

The Capilano Review



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7

Editor's Note

8

Christopher Tubbs

CUSTOMS DECLARATION TO A
WHITE EMPIRE

9

Andrea Abi-Karam

I GOT LOST / I GOT DELETED

15

Ambient Asian Space

Season 3 Episode 5: The Emperor's
Karaoke Lounge

18

Shane Book

Four Poems

22

Jamil Jan Kochai

Two Poems

24

Ya-Wen Ho

Two Poems

27

sidony o'neal

is this the sea?

30

Lee Lai

dreams about surgery

38

Bug Cru

Two Illustrations

40

Raymond de Borja

Two Poems

44

Gwen Benaway

Three Poems

48

Afuwa and Dion Kaszas

stitching back the land

57

Eli Howey

Waking Gates

63

Jennie Duguay

I Pray to the River

64

Christopher Tubbs

WHITE LIGHTNING AND THE
BROOM OF DANGER

72

Kai Rajala

Colliding

73

Natasha Gauthier

Blood Moon

79

Juliane Okot Bitek

UNDER WHAT CONDITIONS DO
BLACK POETS WRITE

87

Jennif(f)er Tamayo

[WHAT IF EVERY MOVE YOU MADE
COULD HEAL YOU]

88

José Vadi

Two Poems

91

Stacey Ho

Green House

103

Caroline Szpak

Grandfathers of Bogatynia

104

Kai Cheng Thom

what i'd really like

109

see to see —

Carmen Faye Mathes

Review of Jordan Scott's *Night & Ox*

Cam Scott

Review of Aja Couchois Duncan's
Restless Continent

Samantha Nock

Review of *IRL*

113

Contributors

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Green House

Stacey Ho

A pair of casement windows looks out from the second floor of the house. You can see into people's backyards: a stack of wood covered in tarp, a rusting tricycle, an abandoned birdhouse. Lumpy cedar bushes, grown too close together, fence in a perimeter. The lawn is cut very short. Miniature bits of sorrel and dandelion sprout up for a moment, only to be mown down with the grass. Nevertheless, there is life. You can tell by the wind moving through the trees.

The window is framed in white trim. It frames the figure of a seated man. When it is sunny, the light creeps in between close-cropped salt and pepper stubble to warm his shiny scalp. Sometimes it is cloudy and the whole room seems to turn blue and is filled with a stillness. He breathes very slow, and it fills the house with a rhythm. The air changes as it filters through him. It retains something of him. It's moist.

When displeased or distressed, the air is filled with a sharp smell like hot vinegar and the woman who shares this house with the man withdraws to a corner that is as far from the smell as possible. After a while, she will quietly climb the stairs and look into the room. He will be there, as ever, maybe needing some water. She'll put on a favourite program or some music and they'll sit together. In this way, they cycle through the nights and days.

The room that faces the backyard is filled with houseplants—miniature versions of life in warmer places. They frame the small twin bed, the man, the easy chair by the window. If there is movement it is on plant time, or hidden inside the glazed containers, beneath the soil. She wipes the dust off the waxy leaves, plucks away ones that are dead or yellowing. The leaves go in the compost. The compost is kept in used milk cartons. The cartons go in the freezer. She tries to cook simple things that he might like to eat. A presence fills the house and takes root in her habits.

The lights go on at the end of the day and reflect themselves in the darkened windows. Night brings a heightened awareness of footsteps, the hum of appliances. The electricity running through the house tickles the pineal gland and sparks half-remembered conversations, phrases that loop over and around,

finding new syntaxes and means of expression. In the dark, her voice emerges, gives body to strange memories. She wonders if it's his voice speaking through her, her own, or someone else's. She doesn't know anymore. *I don't know*, she says to nobody. She goes to sleep.

It's a mild afternoon. The woman takes the man to a city park. He squints and moves gingerly, waving his arms from side to side like an underwater creature as they pick their way along a path. Along a riverbank there is a bush of light pink, spiky globes, each sphere cracked open by five corpulent orange blobs. "Look," she says, "flowers."

There are historic buildings, interesting cloud formations, other plants, and trees. She points at anything and everything, searching for his attention, touches him lightly on the shoulder to remind him of the way. His head wags back and forth, following her finger. They return to the house and he sleeps for a long while.

The light warms the room. The room is filled with plants. The man and the plants are breathing. The heat traps itself against the window, dissipates slowly through fissures in the wall, and lingers on until the evening.

* * *

Her attention flattens and spreads as the screen light flickers across her face. Information and emotion are generalized as they move from one window to another. She catches up on East Asian news blogs while cruising a dating site, pauses to solve an online chess puzzle, then forgets, for a moment, what she had started doing in the first place. It's better this way, to stay flat, but it only works for so long. Given the parameters of a human body, flatness must on occasion be filled out by movement and sensorial information.

She is trying to be a little better, every day. Any apparent frivolity is justified as simple behavioural modification, a strict system of positive and negative reinforcements. For instance, tonight, a date planned at a local bar: reward for two weeks without incident in the house and completion of a three-month long exercise regimen. Anything can be made into a reward, really, as long as you build it up that way.

The muscles in her neck loosen as she opens the garage door, steps into her vehicle, and starts the engine. The passing scenery stands in stark contrast to her recent house-bound monotony. However, the tension that arises from the stasis held in the house is necessary to her work, helps her balance numerous factors

to produce the perfect degree of focus. She turns down a quiet subdivision. Beautifully produced, dancehall-tinged pop music floats through the car stereo.

Leading up to the bar's entrance, there is a long hallway lined with mirrors and small, dim lights. She sees in her reflection that she is successfully mimicking a categorical sex appeal that is sleek, black, sharp, and again, flat. She waits, ordering a ginger-ale which glows with the same amber light that fills the room and glances off the brass taps and railings, accenting intentional glimmers on her neck and wrists. This is all part of her logic.

Later that evening, her date rises behind her, adjusts the straps of the harness, and pulls the woman up by the back of her hair so that her ass arches up toward the wobbling dildo. The pillow smells rich, like someone who hasn't showered in weeks mixed with leather jacket. Something tears along her shoulders and back.

"What's your name?" a voice says, somewhere off in the distance. "Marlene? That's a very pretty name, Marlene." The woman lets the physiological responses induced by her partner's actions run their course. She inhales pillow smell, bites deep into polyurethane softness.

"That's right Marlene, close your eyes. Go to your happy place."

Headlights illuminate the interior of the garage: an empty jerry can, a ladder-cum-storage space. Then back to darkness. She pulls the door tight against its frame so it doesn't squeak and turns the key deliberate and slow, making as little noise as possible. Voices come, murmuring around her. She ignores them. The amber bar room and the smell of sex linger and provide a sheen of immunity as she slips between a set of immaculate sheets. Light greys the sky outside her window.

* * *

There are boxes piled on boxes in the room next to the room where she sleeps. She doesn't know what the boxes contain, though a collection of work boots, each one tied by its laces to its partner, peeks out from the top of one pile. Also bound together are several piles of newspapers. There is an empty fish tank streaked with residue and framed full-sized posters for movies she's never seen. She doesn't recognize herself in any of these objects but will occasionally use the workout bench stored at one end of the room.

Ensnared in the room up above, the man hasn't moved for days. When this happens, his chin hangs slack from his jaw and the inside of his open mouth begins to dry. His tongue cracks and bleeds and spit forms a semi-solid film lining the cavity of his mouth. When this happens, the man must be watered

carefully and often. The woman uses a tiny wet sponge on a stick to moisten all the dried spit and another to scrub the film away. The sponges look like pastel lollipops. If the sponge is too wet, water trickles into his lungs, which produces an angry, involuntary cough. The spray she uses to moisten his mouth smells like lemon candy, masks the dank sour smell emitting from the man's body.

In the mornings now, when she wakes up, she imagines filaments of spit in her own mouth. Licking the back of her hand, milky white deposits appear on her skin for her inspection. So, it seems she has them too. She had never noticed this peculiar effect before. Now that she is aware of them, the strings of spit appear not just in the morning, but at all times of the day. She has taken to playing with them in her mouth as she goes about her work, sucking the neutral-tasting tendrils through the spaces between her teeth.

She waters him, she waters the plants. The sun shines through the window and heats the skin along one side of his body, which grows warm and sticky. The plants grow dense and lush and dark green. They creep along the walls, wrap themselves in the venetian blinds, tangle themselves in each other, thickening. The man gags on a sponge lollipop that she's shoved too far down his throat. Bilious drops stain the front of his pyjama top. "I'm sorry I'm sorry," she mutters on repeat. Outside an arbutus tree is flowering, red berries hanging in tandem with round white blossoms.

The exercise equipment in the basement looks like it is from the seventies. The bench is upholstered in disconcertingly bright blue vinyl and the pearly beige weights are filled with fine black sand. She knows this because one of them once cracked while she was lifting. The grit worked its way well into her eyes, mouth, and all over the concrete floor before she noticed the leak. It's a simple thing, this exercise machine. There's a system of hinges and pulleys to work her calves and quads and a big barbell suspended above the whole contraption. She likes the pressure that builds around her skull as she lifts. She takes on as much as possible to make it squeeze tight and snug around her brain.

Beneath the exercise bench, three milk crates overflow with empty bottles. The contents have evaporated, but the sickly warm smell of brandy still hangs in the air. Each time she lets a weight fall, there is the sound of glass clinking against itself to punctuate her efforts. She's reminded of a dream she had the night before, the sound of bombs going off in a crystal ballroom. She was staring at her reflection in a red taffeta dress, listening to the tinkling of the chandeliers as they shook above.

So that his body does not completely fall apart while it is not in use, she moves his arms and legs for him, twenty times each, two sets twice daily. One arm, then the other, goes up-down-back-forth, then is twisted lightly from side to side. One, two, three, four, five... The elbows, wrists, and each finger receive this treatment. Then one leg, then the other, then knees, ankles, and toes. "Very good, this is going to make you stronger." She says this though she's not sure if he can hear. From large to small, each appendage is suspended gently in her grasp, then bent and lifted. Then each part falls limp again. Five, six, seven, eight, nine... After his workout she pats and massages each limb.

* * *

Another date. The bed smells musky, as it did before. Greasy sheets are pushed to the edges of the mattress. They twist around their bodies. The dildo, still wrapped in its prophylactic, is tossed on top of a pile of dirty laundry. A body lies next to hers, swaddled in more sheets. Noise emanates from the tangle of linens.

"Mmmmphtck."

"What?"

"Mmmph," the body speaks, "That was... fuck. Nice. That was nice."

"Yes," says the woman, "we had sex."

Her companion's head peeks out of the pile, accompanied by grey hair and eyes. She has no urge meet this gaze. Instead the woman inspects the edge of the mattress where foam leaks out of a seam and onto the floor. She has just had sex on this mattress. The mattress lies on the floor. The floor is coated in vinyl, but the vinyl looks like fake wood. Cigarette butts and a crust of toast in a saucer share the floorspace. An overflowed recycling bin.

This recent encounter is blurry and difficult to quantify. There was wetness and dryness. There was the taste of sweat on skin. It was punctuated by yes, no, functional phrases such as are you ready now, do you like this, a particular line of collarbone or texture of hair or skin. But the memory of the event doesn't come back in any sensible order. It has no use as information. For her, this is not necessarily problematic, but certainly unusual. This instance and its accompanying pleasure will not differentiate itself between the last time or the next time. It is hard to recall things that are purely physical.

Meanwhile, the naked body continues to speak.

"Want to go for a drive?"

Cocooned in the car, her companion is seated in the passenger side. The

woman is again cruising through placid and familiar streets. A stream of running commentary from the passenger, pleasant and meaningless, like the radio. She doesn't pay attention. "You can call me Al. Like that song? I've been called a lot of things. Al is good. Where are we going?"

The car smells fluffy and new. Modest townhouses and gently curving streets recede into highway turnoffs and roadside motels, recede into farmland, horses, fields of yellow canola. They park in an open field, facing west.

The woman does not understand the sound that Al is making. Al repeats the sound, and continues to do so. Al is singing, sort of. They want to move on top of her. They want to lie on her chest. Al acts like a kid, despite their greying hair. Al wants to sing. Al wants to kiss her and slide their hands down her jeans. The car is parked in an open field. Little birds, barn swallows, are zipping all around them, in and out of the fading light.

Suddenly, at once, they are both hungry. In a gas station restaurant on the highway between two mid-sized college towns, they order breakfast: stacks of buttered pancakes, toast with jam and eggs, milkshakes in frosty tin containers. Between mouthfuls, Al talks about travel and criss-crossing the continent. The woman is reminded of monarch butterflies migrating across the sea. Small things, vast distances. It seems tiring. Al's words jump lightly from one subject to the next and circle the food cooling on the table.

They rub their distended belly and belch across the table. "This makes me happy," says Al.

Looking out from the diner it's pitch black except for the fluorescent light falling on the gas station pumps. Looking in from the outside, Al and the woman are pictured through a large, aluminum-framed window. Their hands stretch across the table. She touches things carefully. Through the glass, their mouths move in silence.

When she gets home that night, there is already a message glowing in her inbox.

Dear Marlene,

I wonder about you.

Yours,

Al

The house feels angry from her day-long absence. Sour and pungent drafts of air punctuate the stillness and wrap around her figure, but she ignores this and absorbs herself into the dim light of the computer screen. She'll deal with all of that. Later.

* * *

Dear Marlene,

I woke up this morning feeling wonderful but also with the sense of having lingered somewhere strange where I don't belong. I would have always been a spectre in your life, don't you think? Decided to book a flight to the coast to visit some old friends, go crab fishing, and maybe try to hook up a job or two.

I like you too much. This, with your distance, makes me nervous. But I hope that the physical distance I am putting between us can be a gesture that will help clarify what's to come. I guess that's what I want, and although I'm gone, I am also in some ways here, as ever... forever, if you want me.

Al

She considers these words, then goes upstairs. The man has thrown up his meal replacement, which looks and smells about the same coming up as it did going down. Today, sitting in his chair by the window, his eyes are restless, scanning up and down, searching the edges of the room. They follow the woman's movements as she cleans up his vomit. More than interest or expression, one could read a sort of intensity in the man's eyes as he watches her. She pretends not to notice this.

Despite the vomit, despite Al's departure, today is no worse nor any better than yesterday. The present is always a continuous, flat whole. Seldom does any event break through the surface of the moment, and such interruptions are easily set aside. It's true, she once kept a room not in the basement, but up here, next door. Once, its walls were not white as they are now, but light blue. But there is no room for regrets. The man used to say something similar. He refused to have patience for any conversation that wasn't immediately useful. Case in point: within his conception, remembrance of the past was absolutely not useful. In thoughts like this, he has had more influence on her than she would care to admit.

The words return. They buckle and shimmer. They call out, sometimes like Al singing in the middle of an orgasm, sometimes like the man, though she

hasn't heard his voice in a very long time. The sounds they make are wounded and inhuman. The woman lifts weights, lets her body drown out the noise, but finds that the sound remains after her workout is over, coming from above. She finds the man upstairs, agitated, wandering up and down the hall. The hallway is dark. He moans and hits his head against a wall. A large maidenhair fern has been knocked over, dirt smudged into the diamond-patterned parquet floor. Downstairs, someone raps on the door.

Two police officers in uniform are waiting outside, one female, one male. In their stance, the cops seem to take up the whole doorframe, crowd out the light. Al's face flickers before her. One of the cops is holding a photograph of Al, 'Allison P', wearing a light grey, button-down dress shirt, their typical sideways grin. Is this a photo from the internet? It's unclear if this means that Al is wanted or missing. The woman tells the officers that she has never seen this person before.

"What's your name?" A man's voice floats towards her. "Mary? That's a very pretty name, Mary."

A moan comes from inside the house. The cop she is speaking to peers behind her shoulder.

"That's my husband. He's sick."

The other officer, the female, has a device in her hand. She is looking up something. She is probably looking her up in a police database. The woman doesn't know what they'll find. The cops stare at her. One of them writes something down in a folder. They don't say anything. The woman slowly shuts the door.

Words ring throughout the house. They swirl up the staircases, under the furniture, and around her head. The words are full of suspicion. They shout her name. The woman moves through this with deliberation. She makes her way to a bathroom, then opens a cupboard, runs the tap, drinks. She takes lorazepam, lets the sweet taste dissolve in the wet under her tongue. Green floats all around her. The pills are small. She takes another, a few.

Years ago, the woman bought a videocamera, expensive at the time, and would carry it with her wherever they would go. She took footage of road trips, parties, or of quiet moments alone, together. At that time, her camera was often fixed upon him. Even washing dishes, he moved wonderfully, a little dance every time he spun around the kitchen. She was a different person then, really, with her feeble attempts to preserve and record. Now she's against memory, as if one could rally against such a thing. However, the past becomes docile when combined with certain drugs. On such occasions, she allows them to slip in.

Her mind is very still. Everything is set to autopilot, on repeat. She is guided to the basement. Her camera, her recordings, lie under a collection of screws and nails, a pile of dated magazines. It's no trouble at all to find them. From the tiny speaker in her old camera, she plays the tapes with the video turned off as she lies in her room in the dark. *What are you doing? Are you filming right now? Hi.* The ceiling feels very low. The sound is tinny and tiny, yet it is harsher than any other sound or word that might creep into her head. His laughter emerges and she lets herself get absorbed in the stupid terror of his voice. She laughs. She can smell his breath in the air, sour and heavy.

* * *

The space of the car is enclosed and of a manageable volume. The woman enjoys the familiar touch of the controls and the steering wheel. All the settings have been adjusted so that they are adapted to her body. It is a comfort to be held safely within a bubble of steel and glass. The bubble glides forward with her thoughts. The woman focuses far into the distance, towards a stand of trees or buildings that seem to lie on the horizon.

She eases into the graceful curve of the ramp that leads onto the highway. The benzos make the woman feel so normal it's like they're not even present. Memories flash past her and blend into the scenery passing outside the car windows. With methodical concentration, she turns each instance over to examine its variegations, weighing them against her reactions. Her reactions generate a feedback loop that turn her back to her memories. Past and present overlap so that it is unclear which temporality she is inhabiting.

It feels like she has been in this moment before. She follows the yellow line of the highway which leads her to a bridge. There is no place to pull over so she slows down to a stop and carefully turns on the vehicle's hazard lights. The bridge rumbles with the movement of passing traffic. These vibrations register as a deep tone that travel through the car and into her body. The woman examines her surroundings. There is a concrete bench overlooking an industrial park through tall bars of steel. The buildings below look very small from this height, as do the subdivisions well off in the distance. Drivers, locked in their own bubbles, shoot her dubious and angry glances as they pass. There is a symphony of car horns behind her, adding to the deep vibrations.

The woman checks her purse. On her way back to the house, she will pick up a bottle of wine. She steps out of the car, leaves the keys dangling inside. Traffic

moves quickly. The velocity is felt as a small rush next to her ear, a somewhat disorienting effect, like she could be struck down at any moment. She walks against the direction of traffic, aware of the instability of her steps and the shifting structures around her. Still, for this occasion, she is able to summon a certain degree—an idea that resembles—determination. The view from the bridge unravels in a striking and familiar way. From here on out, every encounter will hold a similar possibility.

* * *

It is possible that the police are coming for her. It's possible, and sort of funny. Perhaps they suspect her of murdering Al. Perhaps she did. Perhaps she ripped through them while they were having sex, slit them open so that their guts toppled out of their body. Perhaps she buried them in some field on the side of the highway, where the swallows dip in and out of the light. One morning she wakes up with electrical wire wrapped around her throat, laughing. She can't remember much except the sour taste of lemon in her throat. She throws up sour, pickled, sweet, brandy, pills. Who was that, stroking her shoulders, holding back her hair? She is falling asleep to an extra long movie, starting over, falling asleep again. Things move around her. This has all happened already.

A hand is stroking her head. The hand becomes a fist in her hair that pulls her head back so that her body arches backwards and her voice is buried as it slips underneath her throat. Her face is pushed against something flat and cold. Another face turns towards her, does not break its gaze upon her as the fist punches hole after hole in a wall. It bares itself to her, each time, each punch, so that she can see how bloody and broken the fist becomes. Fist and face are the same thing, the things they show her are all the same.

Her voice is slurry. "It's alright," she addresses them aloud, "It's just like before, and as it always was. I can feel you... I can feel your face. You can come into me. You can come inside me. I'm not scared. There's nothing to be afraid of. We are going to be okay."

The ceiling is very low and the bed is very small. She is very slightly sick. Voices shimmer on the periphery, images pass over her. A smile flickers occasionally like static across her face. Hands and mouths press into her. They pick and tear at her toes and her ribs. Her bones unravel along the lines of meridians. Her face is wet. The spirits are precise. They slowly disassemble, they take her apart. It doesn't matter what she wants. This is what she always wanted.

She has never wanted for anything. She dissolves. She doesn't exist.

Dear Marlene,

I thought about you today as I was walking through the forest. I'm on an island. The biomass here is greater per cubic metre than any other place on earth. I found a massive tree that had fallen over. It was the size of a ship that could hold hundreds of people, more than twice my height at its width, and with a million little lifeforms growing out of its giant corpse.

I want to be like that tree when I'm dead, connected and important to the things that are still living. In this way, we are different, but it would still be good for you, don't you think, to have some forest around you, some dead tree to grow out of...

That is to say, politely and poetically, that I'm not going to let you go.

With you as ever,

Al

The house is destroyed. Light fixtures have been torn from the ceiling. Beams are cracked or snapped through, the studs visible from holes torn through the walls. Wire, insulation, dead bugs, and newspaper—whatever was inside has been pulled out. The holes have left decades-old layers of wallpaper and paint exposed, have carved peepholes and passageways to the spaces on the opposite side. At least some of this work has been done with a chair that is still partially embedded in the drywall. Plaster dust floats through the air. Oddly, the windows are all closed and still intact.

Cool, still water has flooded the basement, rising just high enough to creep over the ankles and touch the electrical outlets. Plastic slippers and plastic dishware float languorously on this surface. The power is out. It is quiet quiet quiet, as if the house has been vacated.

Upstairs, the man is luscious and corpulent, despite his subsistence on little more than water and air. His room remains untouched. Rooted in his chair, his limbs, glowing with life, have expanded and solidified into wide, fleshy trunks. The houseplants coil around his head and wrists. They form a green jungle, thick with heat and vitality. Humid, sticky condensation emanates from this self-contained ecosystem. Redolent of chlorophyll, rot, and over-sweet meal replacement, the wetness steams up the windows of the man's room and spreads itself through the house. The plants tangle into the woman, pull her deep into the walls of the house

where they have taken root. She breathes in their heavy scent, the essence of this place, its hostile newness latent with unspoken memories.

The man is sitting before her. She doesn't know how long she has been sitting here. There is a massive wound cut open between the man's spread legs, as if someone has used an axe to split his body down the middle, as if his body was made of wood. The gash runs nearly to his chest. Ficus, anthurium, and fuchsia-pink orchids explode riotously out of his hole. The man is not moving. The room is very still. Outside, a black grackle, coated in iridescent blue, peers into the window, shrugs, and flies away. You can hear other birds singing out there, but in here things are different. The man looks very beautiful.

His eyes do not open, nor are his lips moving. Nevertheless, something is being said. It is an acknowledgement, communicated through the pheromones in the air, or perhaps through some sort of telepathy.

She has needed to hear these things for a long time. She can't think of a better conclusion. Sirens sound off in the distance. Somehow it is not enough.

* * *

Dear Marlene,

Writing you, I'm by the sea. I've been sitting here for hours. You know, just watching the waves do their thing over and over again. The sun is coming down so hot. I don't really know why I'm here. I feel like I've been floating in this liquid space, and in it, you keep coming back to me.

I remember you, but there is so much I don't know how to remember. I wish I wasn't alone in my remembering, but that's just the way it is, isn't it. Even if we both tried to remember the same thing, it would turn out different. And it's not even the same, either, as whatever really happened.

But, for now, I remember the way your body moves against mine.

Is that important? I don't want to be alone... Is it worth it, do you think, to remember these things with me?

I want to thank you for this feeling I have, but I'm not sure what I mean.

Thank you, I guess, for everything.

Al