
the
IOWA REVIEW
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2019 IOWA REVIEW AWARDS CONTEST WINNERS

POETRY

Judge: Kiki Petrosino

Winner: Brian Sneeden, "Origins," "Season of Echoes"

Runner-up: Stephanie Ellis Schlaifer, "Here's What We Know"

FICTION

Judge: Rebecca Makkai

Winner: Chloe Wilson, "Tongue-Tied"

Runner-up: Analía Villagra, "After"

NONFICTION

Judge: Roxane Gay

Winner: Derby Maxwell, "Tiny Firecrackers"

Runner-up: Andes Hruby, "The Kitty"

The above winners have their work in this issue. We also announce Belal Rafiq as the winner of our 2019 Tim McGinnis Award for the most unusually pleasing and unexpected work of the year. His story, "Wedding Survival Handbook," appeared in our Fall 2019 issue.

VOLUME FORTY-NINE ISSUE THREE

Winter 2019/20

NONFICTION

POETRY

FICTION

ANDES HRUBY

The Kitty

Montreal, Winter, 1978

We are crossing the border to Canada. This is not a vacation: it is a drug deal, and I am a nine-year-old smuggler. I do not like the slang word *mule* because it makes us sound ugly or stupid, which we are neither. My mother, Eva, thirty-four, sits behind the wheel of our wood-paneled brown and tan Oldsmobile station wagon wearing a frayed purple cashmere sweater, orange velvet jeans, and high-heeled, lace-up leather boots. Threaded by two chopsticks, her curly brown hair is loosely fixed on top of her head. She wears little red leather gloves cut off at the fingertips. Eva strokes the steering wheel, singing a song from *Manon Lescaut,* an opera by Puccini; the character is dying in the bayou from exhaustion, sweat, and the curse of being proclaimed a prostitute after moving to America.

That says it all.

As the border patrol guards survey the car with flashlights, her green glitter nail polish sparkles. My mother is not a drug courier; she is just playing a part. She is an actress, painter, and singer. Eva was educated at Institute Château Beau-Cèdre, in Clarens, Montreux, Switzerland. It's a place where women go to be "finished." I dream of going there and learning how to play tennis, ski, and ride horses. Eva learned to conduct herself with manners, be polite, and be a member of the society that directs events. I am often instructed how to be a lady, and proper etiquette is emphasized in our loft on the Bowery.

Manners mean everything to my mother. She claims they prepare you for social situations where you might be uncomfortable. Manners will always save the day until, of course, it just becomes time to tell someone to "Fuck off." That's always the moment I hate. I can see her brow furrow as she develops a twitch in her left eye. It is usually the moment I prepare to be arrested or run.

Eventually she was asked to leave Château Beau-Cèdre after waxing the underarms of a Muslim princess—an offense few can understand. Yet, my mother can still speak multiple languages and blow smoke rings with

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Photograph courtesy of the author

cigarettes. She unleashes her hair from the chopsticks and runs her fingers through the damaged frizzy curls.

"Son froid pouvons-nous enrouler les fenêtres?"

She turns to me with a Cheshire grin.

"Pumpkin, I was saying it was cold out and asked if we could close the window."

She scrunches her face like a fairy and wiggles her nose at the guard: she's cute until she cuts your throat.

I'm the freckle-face kid who carries the maps, hides the keys, makes the drop, and answers the phone. I like my day job as a Ford Model: a high-end modeling company that embraces and sells pretty. I like it there because it is the land of make-believe; sparkling, crisp linen; large buffet lunches; and pressed underwear. I stand under the lights until I'm dehydrated just to stay close to the bleached smells and tidy polished shoes. It is where I pretend I am normal.

My mother continues on because she has the guard's attention: "My French is *barely passable*," she smirks.

She knows this is a lie but then defends: "Ah, but one should always, always practice. It's how to be respectful when you visit another country."

Flashes smile, shrugs shoulders, flicks fingers. She looks like one of our friends who perform at the Bottom Line drag show. Maybe she is not such a good actress, she is definitely a better singer, but the guard returns her smile: it's *Canada* not *Cannes*.

In a thick accent he leans into the open window. His cigarette breath mixes with strong cologne that makes me feel like I'm in the bathroom of a hotel we will sneak out of before paying the bill.

"Mother Frencssh iz not zo bad."

He believes they could be having sex tonight if I were not in the car. That's how men look at my mother. Then they frown when they see me: oppressive pouting offspring. The guard raps the window several times and is about to wave us through, but reaching into the car is too much for our mutt dog that we named China Dragon. China Dragon is part pit bull, Doberman, boxer, and terrier. China lunges and takes a small nick out of the patrol guard's leather glove. My mother yells a command in German, backhands China, who then humbly slinks to the floor by my feet.

We have been in the car seven hours traveling from New York City. I usually pee on the side of the road whenever I want because my mother believes the side of the road is a lot cleaner than any rest area. Urinating in public is a sign of freedom and a statement for women. She says women have to pee more outside and sleep naked: "Toilets are not fair. Someday there will be more women's toilets than men's. For now, pee where you need to."

Toward the end of the trip, just before the border, the temperature is so cold I can see the steam rise from my urine stream. There is frost on my vagina by the time I pull up my pants. For the past hour I have been trying to wait for the hotel.

The buyer is paying for the weekend, so I know it will be a nice hotel with a bathtub. My dreams revolve around bathtubs. We do not have one in the loft we live in now. When we lived at the Chelsea Hotel, the only bathtub on our floor was in the hallway. We had to take a room on one of the lower floors because Stanley, the concierge, thought my mother might be a *jumper*—the suicidal ones stay above the awning so Stanley doesn't have to clean up as much. The cheaper rooms have no private bath, so men shaving their legs or junkies who had fallen asleep against the cool porcelain surface occupied the communal hall bathtub. If they didn't budge, I just washed my feet in the sink.

The diagram of where the car has to be parked was my responsibility. I would do anything to be alone in a bathtub, even the dreaded word "mule." Once the Kitty has been cleaned out and my mother relaxed, we usually walk everywhere, and she tells me stories about her life. We sit back in cafes and drink coffees with steamed milk and whipped cream. The Kitty is the secret storage hole that is built into the bottom of our station wagon. It is a complicated, locked steel structure somewhere between the passenger seats and above the catalytic converter. I know that because the car has to sit for some time before the trade can be made. If you go in too fast, the converter makes a smiling moon burn somewhere on your arm. It's a safety measure to make sure the deal isn't rushed and everyone is still happy with the plan.

The drug dealers we know are not the ones depicted in stereotypes stuffing ziplock bags in tawdry motels. They are methodical and superstitious. Meetings are usually in churches or promenades that surround the hotel or the nearest car wash. The directions to the hotel Château Champlain Montreal are in the pocket of my Sassoon jeans because everyone knows my mother will lose them. Every time I pull my jeans down to urinate on the highway I am in a panic the paper will fall out and be swept away in the growing chill.

When China Dragon startles the guard, he curses at the car. I touch the directions, checking to make sure they are in my pocket. My mother takes a deep breath and pleads.

"Je suis désolée ainsi. Le chien est protecteur. Sont juste nous."

I can tell by the way she waves her hand she is saying we are alone.

"The father?"

The guard sounds like Inspector Jacques Clouseau from *The Pink Panther.*

"Mort."

I know "dead" in seven languages.

Dead.

She's playing the dead card. It's not a lie that my father is dead.

The guard nods, but it is neither up nor down nor side to side; it is more of a shrug because he thinks he could maybe really get her into bed. While he hesitates, the other border guard stops him and shines a flashlight on me.

"Little girl, why don't you wear a seatbelt?"

My mother's body abruptly quivers. We do not have seatbelts because my mother cut them out with a hunting knife she keeps inside the dashboard. She is a twice-convicted felon and is not allowed to carry a gun. My father drowned, strapped into his seatbelt. He was a Jersey boy who could ride waves and free dive and taught her how to bodysurf. He could also hold his breath long enough to descend and wrangle lobsters from under the rocks when they lived in St. Thomas.

No way he drowned all strapped in cozy to his seatbelt, Cookie. Everyone knows who murdered him.

My father was the fastest of all his friends at hot-wiring a car and stealing the license plate from one to place it on the car parked next to it. Apparently from all the stories, he never wore a seatbelt. It was one of her triggers. It was always unclear who killed him. In every car we owned, the first thing my mother would do was pull the seatbelt out from its slack, like a bow, and start slicing.

Seatbelts kill. Seatbelts do not save lives. Seatbelts cover up murder. Smugglers do not wear seatbelts.

I feel tears come to my eyes because the hotel is slipping into a blurry mirage, and we might stay here in the holding pen. I cross my arms over my stomach and hold my belly very tightly, make a frowning face, and in a very fake and heavy French accent I blurt out the words: "I have to pee-pee!"

Everyone laughs.

We are waved to the side. Slightly stooped over, I walk through a heavy metal detector and use the restroom. The toilet seat smells of mint green alcohol and rose powder. I wash my hands, and upon exiting, stop at the desk and very politely curtsy.

My mother is standing in the doorway of the barracks smoking a cigarette and laughing with the guard. I pull on the back of her sweater. She smiles at me with the wickedness. I feel it's time to run.

"Did you say *merci beaucoup*, Buttercup?" she asks.

"No, I said, *'Thank you.'*"

Eva forces one of her fake laughs. It's the sign: an over-the-top cackle she uses at bars before excusing herself to the bathroom and leaving the unpaid

tab under a wet glass. It's my cue to count to ten and meet her on the corner or by the car. I count in my head.

"Momma, I'm very tired."

Eva, the actress, looks longingly at the guard trying to explain with her pleading eyes the complexity of the situation. She smiles. He smiles. She takes my hand, and we walk to the car. We sit, no words, quietly taking a moment to warm up the station wagon, appearing as if we have all the time in the world. My mother puts the car into reverse and pulls out of the parking spot.

Blocking our exit is the flirtatious guard. He has his big puffy black parka back on and is squinting at us. He is holding up a small folded white piece of paper. Our eyes both widen. It is my drop directions. They fell out of my pocket when I went to the bathroom.

The dog starts a low growl. I press my feet on China's body to keep her down. He knocks on the window with great confidence. My mother gives me a glance—the one that is explicit and needs no definition—that I have possibly separated us and we are going to prison.

"Directions à votre hôtel?" says the border patrol holding the paper.

My mother waves her finger at me in a scolding manner. She pauses searching for some words. I am shaking.

"Ah yes. *Dites merci si très beaucoup,"* she winks at him.

He takes one step back from the door and motions for her to get out of the car. They stand with their faces very close. Frozen breath and light between them disappears for several minutes. I glare at the dog. They break apart. He grabs her by the shoulders and stares at her. She nods at the car. He loosens his grip and kisses her on the cheek. He takes out a pen, and she holds up the crushed folded note for him to write on.

"Mon nombre."

I do not have to speak French to know he wrote his number on the paper.

We are silent for several minutes, driving in the dark. I feel my breath come back to my body. The dog curls up on the seat between us trying to absorb more heat.

"Hard to say if we are lucky or cunning." She winks.

I'm waiting for her wrath: this is where she tells me how incompetent I am that I almost lost the paper.

"Because you speak French?" I ask.

"Speaking French means I'm educated. *Lucky* is if someone found the paper before we pulled out of the parking lot. Cunning is that we now possess the number of someone at border patrol written on our release directions."

"Was a kiss necessary?"

Big sigh: academy-award winning one.

"I kissed him because he just fed himself to any wolf we come up against. He just wrote his number on our delivery directions. Changes the focus of the suspect. You have to be like a snake sometimes and leave a little skin behind to get away."

We circle the hotel looking for the underground entrance to the parking lot. We need a key. There was nothing in my instructions about a key to the garage. I rub my eyes. We park in front of the thick glass doors of the hotel. The doorman opens gilded swan handles. He wears a thick red coat with gold tassels on the shoulders. He drags himself reluctantly outside. His nose looks like a long slide. His eyes are half shut; the lashes that catch snow are downcast. From that point forward whenever I felt someone looking down at me he would flash into my mind.

He pulls out a watch on a chain and taps it.

"Avez-vous besoin des directions?"

My mother smirks.

"We don't need directions. We are staying here for the weekend."

In an unfamiliar French accent she says: *"Nous avons besoin d'une fucking clé pour le garage."*

I know she is speaking French, but then in agitation, she mumbles to herself in German. I smell her need for a Jack Daniels bottle.

Whatever inflection she used left him humbled, and he attempts to smile at me. It's not a nice smile. It's the smile you give a child who you think is spoiled. The "I'll get you later" smile like a witch from a Grimm fairy tale. I decide I can use that smile myself.

I follow with my eyes as she enters the lobby. I can see through the revolving doors that this is a hotel to dream about. It has white carpets with red roses embroidered on them, gold-leaf trimmed furniture, velvet cushions, and marble tables. Even though it is February, fresh white lilies and roses are placed in crystal vases all over the lobby. I stare past the guard watching my mother. She is tired. She has not had enough to drink to be charming. I worry the dragon in her temper will be released if acquiring our room has complications. Her arms rise above her head, waving angrily. She slams her hands down on the counter. Little bits of frost escape from my mouth. The petite clerk retrieves a large envelope from beneath the desk. My mother opens the envelope, smiles, and hands her a few bills. I fog the window with a sigh of relief. It is the *upfront* money. The calm.

Eva struts across the foyer: another academy award. Maybe she is back on the carpet at the Festival del Film Locarno or Casino de Barrière de Montreux.

Returning to the car from her success at the front desk, my mother has a sashaying swagger. That hip sashay tells me I will be having a bath soon

and maybe a glass of good champagne. My mother does not believe in limits.

Dr. Spock has done tests. A child will find balance. Neglect them, and if they are hearty enough, they will survive. Candy for three days, and they will crave carrots. This is her version of parenting. They call me the brilliant product of neglect.

When we have money, I can eat breakfast for dinner, lobster, escargot, and the melted cheese off the top of French onion soup. I can certainly have champagne; I learn to differentiate light, dry, crisp bubbles and the strange cheap plastic cork.

Eva stands at the glass door and waves to me. I jerk my chin toward the doorman to pay attention to her. He spins, slips on a little spot of ice, and pulls the heavy door open against the wind. She plucks a bill from her breast and places it into his white-gloved palm.

She hands me a key that is attached to a large brass logo with our room number and the address of the hotel. She has a smaller key of the same quality.

We drive around the corner.

"What did you say in French that sounded so different?"

"I gave him a little bit of Château Beau-Cèdre."

"I don't understand."

"It's proper Romandy Swiss French. It says, 'I'm from Europe so don't fuck with me you snotty Canadian castoff.'"

She needs a drink.

At the garage she uses the key on the worn lock and opens an Otis scissor gate. I know the name because it is etched on the brass and moves like an accordion. My mother motions for me to drive the car through.

I hate driving the car. When I am older I will never live anywhere but a city so I *never* have to drive a car.

You must, must learn to drive. If you don't know how to drive, you lose your freedom, your independence: a girl has to know how to make a getaway.

I slide over the dog and inch up to the edge of the seat where my left foot can hold the brake. My mother showed me the Barbie hold: elbow permanently bent and petrified. I can easily slide the dashboard shift forward, up, down, and back. I squirm with my feet braking while I push in the clutch. I jerk forward in spurts of whiplash. I watch my mother close the gate and leave the lock slightly ajar. She opens the car door.

"Not your best show of skills."

She slides in next to me and places her foot on the brake. I do not move to my seat but cuddle nestled under her armpit. I take the origami piece of paper from my pocket, and we navigate through the garage until we think we have found the location.

I fall asleep before she parks and is hauling out our bags.

She allows the dog to pee on the wall of the garage.

I shake my head in disapproval.

"I'll throw some water on it tomorrow."

We have to use the freight elevator because of the dog, but when the accordion gates open, the carpet of roses is waiting for me. A freckled young man with a shoebox hat is standing by our hotel room door. The cart beside him is covered in white linens, silver domes hiding crispy fries and filet mignon, and an ice bucket filled with Veuve Clicquot and Drambuie.

I smile at my Eva. I'm proud she is my mom. She is always thinking ahead.

"I figured you were hungry."

In less than it takes for the door to close she cracks open the Drambuie and consumes a long thirsty gulp then pours us each a glass of champagne.

"Steak or bath first?" She winks.

My bath has every sovereign essential: marble, perfumes, soaps, bubbles, things I have no idea what they are in French, but I pour them all in. I found my mother in the shower once, bleeding. No stopping the gateway between her wrists, the water, the washcloth, and blood pooling around her ankles. Stanley, the manager at the Chelsea, was wrong. We spent years living next to the neon "L" on the third floor of the word Chelsea.

My mother wasn't a jumper, she was a butcher.

I parade through the hotel room in a thick terry robe that was on the back of the bathroom door. I reach for my crystal glass and take a long slow sip until my nose is filled with bubbles. I strip off my robe, crawl between layers of fluffy feathery duvets—the smell of bleach gives me peace. China, the dog, slides next to my naked body and finds a quiet place snoring by my belly.

My mother says strange things, but I understand them. Dramatic statements that usually mean someone else suffered so I could enjoy frivolities.

Other women have suffered so we can sleep naked.

My mother turns off all the lights. She runs the water for her own bath. I don't have to watch her tonight: she has lobster on her plate in a puff pastry and an envelope filled with cash. Eva pushes my hair behind my ear and sprinkles my forehead with butterfly kisses from her eyelashes.

Tonight I do not worry. Tonight I sleep.

Jacob Eigen is a poet and fiction writer originally from Brooklyn currently living in Chicago. He holds a BA from Yale and an MFA from Hunter College. His work has previously appeared in *The New Republic* and *The Saint Ann's Review*.

Julie Gray grew up in the piney woods of East Texas. A scholarship recipient of NYU's Tisch School of the Arts, she went on to earn a BA from the University of Texas and a JD from the University of Houston Law Center. She lives in Houston and is completing a memoir, of which her essay is an excerpt.

Bruce Holbert is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop. His work has appeared in *Hotel Amerika*, the *Antioch Review*, *Crab Creek Review*, *Other Voices*, and *The New York Times*. Holbert grew up in the Grand Coulee near the Columbia River. His family was among the first settlers of the country. His first novel, *Lonesome Animals*, was a top ten pick in 2012 for *The Seattle Times*; it was followed by *The Hour of Lead* in 2014, which won the Washington State Book Award in 2015 and was named by *Kirkus* as a top 100 pick for 2014. Holbert's next novel, *Whiskey*, was published by Farrar, Straus & Giroux in March 2018.

Terrence Holt teaches writing and practices medicine in the School of Medicine at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. His short fiction has been anthologized widely, in "best-of" collections in the U.S., Europe, and Asia. It was collected in *In the Valley of the Kings* (W.W. Norton), which was a *New York Times* editors' choice. His most recent collection, *The New York Times* bestseller *Internal Medicine* (Norton/Liveright), was named by *Kirkus* as one of the best memoirs and one of the best science and nature books of 2014.

Andes Hruby was at Bennington College when she started as a reporter for *Fortune* during the Gulf War. After graduating she went on to write copy for Armani, Calvin Klein, Claude Montana, Ungaro, and Valentino. She completed her Columbia University MFA and published mainstream fiction with the Dutton, Penguin & Putnam group. Motherhood introduced her to the world of Scholastic Publishing where she became a ghostwriter. "The Kitty" is the first chapter of her nonfiction memoir, another of which was featured in the *Los Angeles Times* article "The Robert Mapplethorpe photo you haven't seen: The one he took of me."

Kenan Ince is a queer, Turkish-American mathematician, poet, and organizer from Texas living on occupied Shoshone, Paiute, Goshute, and Ute