STREET CAKE

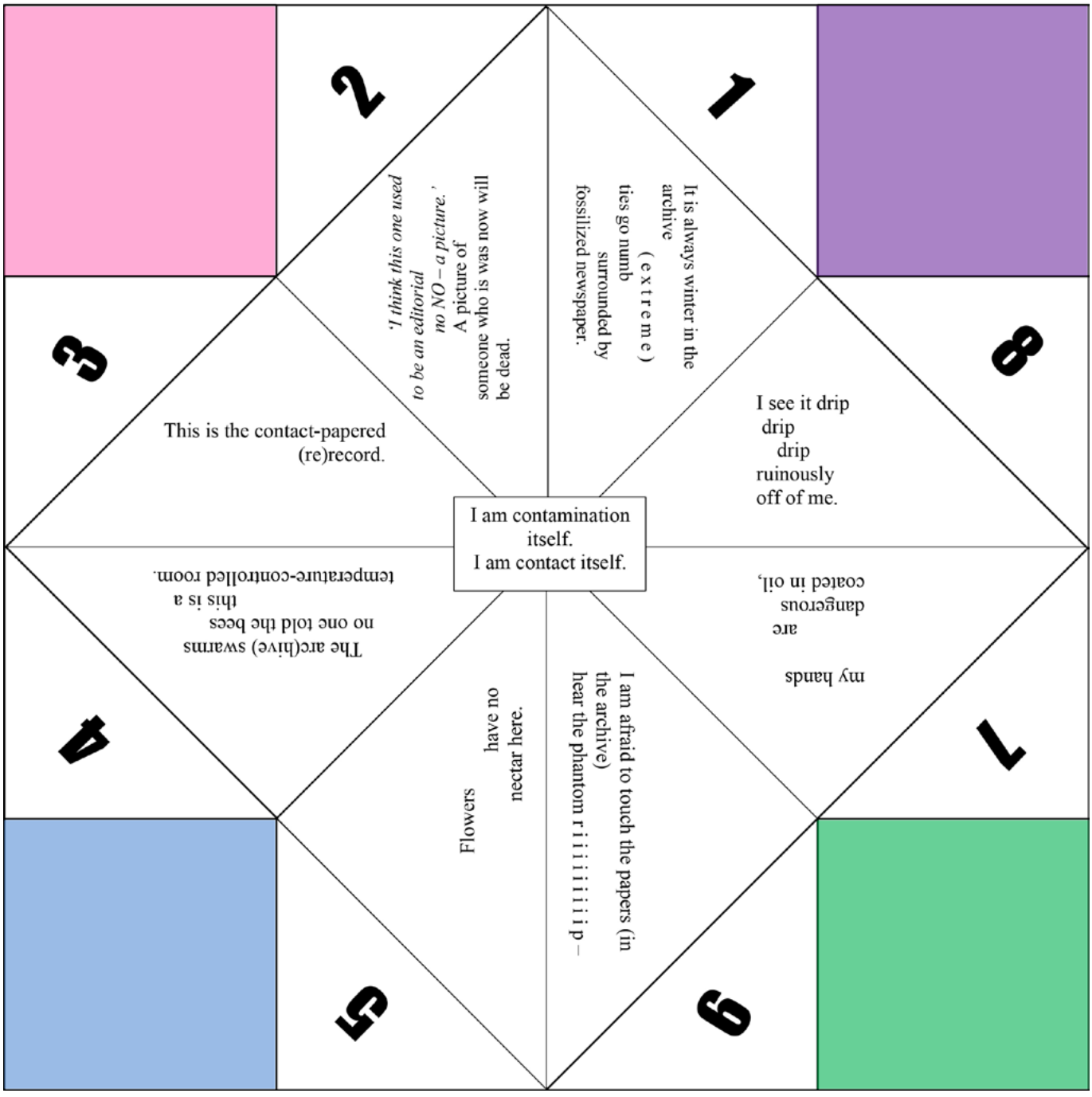
experimental writing magazine

issue 99

@ alexander limarev

contents
issue 99

It is always winter in the archive



Looking Back

I couldn't help but look back one last time. As I caught a glimpse of the ethereal Earth in my rearview scope, I felt sad for the pretty planet we had to leave behind, shedding some tears. It was a good experiment while it lasted, really good indeed, but alas it didn't last. Certain members of one particular species just couldn't get enough, just couldn't stop their insatiable greed and reckless destruction, just couldn't get along with their own species, let alone their fellow Earthlings. We will keep a record in our archives. I hope our new home fares better.

User Error

8 P.M.

You jump out of the passenger seat of your boyfriend's truck into the crunch of fresh Lake Erie snow. The icy onslaught surprises you both, and you curse the TV weather guy. Taillights recede as Chad looks for a parking spot. You hurry toward the stoop of your sweet, gingerbread-trimmed townhouse.

At the door, you push your key into the lock, but it won't turn. You jiggle the knob with force, but it sticks. You can only move the key one millimeter to the left, same on the right. You kick the door, annoyed, cold.

Chad runs up the walk, yelling, "Open up!"

"The lock's stuck or something," you shout back, yanking the key out. Your teeth chatter.

"Let me try." Chad comes up behind you and grabs the key from your hand, pushes his shoulders ahead of yours. He presses the key into the lock shivering from boots up. And, for him, it turns. He flings open the door, marches in. You follow.

8 A.M.

You dress quick and quiet to the sound of staccato snoring. Once in your old Subaru, you stick the car key into the ignition. The key doesn't move.

"What the hell?"

You say a silent prayer to a god you only talk to when you're in trouble. You stomp on the brake, wrench the steering wheel one way then the other, remembering your shitty Ford Focus from college, which had a broken key tumbler you could coax into ignition. But this trick isn't working today.

After three phone call attempts, Chad picks up.

"What?" he says, voice scratchy and thick with sleep.

"My car key is stuck."

"For fuck's sake."
"Please? I'm late!"

After a few minutes, Chad stomps outside in plaid boxers and Helly Hansen snow

boots. He's never been a morning person, and he wears a crabby look on his face like an old hat. He reaches into the window in front of you, turns the key, and the car thrums to life.

"Jesus," he says, shaking his head, eyes rolling, and hustles back inside. You decide not to inform him how he's acting like a jerk. You're late enough as it is.

9 A.M.

You park in your designated space after crawling in traffic full of fishtailing idiots. Seeing heat plume from your office building, you resist the urge to jog toward it, the walkway covered in packed, icy snow. At the main doors, you run your keycard over the reader; but a candy apple red 'X' fills the black screen.

"Oh, come *on*," you shout, pulling hard on the frozen handle. You see Security Guard Frank through the glass doors, who registers your clatter and lopes over.

"What's the matter, ma'am?" he asks after opening the door from the inside.

"Hey Frank, my keycard won't work." You try blowing into your hands to warm them up.

"Well darn, not this again. Doesn't seem these are working for any of you ladies today." He takes your card and scans it. A bright green 'O' shines on the screen and you hear a cheerful electronic "*bing!*"

"Try holding it at the angle I did," he offers and hands it back.

You try again but the red 'X' mocks you. Frank takes the keycard once more, scans it. "*Bing!*"–success.

You enter the warm lobby just as your boss, Greg, walks in right on your heels. He scans his card. *Bing!*

"Technical difficulties?" Greg asks, amused, as the two of you walk onto the elevator.

"Maybe," you say without commitment, wishing he hadn't observed the struggle. You poke the lit-up Number 3, but nothing happens. This time you jab it.

"Tough day, I guess, huh?" he asks, smug, grinning. He punches the button with the back of his fist, lighting up Number 3. The doors close, and the elevator rises.

6 P.M.

Greg started your car to get you out of the parking lot, and now you're driving home in the dark, shame warming your chest like a heating coil. Not since you were a child can you remember knocking around the world with such futility. Your coworker Bridgette also couldn't start her car; at least that's what Boss Greg said with glee while he brought your Outback to life. And your email wasn't working either. The IT guy had to sign you in after you tried ten, twenty times to enter your password carefully, only to be greeted with the same notice—USER ERROR—screaming at you in bold, red print.

You exit I-90, and the 'no gas' light pops on—you're still about five miles from home. You should stop; Clevelanders don't run out of gas in the snow. That's for people visiting from Florida. But a voice inside tells you, *No, don't. The keys. The locks. How will that work,* the voice needles. *You won't be able to turn the car back on?*

It's so cold outside anyway. Maybe you'll ask Chad to fill it up in the morning, knowing full well that'll feel like pulling teeth. You hate yourself for resorting to begging for his help, even if you're the only witness.

You drive on.

7 P.M.

You roll into your parking space under a chintzy carport cover, which is frayed at the edges but stops Lake Erie from icing your car like a giant cake each night.

As you walk toward the threshold of your little gingerbread sanctuary, you hope Chad is already there. Your nerves cannot take getting stuck outside again. As your hand turns the unlocked knob, and you feel a frazzled rush of relief, you hear a ruckus nearby. Your neighbor, Emily, is kicking her own front door and cursing with great emphasis on the word "fuck." The complex's superintendent, Carmilla, is beside her on the stoop, shaking her head in frustration.

"I told you, we'll just have to wait for a locksmith," Carmilla says, resting against the stoop's wrought iron handrail.

"They're like 90 minutes away! It's fucking freezing out here," Emily shouts in despair.

Emily is right. Thick, fat snowflakes are coming down so hard and fast it hurts to keep your eyes open for being pelted nonstop; you're unable to blink them off your

lashes. You think of something that might help, discomfiting though it might be.

“Um, broken key, right?” you call over to the pair, shouting a little to be heard over the wind.

They both jump at the intrusion, but turn to look at you.

“Yeah, I was,” you start, unsure how to explain, “I was, um, having this issue, so weird, but, well, my boyfriend was able to use my key and get my front door open. My car too.” That warm feeling of shame returns.

“Well is he *home*?” Emily asks, with an incredulity suggesting you’re an idiot for not already having gone and gotten him. You two have never developed a rapport. Not for your lack of trying, you think. You’re pretty sure she called the cops on you and Chad a few months ago when the two of you got in a fight.

“Is he a locksmith or something?” Carmilla asks with some suspicion, her eyes squint under an oversized rain hood, which is attached to an enormous parka. Credit to the women who know how to dress for Cleveland winter, because you’re shivering in your sweater dress and tights.

Before answering her question, you have a thought, and ask Carmilla, a trans woman, “You’re not able to open it either?” Carmilla’s eyes only shrink colder, her jaw sets harder—she’s still standing outside, isn’t she?

You rush to move on and respond, “no, not a locksmith, um.” But why bother trying to explain—as if you even know what’s going on? “Just, let me go get him, he’s good with keys. Or, wait, do you just want to come inside just in case you have to wait for the locksmith?”

The women are already on their way over, both glowering; you suppose the sub-zero windchill propelled them both toward the caramel-colored warmth emanating from inside your place.
The three of you stamp your boots outside then cross over the threshold—Carmilla is the last one in and shuts the door behind her. Chad doesn’t look back at the commotion. Emily, eyes tight, looks everywhere but toward Chad and she’s shuffling from one booted foot to the other, huffing, making small, jittery movements with her gloved fingers. Carmilla looks poised to run away. You know your boyfriend isn’t the friendliest guy in the world, but geez. The TV is on, some podcast with video streaming and a dude in a tight t-shirt is yelling, though from the angle of Chad’s neck it appears he’s fixed on the phone in his hand.

“Hey babe,” you say, taking off your coat, hanging it on the rack, though he doesn’t respond. Carmilla and Emily keep theirs on.

“Babe,” you say walking toward him, but he still doesn’t answer. “Chad!” you pipe up louder, then put your hand on his shoulder.

He flinches, and looks toward you, eyebrows drawn together. “Yeah?” he asks, unable to tear his full gaze from the phone.

“We need you to unlock Emily’s door,” you say. You hear Emily grunt out a humorless laugh full of disdain.

He looks beyond you, at the two women. “OK, just a few minutes,” he says, locking back onto the screen.

“You know what, forget it, I don’t have time for this.” Emily’s half out the door before she finishes the sentence and stomps down the snow-covered steps.

“No, wait!” you say, turning to chase after her. “He can probably open it!”

“Fuck that!” Emily yells over her shoulder as she marches across your icy grass. Back at her place, she stops short by the garden beds lining either side of the short staircase leading to her front door. She shuffles and scuffles her hand around in the deep snow, looking for something. Emily’s face lights up with triumph when her hand grasps something beneath the frosty blanket. Now she’s smiling down at a large, smooth rock, which she gives a quick toss into the air. The rock is decorative, but still full of weight.

“Hey wait!” you call out. “You don’t need to—”

Emily winds up like a major league pitcher, hurling the softball-sized rock right through her window.

CRASH! Thousands of shards of glass tinkle and clatter into her house and around the garden bed.

“Oh, come ON!” Carmilla yells. She runs from behind you down the front stoop, crossing over to Emily’s side of the property line.

“Jesus Christ!” Chad yells from within the house, head poking outside for a moment. You hear him shuffling around in the foyer.

But your attention is drawn to Emily, who is now standing on an upturned orange bucket, her face bathed in the interior’s glowing light. She’s beating back the remaining shards sticking out of the windowsill with her heavy Columbia gloves.

Carmilla is yelling at her, “The landlord isn’t going to reimburse you for this! Why didn’t you just let the guy try and open the door?”

“I’m not waiting on some fucking guy to open *my* door to *my* own goddamned house,” Veronica curses back, while heaving herself above the window’s sill. She’s gotten her head and shoulders inside, booted feet moving her up along the outdoor brick façade.

Chad runs around you—are you really still just standing there in the same place, staring?—and stomps over to Veronica’s door. You start to follow after him, no coat, not even feeling the cold anymore.

“Crazy bitch, you should have waited like one more minute.” Chad’s acidic admonition makes you lurch back a step. He arrives at the deadbolted lock, still stuffed with the offending key. He’s got a haughty glower on his face as he turns the key and pushes open the door.

“Wow that was sooo hard,” he bawls into the house, mocking. “It’s open!”

Every cell in your body screams and blood thrums in your ears, your face grows hot, even though the wind has only grown colder.

“Didn’t need your help, dickhead!” you hear Emily yell from somewhere in the house, banging around.

“Chad,” you shout at him over the sound of crashing inside, arriving by his side, pulling at his arm. “Just get back over here, forget it.

He rolls his eyes, glaring inside for a full moment, jaw clenching, but then swaggers your way, face alight with the adrenaline of someone who knows they can do something you cannot.

“*Bing!*” you think when Emily slams her door shut from inside with a proud bang.

8 P.M.

“Isn’t this all so weird?” you ask Chad as you prepare dinner, looking out the window you see never-ending white snow still swirling in the night. “That none of my keys will work. Not even my car keys? That the neighbor’s key didn’t work?”

“I don’t know, they worked for me. Must be user error,” he says, scrolling through his phone, not looking up when you set a full plate of hot food before him. “Plus, the neighbor was such a bitch, is she always like that?”

You imagine upending the plate's contents into his lap.

But you don't.

Emily would do it, you think wistfully.

You ignore him and continue. "It sounds almost crazy saying this out loud, but it's like women can't unlock things all of the sudden, you know?"

"I mean, I doubt it, how would that have happened," he mutters back, absorbed in the action of the dopamine treadmill, nose inches from his phone.

"Wouldn't this be a huge pain in the ass for you too, though? Think about it. What, I'll just have to wait for you to unlock every door for me, and start my car, and get me into my office building forever then? I'll never be able to open my own email account?" You throw up your hands with a strangled moan, before putting your head into them.

"Sure babe," he says, eyes still on the screen, thumb hovering over the post button.

Restart

All the worlds we are / in / stop / at once / go back / sometimes / all times / not gradually, gradual / delays the bang / gradual / ladders of happening / peel away flake away / fall off like skin flakes / quicker / flakes of scalp / quicker / off the edge / imagine space as a scalp / as / dessert / a cake of layers / a head layered / flaked with / gold / chocolate / lava / metal / plastic / all combustible / all digestible in our future and / other worlds already / flakes of what's been / every memory / coming down / quicker / sweet recall / cane / beet / honey / honeysuckle / any real sugar / found in nature / your nature / worst and best all sweet to all / tongues as they fall away / back and back the / car window withdraws / country smells in / slurry in / cows in / pollen in / sun in / grasses in / honey in / honeysuckle in / smell of blue of hills in / blue and orange in / smell of a sight in / sight of a sound of low lap in / road as ocean / in / your spine can taste, it turns out / taste wind / and spine comes out / in mouth / roll on tongue / bite down / film on molars / tongue hot rough in middle with / amaze / pity / regret / passion / warmth / warm day / white buds could they be / any smaller / any more of them and we / will be them / wind in ribs / lungs hanging / in air / moved / each of these / moved / moments a / world a flake to flake / moved / away on the way back / moved / to a single point / all things reeled in / peeled in / quicker / don't move / don't move / don't move / now / move / nothing / but then / then again / what's this?

Why My Student Didn't Do His Math Homework

He says: *So, I ask the bot what the square root of 7 is. It says "49." I try again with my calculus homework and figure I'll use the opposite answer. It tells me to "try Shakespeare," so I read a Donne sonnet instead.*

I give him an A+.

A Poem about Christopher Walking

This is a poem about Christopher, walking,
because he doesn't feel like driving.
He just needs some bread and some milk,
easy to carry in his on-ya bag.

I know that you are expecting this poem to
be about the Hollywood star Christopher Walken,
with his idiosyncratic way of speaking,
of dancing, and being in some classic films.

But no, this is just a poem about some bloke
called Christopher, going for a walk
because it is a nice day.

Cactus Conference

i attended a meeting of cacti
they discussed the ethics of spines
the aloe insisted on arbitration
the saguaro cried silently
i was promoted to chair of thorns
and nobody noticed i was not a cactus

***

A skull at the threshold

How many doors have become refugees so far?

How many clocks have lost their hands?

The absurd questions fly to and fro nowadays

And I am not surprised.

As

Not ancient but the modern philosophy knows better

Which avatar will play the second fiddle when two scepters play the chess.

And yet if you get surprised by thinking

As if suddenly all have gone mad

As if suddenly all have become prophets in the vacuum

Then inevitably an arrow for you-

But is there anything that is born just now without giving signal?

If you are surprised having seen the guillotine in the kindergarten,

If you are shocked having found a ghoul in the asylum

It is your fault.

of these

this i put safely
with coin
keys
and book

this i put in my ear
on dark pillow
under fan
a room i dare not leave

this i put to my mouth
as if to mollify
or kiss
or sing

i place this in your hand
to carry
unburdened
for passing on

all i own
i've bodied for
or forfeited
or lost use

all i owe

has been tendered

expunged

and counterfeited

of these

a whisper rents an ear

as a hand exploits

the presence of pocket

Hangman

It was the first recorded use in history
of shock and awe, coming way before 20th
century horrors. Could the Japanese have
fought on after Nagasaki? With a mission
to rid the land of non-believers, Joshua
slaughtered hordes. Vast
numbers of women, men,
boys and girls, farm
animals, died fast
without any hope
of gaining a blessing
from their new overlords.
After they were waved off
into hell, their king
would face a very
public end with a rope around
his shaken trembling neck. When
Joshua had seen
enough, he used
to command that
the king's head
be mounted on display
to terrify neighbouring
rulers who should flee if
they cared to live. In this
way, God's rep got rid of
anyone who could maybe
hold faith in an
alternative
belief system,
even though they might have been willing to
convert to avoid being totally obliterated.

"Postcard" is an erasure experimental haibun created from a text by Clarissa Botsford, which appeared in page 38 in *The Riveter magazine* (*The Italian Riveter*, Edition Ten, April 2022,) published by The European Literature Network.