boardshorts during the vacation. At the time, Ruby was 11 years old, and she was disappointed to not be able to wear the bikini bottoms she was used to wearing when hanging out with friends at beaches in southern Ontario.

When the family returned, Jamie set out to find a solution for flattering, form-fitting bottoms that would give trans girls and women the opportunity to confidently enjoy the same activities and sports as their friends. This marked the beginning of RUBIES, a gender-affirming clothing line based in Toronto.

"There were definitely products for adults," Alexander said about the marketplace in 2019, when the brand launched. "But not a lot for youth that are active." Now, though, RUBIES is part of a growing list of suppliers making trans-friendly activewear, which includes brands like TomboyX, UNTAG, and GENDERBENDERLLC.

Before starting RUBIES, Alexander worked as an engineer with no prior experience in fashion or garment making. When he began the company, he collaborated with the fashion incubator at Toronto Metropolitan University, before shifting gears to work with a fashion studio in the city.

Over the past five years, he has continued to work on the re-shaping effect of RUBIES products in an effort to replicate the look sought out by trans-femmes who tuck or use gaffers, but without the need to tape or hold anything in place. RUBIES has also expanded beyond swimwear into gender-affirming underwear, and now has a similar line of garments for adults.

As a cis man making clothes for trans bodies, Alexander has had to rely on customer feedback and market research. He says he's learned a lot, particularly from parents of trans children, about what is lacking in trans fashion. One thing that he heard repeatedly from parents was that trans children were often withdrawing from activities they loved after transitioning, in part because they didn't have clothing that helped them feel comfortable and empowered. "We just want to help people. The big thing is just getting people moving again, going swimming again, feeling comfortable going to the beach, going to camp, hanging out with your friends," Alexander says.

Over the last few months, RUBIES launched a program to donate returned and used clothing to trans and 2SLGBTQIA+ organizations, who will pass them along to members of their community. The company has partnered with roughly a dozen organizations in the U.S., and they're now looking for Canadian partners to expand the program.

"The reality is the clothing is not cheap," Alexander says. The program aims to make RUBIES clothing more accessible to those on a budget. "There's some people for whom it's out of reach, and I know there are some people who just can't afford to buy it."

At 16, Ruby is back to having fun with her friends like she usually does in the summer. Only now, thanks to her dad, her athletic wardrobe is much more diverse.

IMAGES COURTESY RUBIES

FILM

Labour and love

Ilse Moreno's *The Canadian Dream* encourages migrant workers to fight for their rights

IN 2010, ILSE MORENO'S FATHER, ALBERTO MORENO Sartorius, discovered burns on his body. He was alarmed. He had just moved to Leamington, Ontario from Mexico because he wasn't making enough money to support his family. In Leamington, he worked on a vegetable farm for 14 hours each day. He was concerned that some of the chemicals there had caused his condition.

The farm manager didn't share Sartorius's concern—when they found out about his fears, they mocked him. When Sartorius filed a complaint to the Ministry of Labour in Canada, the farm's owner asked him to sign a letter of resignation. He didn't. They tried to deport him to Mexico.

Now, 14 years later, Moreno shares Sartorius's story through a nine-minute documentary, *The Canadian Dream*, which premiered at HotDocs earlier this year. Narrated by Moreno in Spanish, and presented through an interview with Sartorius, also in Spanish, it highlights the distressing, exploitative conditions faced by migrant workers. Moreno's father stayed in Canada and was able to win his lawsuit against the farm with help from advocacy group Justice for Migrant Workers. But his case is rare; Canada deports thousands of migrant workers each year.

"Even though it was hard, and better laws are needed, defending yourself is possible," Sartorius says in the film.

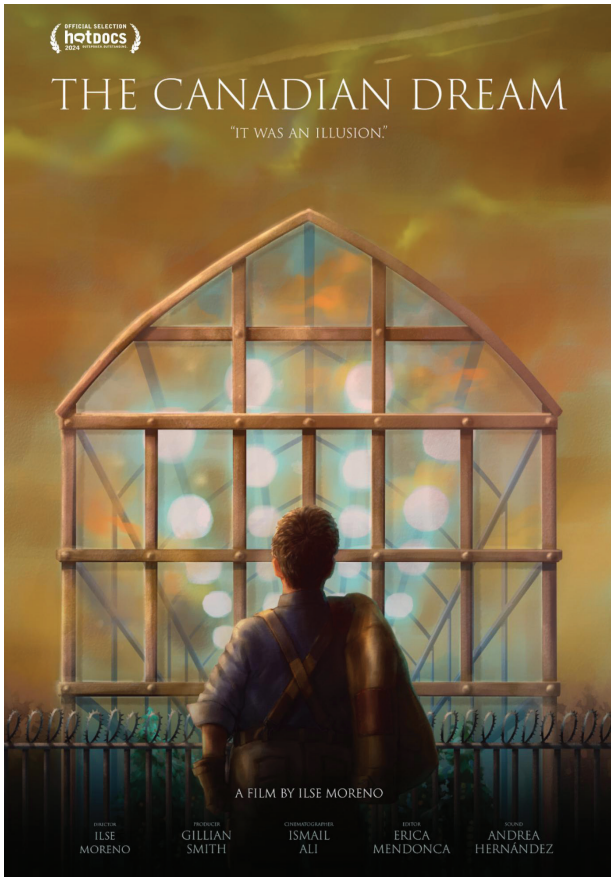
"My dad's story stands out because it's proven that something can be done," Moreno tells *This Magazine*. "He was smart enough to get proof and record the bad things that his employers were doing, and he was brave enough to make change."

Initially an assignment for a class at Humber College, *The Canadian Dream* turned into more when Moreno realized that her father's story was too important to be limited to the tight time frame of a semester. After graduating, she finished the doc alongside cinematographer Ismail Ali with the goal of creating awareness around migrant workers'rights. In addition to its HotDocs run, *The Canadian Dream* will be shared with migrant workers' activist groups and raise money for temporary migrant workers' safety equipment and health care.

Moreno hopes *The Canadian Dream* will equip migrant workers with information to advocate for themselves. "There's a lot of misinformation that they've received," she says.

Now, Moreno and Sartorius regularly visit migrant workers to share their story and encourage collective action. This, Moreno says in her director's statement, is the first step to showing them that their "dreams are not only valid but also achievable."

—ALEXA DIFRANCESCO



IMAGES COURTESY ILSE MORENO

ILLUSTRATION COURTESY *YARROW MAGAZINE*

MEDIA

An honest conversation

Yarrow Magazine mentors emerging Indigenous editors

IN 2003, JORDAN ABEL LEFT Vancouver for Edmonton in search of a fresh start. As a recent English graduate, he wanted a career in publishing. But after years of unpaid editorial work at various publishing houses failed to lead to a stable career, he decided to focus on writing.

"I was told really early on," Abel says, "you just have to choose one or the other, and that was kind of frustrating."

Whoever said that was wrong. Abel is now a Griffin Poetry Prize-winning writer, editor and professor in the Department of English and Film Studies at the University of Alberta (U of A).

From his early experience, the Nisga'a author wrote *The Place of Scraps*, a book of poems about the impact of colonialism on Indigenous people's identity and history. The success of his debut opened him up to more writing and editing jobs. Now, he wants to help other Indigenous people get a foothold in the industry.

In April, Abel and collaborators Jessica Johns, the infamous Cree writer from Alberta, Conor Kerr, an award-winning Métis and Ukrainian writer and lecturer at the U of A, and Chelsea Novak, a settler of mixed European descent who is also a lecturer at the U of A, founded *Yarrow Magazine*, a digital publication of literary work by emerging Indigenous writers. The Indigenous founders' struggles in publishing inform their goal of mentoring young editors. Abel says they want to "heal a historical divide and allow Indigenous editors to come into this space."

Despite a recent increase in the promotion of literature by racialized writers, mainstream publishing houses still don't represent the diversity in Canadian society. "There is an enormous deficit of Indigenous editors in this country...The concerns and ideas that Indigenous writers bring to the table need to be nurtured and cared for in Indigenous kinds of ways," Abel says, addressing the mainstream publishing industry's failure to accurately represent Indigenous voices. *Yarrow* seeks to provide a platform for authentic Indigenous storytelling in a culturally respectful environment.

The founders' passion is evident from the first edition, which showcases talents from well-established Indigenous writers like Marilyn Dumont, Kaitlyn Purcell and Billy-Ray Belcourt.

In the next issue, *Yarrow* will partner with the Indigenous Voices Awards to publish unseen poetry and prose by eight Indigenous writers. Abel thinks *Yarrow* will continue to grow by addressing new Indigenous editorial issues and championing Indigenous writers.

"We need to be able to tell our own stories," Abel says. "We need Indigenous narrative sovereignty."

—MATTHEW HANICK

SPOTLIGHT

Habitat loss

How the Toronto furry community is battling gentrification

FOR ROO, A GREY MUZZLE, THE BARS IN TORONTO'S GAY VILLAGE WERE A birthplace of sorts. Grey muzzles are longtime members of the furry community, and bars were formative spaces for Roo both as a gay man and a furry. In the '90s and early 2000s, Church and Wellesley staples like 5ive, Zipperz, The Barn & Stables, Remington's Men of Steel and Babylon Martini and Musique Boutique were second homes for these communities.

"We showed up in groups of 10 or 15 and just took up the entire floor," Roo says, recalling the early days at Babylon. "That was my introduction to the actual gay community at large—furries somehow taking over the first floor of this really ritzy martini bar."

Furries, in the simplest of terms, are fans of anthropomorphic animal characters. Many furries consider fursuiting—dressing up and roleplaying as their favourite characters—as a custom akin to drag; an alter ego that represents a heightened or aspirational version of themselves. Like drag, furry has been claimed by the 2SLGBTQIA+ community as a uniquely queer subculture.

"A lot of us who are queer and trans never really felt human in the first place. Or maybe our human-ness has always been determined by law and policies," says Hazel Zaman, a professor of social work at Pacific Lutheran University who studies furry identities and queer spaces. "To feel like 'other,' or to feel like 'animal' or feel more different than what it means to be normal—furry allows that."

Babylon is the only one of the key clubs from the '90s and early 2000s to have survived Toronto's condo boom, albeit in a new iteration and under a different name. It's now a Mexican restaurant. The rest were razed to build luxury apartments, which are encroaching on Church-Wellesley's small businesses. With the loss of these spaces comes fewer arenas where furries can be themselves, limiting the ways in which the community can grow. Roo compares these closures to "losing my Cheers."

This trend extends to furry-exclusive dance parties and meet-ups like Floof!!, Howl and Kerfluffle. Many of these events encountered issues with their event spaces as well as navigating in-person gatherings during a time of physical separation in the early days of COVID-19.

This has a serious impact on community, and the means people have to build it. While Canadian furry convention attendance at events like CanFURence and Furnal Equinox has increased over the last few years, spurred by a burgeoning online presence, participating can be pricey. A single day pass can cost up to $55, while hotels and transportation can cost hundreds of dollars. The disappearance of affordable queer-friendly venues, either due to COVID-19 or real estate buyouts, means fewer spaces accessible to all furries—spaces where they feel understood, away from the stigma that clings to their community.

This is where Fierce Furry Buddies has emerged. Founded in 2022 and held every few months, Fierce is a kinky, 2SLGBTQIA+-led rave held at the historically queer Buddies in Bad Times Theatre in Toronto. Corey Manuel, Fierce's operations manager, says 151 people showed up to their first event. The line extended down the block. "It's one of those things where if you build it, they will come," Manuel says. Clearly, the community was hungry for an event like this, where tickets cost $10 and come with the guarantee of a party.

Melancholy, event co-founder and former organizer, laments the rise in anti-queer rhetoric throughout Europe and North America. "Fierce represents that we're united, brought together by community and a desire to express ourselves and enjoy our lives, and that we won't step off to the side in silence," they say.

While Fierce is just one event, it serves as a vanguard against both hatred and the condos that tower overhead—an oasis where furries can be out and proud.

—ELLA MILLER

PHOTO BY DREW SLAWSON

CULTURE

Family ties

Why *Bob's Burgers* holds a special place in our hearts—and on TV

BY ANGELINA MAZZA

BOB'S BURGERS KEEPS GETTING BETTER. Loren Bouchard's animated sitcom, now beginning its 15th season on FOX, is bigger-hearted and far more ambitious than when it first aired in 2011. It has the kind of confidence that can only emerge, I imagine, when a project that starts out with tepid-to-terrible reviews goes on to receive years of critical praise and multi-season renewals. A critic at the *Washington Post* once dismissed *Bob's Burgers* as "derivatively dull," and wrote that "somewhere, once again, Fred Flintstone weeps." The show has since inspired a film, a cookbook, a comic book series, and perhaps inevitably, the porn parody *Bob's Boners* (2014).

For the uninitiated: *Bob's Burgers* is about a family running a struggling burger restaurant in a fictional New Jersey beach town. The Belchers are an eccentric bunch. There's deadpan, pessimistic Bob (voiced by H. Jon Benjamin); his spirited wife Linda (John Roberts); Tina, their nerdy teen, obsessed with boys and horses (Dan Mintz); Gene, the flamboyant middle child (Eugene Mirman); and mischievous nine-year-old Louise (Kristen Schaal). The characters dive into all sorts of hijinks and adventures to keep their restaurant afloat—like participating in a water balloon battle to counter a neighborhood rent hike—and always return to the status quo in the well-loved tradition of long-running, episodic adult animation.

Except *Bob's Burgers* isn't *The Simpsons* or *South Park*. Yes, the writing can be gross and edgy—the pilot includes a recurring bit about Tina's itchy crotch—but it softens. Below the toilet humor lies a tender heart. It's what makes *Bob's Burgers* spark: its ability to balance absurdity with genuine emotion, and to explore existential questions, like what we owe the dead, with tremendous wit and pathos. "I am a terrible son and a terrible person," Bob says in season 13, after spending a day trying to find his mother's grave, which he hasn't visited in two decades. (Meanwhile, Tina wonders whether it's rude to pick a wedgie in a cemetery. Gene's reply: "I think it's rude *not* to.") But in the episode's emotional climax, Linda tells Bob that his mother would be proud of him. "Look what you've done with the restaurant, with this family," she says, then adds, quickly: "Tina, take your hand out of your butt."

Like the Simpsons, the Belchers are frozen in time—a fate that's particularly brutal for 13-year-old Tina, forever trapped in puberty—even as the sitcom clearly cycles through the seasons, marked by holiday-centric episodes. Still, the characters evolve. Socially awkward Tina becomes more confident in her budding sexuality. When a classmate threatens to share her "erotic friend fiction" (secret, sexy stories she writes about her peers) with the whole school, Tina decides to read it to everyone herself. (Her motto: "I'm a smart, strong, sensual woman.") Early Louise is almost demonic—in season one's "Sexy Dance Fighting," she tells Tina she should kill herself. Gleefully, no less! But over a dozen seasons later, we see a more vulnerable side to her character. In season 13's "What About Job?" Louise spirals out about her future: "What if I grow up and I just am not really anything cool or exciting? What if I'm just a boring-life person?" It's a gut-punch of an episode. Silly and resonant in equal parts, it marks the series' gradual shift from a darker, more abrasive tone to something heartfelt and oddly profound. Over time, *Bob's Burgers* has positioned itself in a realm that many critics take for granted: the airy, earnest, slice-of-life comedy. TV that is far removed from the stream of reboots, tense dramas, and dramedies that still command the most cultural authority.

Season 14's standout, "The Amazing Rudy," pivots away from the Belcher family for the first time. The story follows Louise's classmate, a recurring character known as Regular-Sized Rudy (Brian Huskey), as he attends a "we're-still-a-family dinner" with his divorced parents and their new partners. It casts the Belchers as minor characters—they first appear a quarter of the way through, in the background, bickering about whether to steal coins from a mall fountain, while Rudy tries on hats at a kiosk called "Better Off Head." (*Bob's Burgers* is reliably—and delightfully—heavy on wordplay.) The episode is funny and melancholic, scored to wistful piano melodies and Stevie Wonder, like a less-cynical *BoJack Horseman*. There's a montage of past family dinners, each one showing Rudy's parents sitting farther apart. There's a tragicomic scene in a carwash, where Rudy's father can't tell Rudy he loves him without the whirring machines drowning him out. And there are moments that align us with Rudy, like when he watches the Belchers from a distance, drawn to their supportive, close-knit dynamic—a nod to *Bob's Burgers*' secret sauce, the key to its enduring charm.

"The Amazing Rudy" proves that after 262 episodes, *Bob's Burgers* can do whatever the hell it wants. It can experiment with tone and perspective. It can arrange a Philip Glass song for Gene's all-xylophone band in a way that brings me to tears. It can cast comedy superstars, from Paul Rudd to Patti Harrison. And it can channel the quiet, emotional ambition of children's television, where animated shows like *Adventure Time*, *Steven Universe*, *Hilda*, *Dead End*, *The Owl House*, *Summer Camp Island*, and *Infinity Train* have often delivered more affecting and complex storytelling than adult animation over the last decade. (A few exceptions: *BoJack Horseman*, of course; *Pantheon*; A24's *Hazbin Hotel*, and HBO's terrific *Harley Quinn*.)

Among that company, *Bob's Burgers* stands out for its remarkable longevity. Television has long been a cutthroat

ILLUSTRATION BY VALERIE THAI

arena. The landscape has felt especially unstable since the Great Streaming Panic of 2022—courtesy of Wall Street—when services like Netflix, Disney+, and HBO Max became more selective about renewals, and less willing to nurture shows finding their groove. (Many also removed media from their libraries to cut costs, making a casualty of animated gems like *Infinity Train* and *Summer Camp Island*.) A new kind of Comfort Show has emerged: the rare series that gets regular renewals in a painfully commercialized industry. The survival of *Bob's Burgers* is a small marvel; that the series continues to surprise and delight viewers, year after year, is an argument for patience. For giving writers time to experiment. For sticking with a TV world as it unfolds and evolves. For playing the long game—despite all the odds.

In the season six episode "Sliding Bobs," Tina, Gene, and Louise imagine how different life would be if Bob didn't have a moustache when he first met Linda. Would Bob and Linda have ended up together? Would their family still exist? When Tina panics at the thought that life is ruled by chaos and randomness, not fate, Linda tries to comfort her: "Everything *is* random, but that's what makes life so wonderful. Sometimes, all the crap in the universe lines up—like that night I met your father. Everything lined up, and it came out Belcher." We're so lucky it did.

READ THIS

No Credit River

A non-linear look at loss

NO CREDIT RIVER
By Zoe Whittall
*Book*hug Press, $22.95*

ZOE WHITTALL'S *NO CREDIT RIVER* IS AN ACHING, INTIMATE LOOK AT A tumultuous decade of heartbreak and unimaginable loss in the writer's life. Told through a series of beautifully crafted prose poems, these vivid snapshots of events and memories evoke a clear time and place, transporting us from Toronto to Banff and back again. Whittall's writing refuses to shy away from the ugly feelings that can accompany loss and lost love. Much like the grief she works through, the trajectory of the book is not linear, and we find ourselves bounced forward and backward in time, a twisty illusion that keeps us, like the author, unmoored and searching for solid ground.

Despite the heavy subject matter, Whittall's signature wit and laser-sharp observations on life shine through in each piece. A wry look at the Canadian literary community in one and observations on the absurdity of working in Hollywood in another illustrate Whittall's distinct ability to focus her lens not only inward on her own grief but on the larger world around her. This accessible glimpse into her mind and heart results in a collection of vignettes that are both lyrical and heart-punching. *No Credit River* is a memoir to savour.

—ELIZABETH OBERMEYER

CHAMBERSONIC
By Oana Avasilichioaei
Talonbooks, $21.95

Chambersonic is a collection of scores, poems, and scripts exploring the possibilities of voice in performance—in the close space of a sound booth, in the public intimacy of a theatre. This is a poly-vocal text—at times from a single speaker, at others from multiple voices. "[A]lways beginning in the middle," these works delve into the aural textures and political implications of sounding aloud, through language or otherwise. QR codes throughout the book lead to recorded versions of many of the texts, putting them in clearer context. When static on the page, Oana Avasilichioaei's texts invite us to read them out loud.

—SARAH PINDER

ATTIC RAIN
By Samantha Jones
NeWest Press, $20.95

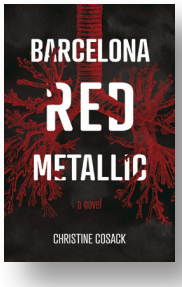
Samantha Jones's *Attic Rain* is a nuanced articulation of the mindspace of obsessive-compulsive disorder. Her debut poetry collection uses form—the brevity of haiku, the recurrences of villanelles, the queries of mondos—to make visceral OCD's reiterative fixations and rituals. These rituals are conveyed with insightful complexity; they are soothing, grounding, as natural as water moving over the same path repeatedly to make a river, even as the force that propels them is terror. *Attic Rain* achieves the impressive feat of both portraying and reenvisioning OCD: by drawing it as maps, organizing it into graphs, annotating it as music, and ultimately, transforming it into poetry.

—JADE WALLACE

COLOURS IN HER HANDS
By Alice Zorn
Freehand Books, $24.95

Mina's world is pieced together by running stitches of brightly coloured embroidery thread. Her brother, Bruno, is often left untangling his sister's personal affairs and romantic relationships while his own get swirled into Mina's world of needlework and purloined possessions. When Mina's independence is threatened by a small stroke, Bruno must navigate the ethical maze that results. Protecting his sister from potential exploitation is a priority, but at what cost to her happiness and trust? *Colours in Her Hands* is a touching novel about a woman with Down's Syndrome and the power of a sibling's love.

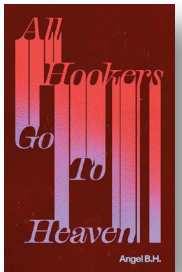
—WHITNEY ADNANE



BARCELONA RED METALLIC
By Christine Cosack
Second Story Press, $22.95

How well can we ever know our loved ones? Though *Barcelona Red Metallic* initially presents as a standard murder mystery, readers will be surprised as the story expands into themes of grief, control, and parental responsibility. Anticipation builds through rotating characters' perspectives, like Jo Nelson's, a grandmother using her warm exterior to shroud secrets, or Luci Miller's, an inquisitive RCMP officer. Through carefully constructed details, like descriptions of forensics, the moody landscape of the Pacific Northwest, or the workings of the human body, Christine Cosack has created a vivid, immersive novel.

—OPHELIE ZALCMANIS-LAI



ALL HOOKERS GO TO HEAVEN
By Angel B.H.
Invisible Publishing, $23.95

On a turbulent journey from a strip club in Montreal to a swingers' resort in Jamaica to a brothel in Sydney, Australia, former virgin Mag unearths her queerness, discovers a restless obsession with money, and continues to redefine her relationship with sex. Raised an Evangelical Christian, remnants of the religion—repression, guilt, shame, the occasional prayer—cling to her foray into sex work. Capturing the intense and resurrectional nature of female friendships, Angel B.H.'s gripping debut novel *All Hookers Go To Heaven* expertly examines what it means to come of age with the shadow of a religion that never felt like yours looming in your rear view mirror.

—JULIA MASTROIANNI

SNEAK PEEK

Just the tip?

I BEGAN TO SEARCH OUT TRACES OF THE FORESKIN both abroad and closer to home, in spaces both "scholarly" and very much not. Amsterdam, for instance, is home to both the national Rijksmuseum and the Sexmuseum on the Damrak, near the Red Light District. Both are necessary to understanding how and why the foreskin inscribes and is ascribed meaning, from the marble sculptures populating the Rijksmuseum to the animatronic flasher at the Sexmuseum. So, from the British Library and the Wellcome Collection to the Kinsey Institute, from the Gerber/Hart Library and Archives to the Leather Archives & Museum in Chicago, I went looking for traces of foreskins both present and absent. Interlibrary loans arrived from around the world, bringing me sources from local public libraries as well as from the Library of Congress. Information about foreskins appeared from all directions. As I searched for information in medical textbooks, I read up on religious debates, and pored through sex manuals, scientific studies, blogs, parenting books, pornography and erotica, the fine arts and popular arts, everything from scholarly books as well as self-published books. I understand an "archive as any mechanism for collecting and preserving information, including documents, computer data, audio recordings, objects, and historical artifacts." What matters is not that there is an "official" archive of the foreskin, but rather a method through which to think about a given concept, idea, or thing.

I began to trace the various discursive tendencies that seemed common to the scholarship. If the study was "procircumcision," we could expect to find pejorative references to the foreskin; if the study was "pro-foreskin," we would find the foreskin reified and the biomedical industrial complex demonized. This debate is polarized. Sides are taken. It often seems as if the scholar must be like George W. Bush declaring that "either you are with us, or against us" (echoing Jesus Christ's words in the Gospel of Matthew), and thus the scholar takes a strong position either "for" or "against" the foreskin. But what happens to the agnostic researcher, let alone a parent confused about what to do? When I commenced this study, I was not interested in the division so much as the discourse, the language used, the metaphors deployed, the tweets, the memes, and the gifs that were distributed online. Today, my interest is very much in the division and how the foreskin is represented and understood. Quite simply: What if one just wants to know about the foreskin?

From Uncut: A Cultural Analysis of the Foreskin *by* **JONATHAN A. ALLAN**. *Used with permission of the publisher, University of Regina Press. Copyright © 2024 Jonathan A. Allan.*

LETTER

The age before algorithms

As we move into digital silos, I miss how legacy media brought us together

ILLUSTRATION BY ALEX DEADMAN

IN AN AGE OF TARGETED ADS AND ALGORITHMS SHUFFLING US INTO digital silos, I think about the time of *Reader's Digest*. This isn't just about the end of the magazine's over 75-year run in Canada earlier this year. The story of the decline of legacy media is one that's been told many times before.

Instead, it's a reminder of the near disappearance of a different time. A time before mysterious digital formulas shaped much of what we read, watched and listened to. A time before daily experiences were tailored to our unique tastes. When it was easier to have random encounters with media that changed our minds, or led us down a different path.

Reader's Digest, *National Geographic*, *60 Minutes*, MuchMusic. Growing up, these were more than just news and entertainment. They were the gatekeepers to much of what we knew about the world around us. Through them, we collectively read many of the same stories and waited to tune in together each week to watch the next episode of the show that took a week to air. We bonded over the mutual inconvenience of waiting to see what happened next.

Contrast that with today, as we skim through articles on our phones or devour a new series in a night or two, immediately sharing our thoughts about what we watch or hear. But there was something about how we used to experience these things together, like when *Seinfeld* drew to an end and had us guessing how it would wrap. When we talked about it, we read our friends' facial expressions and silences. We lingered in these moments, and there was time to find common ground in unedited spaces.

Looking back, it was the way we encountered legacy media all around us that embedded it in the fabric of our culture in a way I only truly appreciate now. Fewer outlets with more touchpoints when we stepped outside of the house gave way to universal experiences.

Random encounters with media in mundane places (the dentist's office, most iconically) created new windows into others' life experiences and opportunities to learn. It also gave us something to fall back on in conversations with those we didn't have all that much in common with.

As I watch my son flicking through apps, it is remarkable to think about how much he has at his fingertips. It's a world so unlike the one I grew up in, where you watched what was on that hour and if you didn't like it, you waited it out. Either that, or you ended the minor misery by turning off the TV to go outside and look at a bird's nest, or took a second crack at an unfinished art project. Gratification from this came slower, but seemed to last longer. It was the stuff of lingering childhood memories. As he grows, I hope that my son will also come to know the small triumphs of making his own fun.

Maybe I'm holding on to the past, but I think the unexpected, shared experiences that expose us to art outside of what we crave or the kinds of stories that we would usually tap on are precious. It's a phenomenon that has the power to pull us in and connect us to something bigger than what our tastes may prefer. It's how our perspective widens, how we grow, and it's been a gift to us from legacy media like the Canadian edition of *Readers Digest* for the past 76 years.

Most people are probably nostalgic about their childhood, but I'm grateful that I knew a time when more of our experiences were unscripted and unforgettable.

Sincerely,
JEN LEE

THIS...

doesn't try to be hip, it just is.
It never ceases to make me think,
question things and get angry.
–SARAH POLLEY

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