

Bloodroot

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Bloodroot Literary Magazine

Bloodroot is a nonprofit literary magazine dedicated to publishing diverse voices through the adventure of poetry, short fiction, and creative nonfiction. Our aim is to provide a platform for the free-spirited emerging and established writer.

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The art that graces the cover of this edition was painted by Vassiki Chauhan. We thank her for her permission to use this work.

Note on Type

This book is set in 12 point ET Bembo, a modern face designed for the web and print by Edward Tufte and based on the Bembo family of typeface. ET Bembo is a freely available open-source font. The text was typeset using xelatex, an updated \LaTeX typesetting package, along with several other free packages, including poemscol.

Introductory Remarks

Somehow this has been the hardest pandemic issue to produce yet. Everyone is worn down. We've been putting on brave faces for so long, and now the masks have come off and the Dartmouth COVID Dashboard numbers soar again. Six hundred. Seven hundred. The small animals of springtime have shown their faces, and they too seem discouraged, frustrated, tired. In light of all this, we are extra grateful to everyone who contributed to this issue. Everyone who submitted their best work and it didn't make the cut—we see you, we thank you. Please don't get discouraged. Please keep writing and please keep trying.

In these pages we invite you to meet the Upper Valley, and beyond. Some of the work represented here was created in retirement by professors who taught us years ago. Some of the work comes from current students. Some from our friends and neighbors. Some from people we have never met who live half a world away. *Bloodroot* is committed to staying focused on writers of the Upper Valley while including voices from other places that sing in harmony with ours. One of the best parts of reading through the submissions is noticing themes that run through when there is no official theme. But at this moment, in the (dare we say) end of the pandemic, the work we've chosen is shot through with the light of creativity and the joy of making art, even after years of darkness.

Sincerely,

RENA J. MOSTEIRIN & JAMES E. DOBSON

Dymphna

They will hunt you down
Walking home in the daylight
On your way out at night

Hunt you down
In your place of worship
In your place of work

The playground, the dive bar
The neighborhood that raised you
The house you grew up in

When she stepped back onshore again
She moved veiled in a hurry
Eyes caught in wet sand, pulled from horizon

There's a patron saint for everything
Even this
Even this

MEGHAN KELLEHER

Death By Online Shopping

buy something that will
change your life
hang on a hanger
cover your body
trigger the sprinklers

like new skin waiting
for warm blood
a window, backdoor
fire escape

MEGHAN KELLEHER

Church

People buy churches to turn them into condos
People rent condos that used to be churches

Their living room walls are stained glass puzzles
The sun reaches through hazy neon pastels

Tenants pace naked up in the clerestory
Fight with their partners, smash glasses of whiskey

Let trash sit and stink, pile dishes in the sink
They take long showers and make sense of things

From the street, they are ghosts haunting an ancient structure
Pouring their morning coffee, blowing out candles before bed

Moving through a routine
Performing a sacred ritual

MEGHAN KELLEHER

Can you smell it? The air is amber, like honey,

not alerts. Leaves shimmer and shiver their way
through the humid breeze, sifting slowly to settle
on grass long dead and crisp. So much golden light
comes from distress. Droughts push trees to shed
leaves, precious jewels discarded and scattered,
whispering onto surfaces. But there are warnings:
wood smoke, skittering chipmunks, ghost-cries
of migrating Canada geese performing aerobatics,
floating and turbulent, arcing through haze.
Hints of cooler days filter in the shadows. I am alert
to changes, hushed hedges, to crickets singing sleep.

CARLENE M. GADAPPEE

Potential

Straight'un, rare enough. Give you top dollar.
The grizzled man spoke around the frayed
toothpick lodged firmly in his teeth. *Twelve,*
mebbe fifteen feet of good board lumber.
Have it outta here next week, slick's anything.
He sees, of course, what could be. But this
is my tree, a sentinel visible from far down
the road, spared when all brush and bramble
were cut down, clearing space for the house.
No. Let him go asking after other trees.
I'll forego the dollars and keep the sense.

CARLENE M. GADAPPEE

Mystery cycle

I come in the middle of the January of his life,
holy in this task and rope off space around us.

Like how some molecules huddle in a ring to repel
what's beyond.

He reaches for some folded map and catches
my face with the bend of his finger.

What I took from him, what he took from me.
What I took to be chapter 11 was chapter II.
The bag of drugs I found on the ground and took to be a gift.

Beginningless.
We lost our shells 140 million years ago.

Behind us are the Futurists
and the double deck trams.

LAUREN HILGER

Character

When it means the you left on others.

When I told myself keep it up keep it up, like I did when I had with me
my machete and cut bamboo twenty feet and carried it down a mountain.

When it means what I'm claiming mine.

When I leaned one arm against the wall
and made of my body
a velvet draped curtain fifty feet high.

My grandkids will say grandma oh grandma.

I send it out.
Smoke to the lowercase parts of me.
I share her blunt.

What is it about you, the thing around you that is so big

You do not know it.

LAUREN HILGER

Missing in Missed Moments

1/ Missing: Each Time

Each time I miss you
 A bud begins to bloom
 So you are surrounded by flowers
 Everywhere you go

Each time I miss you
 A dot of light pops up
 So you are illuminated by a whole sky
 Of stars through the night

2/ Craving in Missed Moments

Within the smallest measurement of a zeptosecond
 At the boldest spot of the present moment
 Upon the shortest daybreak above the horizon
 Of a dream, in the longest nights of
 A lunar or solar month, throughout the slowest seasons
 As they come & go, there is agitation, & it is
 During all this time that the agitation persists, within the inner-
 Most heart of my heart, where my entire protoself agitates
 Amidst agitations; it is then & there that I crave you

YUAN CHANGMING

Steller's Sea Cows

Which are not just manatees?
There are three types?
Whose pelvises are, yes, vestigial?
Whose bones are suspended?
In the Finnish Museum of Natural History?
Where I have never been?
Whose range was wider in the Pleistocene?
Which is colloquially known as the Ice Age?
A movie I watched in theaters as a kid one summer?
In New York City?
The temperature difference was hard to parse?
The icebox theater, the sweating streets?
Who wouldn't have nightmares?
Steller's sea cows are "positively buoyant"?
A phrase I fear could describe my attitude toward strangers?
The sea cows taxonomic order is called Sirenia?
I'll spare you the metaphors? The odyssey?
Where are the dead sea cows?
What were you saying?

KATHERINE GIBBEL

The Opera Singers Stand Like Paper

The opera singers stand like paper
cutouts on the stage where the stone's a trick
of the set; one turns away from the chorus
"My homeland" they cry
Yes, in the opera the trees move close
"That oboe," Angie says
I think about Kevin. The set opens
The violin moving like a skirt in the dark

KATHERINE GIBBEL

Snow in January

all day the snow drifts down
in curds to butter the roads in
slick cream the chickadees drain
the feeder seed by seed and the
juncos hide their white bellies
in the whipped drift four inches
of glass and air separate my
breath from theirs their wings
push shapes into the light I am
seen or unseen it hardly matters
our hearts beating kindling
these strange fires that flame
for such a short and brilliant time

REBECCA SIEGEL

Baruch

I don't know myself—my bones are
 strangers though we've carried each
 other like a fragile egg through these
 years every morning reminds me of
 what I don't know this hand for in
 —stance I'm told I should know its back
 like the hum of my name but each inch
 of nail is new today—every line an im—
 migrant freshly arrived and welcome
 to this odd landscape.

I heard one woman say she wore
 her age like a string of pearls—she
 glistened in her own brilliance.

Some days I'm afraid to ask a question
 —some days I am a stone—some
 days I am the hoof prints of a deer
 in the mud that seams the forest path.

This evening a hawk drew a thin dagger
 across the taut grey skin of the sky, split
 the rain-thick air into before and af—

ter—in the east three northbound geese
baruched toward the new pond the spring
 drench made in the old hay field.

It took me all these years to hear what
 I had heard—how many more until I
 unfold my own unfamiliar wings—inhalé
 into my expanding breast—fly north
 following the river, calling everything below
blessed, blessed, blessed, blessed.

crouched in the garden, digging

bird skull in the earth
dormant roots, seed husk
bits of flowered china

roofing nails, rodent tunnel
nutshell etched by tiny teeth
broken clay pipe

what you see is not all there is:
even now, unwitting, you could be
kneeling on a heart

CLYDE WATSON

Triptych

*

Banks of darkness
 air so cold it shatters
 into star shards
 bursts of shining ice.
 Darkness comprised of such light.

*

Body so slight it barely showed under the herringbone blanket.
 Subtle shadows suggesting shoulders, hips, knees, feet.
 No movement, the end of being alive,
 when the moment came, I disbelieved it.
 A raven distracted my grief at the window. Curls of water rose and fell
 along the endless shore, dashing against sand, flattening out to rise again.
 A sad motion that kept repeating. Lavender tears, silver droplets.
 A fly, stupid with cold, on its back cycling for hours, buzz dulling to silence.

*

Trees along the highway
 shine in wet sun
 blind me with crimson,
 burnt sienna, cadmium yellow light:
 my father's watercolor palette
 smeared with blobs of dried paint.

Each gust of wind
 pours down leaves
 that twirl and race
 alongside my speeding car.
 White doves float
 in my head
 as if real.

The Gleaners

Crows land in the shorn fields,
ink blots on snow

Time, a half dollar
tucked neatly in my pocket

My cold-bruised lungs

Embedded in my right thigh,
a tick

The bite blooms red
and round like a zinnia

We see the horizon
We take all we can

SHARI ALTMAN

Spring Fever

We went to the greenhouse
to look for plants and blooms
She wanted to paste them in the ground
have them spring up like stunned kites
I didn't know what to look for
a few reds and whites
I didn't care
The peonies or whatever would grow
and stand out in fright
Every year I'd see them
becoming startling bold
sudden annunciations soon after
the snows left

But that would be it
Later the repetition would
take them down, palled
by the annual storms of second sight

L.A. RENZA

Daily Communion at the MiniMart on Rte 31

You can find us here
 most every day at dawn,
 some in finery,
 some in flannel,
 bowed and shuffling forward
 in a single silent line,
 waiting our turn
 for Gladys to call us *Hon*,
 to pour fresh hot brew
 into our empty cups,
 to place a cruller dusted with sugar
 in our outstretched hands.
 We drop coins into a basket,
 murmur thanks, lift our heads,
 walk out into the sunlight,
 then pause to spend some time
 leaning into one another—
How about Afghanistan,
that hurricane down south,
those fires out west,
the damn Delta variant
and, tell me, how's your wife,
your husband mother father
sister brother daughter son,
your job, your health
and that chicken of yours,
the one with the broken leg?
 We climb into our cars,
 wave to one another, drive off,
 one hand on the wheel,
 the other holding steady
 our cup of Joe.

BROOKE JAMES

Sunnyside Up at The Sunrise Cafe

Oh, to be the fried egg
on the blue plate
sliding down the counter
with my sunny side up,
me and my home fry friends,
maybe my buddy toast
all buttered on one side,
Marilyn and Elvis winking down
from over the pass-through
as I come to a perfect stop
in front of you.
You've got the daily news
opened on your right,
knife and fork on your left &
you say, *Hey, Dolores, how about some Joe?*
& she fills you right up to the brim.

I know it's not much,
but it's not nothing either,
to be part of that story,
to be there at the start
of each day—when you say
You're a good egg, Dolores,
I should have married you
when I had the chance,
and she laughs her beautiful laugh.

BROOKE JAMES

Well Spring

Smoke billows
from the sugar house, snow shakes down softly and mud,
free from the melting.

Grey like skies where light hides, we haven't seen sun for days.

Time for all
new sprouts pushing out
tender against these biting nights.

Blow it out, stomp it down, go back to sleep. Wishing for when all was quiet
and dead again.

AINSLEY WELSH

The Rare Old Times

I see them most clearly
 When I close my eyes
 And dreams unfold my memories
 And bring out the photographs.

The clearest songs are heard
 In the total silence
 Up from the deepest places
 I hear familiar music.

Cousin John at Bunratty
 Singing The Rose of Tralee
 Or playing the mouth organ
 My father told me.

He played the twelve string
 At a gig in a Dublin pub
 Cousin Jimmy on the banjo
 My mother said.

Cousin Mary played the Bodhran
 Penny whistle, accordion
 Kept time for the Irish reel
 Before The Fusiliers began.

The Fields Of Athenry
 And Spancil Hill
 Whiskey On A Sunday
 In The Town I Loved So Well.

These memories I cherish
 They are all that's left
 Treasured in the secret places
 Dreams know where they are kept.

The Pitch

Julie Delpy. On the Verge. And Joanna Hogg. She wants to make a tv series about a woman a bit like her, that combines Joanna Hogg's minimalist approach to filmmaking (tableau framing) with Delpy's womancentric approach in her series "On the Verge."

She is a woman in her sixties. She has left a job that used to be interesting. She traveled abroad with students and lived in French cities where the city was the classroom, and students showed moderate interest. (*Cut to a montage of students taking selfies, and photos of food in a restaurant in Lyon, napoleons in a patisserie window, the "Napoleon coronation painting" in the Louvre, selfies in the Louvre, selfies on a bateau mouche on the Seine*). She also taught courses on literature, film, and comics, and organized cultural events. She taught classes that examined closely the elections in France.

That all changed when her department created a new world order (The series, "The Chair"? She doesn't need to see that after living through it in reality). Her last years teaching were soulless.

Instead of whining, it was time to do something else.

She worked at a used bookstore where she had great difficulty with the computer while checking out customers. (*Cut to her struggling with an old Windows screen, going slowly with the credit card, beeping from the machine, messages on the screen quite literally saying, "You're doing it wrong"*). She had to consult her hand scribbled cheat sheet every single time, and even then, she made mistakes. (*Customer: never mind, I'll come back later when the owner is done with her lunch break*).

She volunteers at an art gallery once a week. She sits behind a desk and greets visitors. Sometimes they refuse to wear a mask, and that becomes a bit challenging. (*A couple walks in not wearing a mask. Hi, welcome. Have you ever visited before? Ah it's your first time. Where are you folks visiting from? Did you know that our city had a mask ordinance? Ah okay, thanks for stopping by! As the couple leave*). Otherwise, it's fine. She moves chairs into the big room for events like gallery talks and storytelling. She serves wine at openings. She works on the roses for her dress project.

The dress project? Yes, she's decided to save newspaper delivery bags and sew them on gowns that she finds in second-hand stores. What for? It's an art project. She's allowing

the conceptual artist in her to emerge. Why not? She has a “studio” in a building full of artists. Just the other day, she was showing her studio to a friend and her friend, and they were fawning over the dress project, and she was having trouble taking them seriously. *(Two women make suggestions as to where she should sew plastic flowers next, they then tell each other what an awful and ugly project it is when she excuses herself to go to the bathroom).*

She is also saving bottle caps. For another art project. And little boxes. And thank you cards. She is thinking of putting the thank you cards inside the little boxes. *(She puts cards in boxes, on the floor, and moves them around. Action speeds up to time lapse speed).*

She has two grown daughters. They have both moved far away. One lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico, while the other lives in Glasgow, Scotland. She misses them, she wants to spend more time with them. Do they want to spend time with her? *(Logan Airport terminal gate, woman sitting and typing on her computer).*

It’s a bit surreal, traveling abroad for the first time since the pandemic started. She hears foreign languages spoken all around her. The security line remains a total shit show, but she did have a quick chat with a woman ahead of her who was waiting for her stuff at the same time as she was. The woman was going to Verona, Italy. At the check-in, you have to present 1. Your passport 2. Your vaccination card and 3. Your COVID test. Reminder to self: keep the COVID test (a printout) at the top of the pile of printouts, not at the back. But it was no big deal. We’ll see how easy the Brits will be. She has her QR code all set, so hopefully, deep breath, no big deal.

Now she is in Glasgow. On the bus going into the city, she couldn’t help but overhear three guys chatting in the seats next to hers. First they talked soccer (Chelsea, Tottenham, which player plays well, which player played well, the 80s) then they were off to school reunions, then to “lagers” and “ales” (“aisles”). Then one of the guys makes the claim that women are expensive dates because they always order fancy cocktails. At that point, she couldn’t keep quiet anymore, Julie Delpy et al. have emboldened her, and she has to interject that this is a gross generalization, that she is happy to order a simple beer. One of the other guys jokes that she is “a cheap date” (!) to which she replies, with some irony, “I have often thought of myself in that precise way.” Uproarious laughter from all three men. Jeez, it doesn’t take much to make three guys laugh.

She is now sitting at a café near her Airbnb in Glasgow’s West End, waiting for the check in hour. Day one so far confirms how reliably friendly the Glaswegians can be. At the café where she is waiting for the 3 PM check in, the waiter actually asked her how her flight went, did she sleep (yes, I had two seats, then I had three, lucky me), and whether the timing was now okay with the check in (when she asked for the bill). He brought her the most

delicious blue cheese she has ever tasted, but there was so much of it that she asked if she could take the rest with her, always a bit embarrassing to ask, but there was no problem, he brought a little cardboard box to take with her.

Later: she purchased a bottle of organic red wine at the nearby express supermarket, and that and the leftover blue cheese were her dinner.

The jetlag sends her into weird head spaces. For instance, she realizes that when she watches a tv series and sews plastic flowers on dresses, she sometimes gets confused about reality. She imagines that she is with both the lawyer character from an Australian series, that one ended a little too suddenly, and Julie Delpy as a chef in LA. Her space/time continuum is messed up. *(She is a chef sewing plastic flowers on dresses in front of herself as a judge wearing a wig).*

She is also working on plays. Well, one play. It's about the 18th Century French artist Elizabeth Vigée-Lebrun. She imagines what it would be like if the French artist had a long conversation with a modern-day art historian, also a woman. She is fascinated by all kinds of women. They're in her blog.

She has a blog. In her blog, which is mostly about used clothes, because she loves shopping in second-hand shops, she also writes about famous women and how they dressed. Right now, she wishes that she could write a play about Lee Miller, the photographer, Elise Schiaparelli, the designer, and Martha Gellhorn, the journalist. When we get to the war, oh, that imagined conversation might turn ugly. ES was not very clear during the war, while LM and MG were totally clear whose side they were on. *(LM tells ES that she was a collaborator while MG smokes a cigarette while typing on a typewriter. All three are wearing beautiful clothes).*

Where would her tv series take place? LA? No, enough of LA. They have their own reality. Where she lives in New England? With loads of well-intentioned white people. Recently she went to a black burlesque show in Vermont where the audience was made up of hundreds of WIWPs. It was weird. Nothing against WIWPs. She is one of them. She's never done the Peace Corps though, or volunteered in a prison, a soup kitchen or a homeless shelter. She would love it if her series could take place mostly in the building where she has her studio, also in Vermont. It's an old, converted bread factory, a small Beaubourg, with its bold colors, and pipes and vents painted in silver.

Her studio. Her "studio." She would have a studio in her series. She loves her studio. It's quiet, in a building full of WIWPs. Massage therapists, acupuncturists, artists, a pottery

studio where children can paint on the chinaware. There's also a restaurant and a vintage clothing store.

She took a friend to the vintage clothing store just the other day. It was right after the Met Gala, and they had to talk about AOC's dress. Ah the Met Gala. Part of her thinks it's total crap, and of course, part of her wishes that she could stand on those steps in a fabulous gown and be photographed. Every little girl's dream, right?

She is a retired French professor with a studio. What does she do in her studio? Whatever the fuck she wants. Delpy would approve. At the moment, the dress project mostly. She watches Netflix series and sews roses made out of plastic bags onto used bridesmaid dresses. So she looks like she is doing something that an artist would do. Most of the artists around her are older white women who live on their husbands' income, and so they can do whatever the fuck they want.

She doesn't live on her husband's income because she doesn't have a husband. At least not anymore. She actually had two. They gave her some money, but certainly not enough to live on. She has some family money as they say. And heck, she has a retirement account from her teaching job at the local college.

She just found out, from an academic website, that she is quoted in an anthology of theory and criticism. WTF that's exciting. Who cares. Well, she does, a little. She could spend her retirement going through the Academia website, looking up every article and book chapter she's ever been quoted in. There are probably people who actually do that. (*Rapid montage of dozens of Academia pages with the same author's name appearing on each page*). Regularly. That's part of the reason why she left academia. Academics are so narcissistic. They never left school, so they're immature adults, permanently eager to be at the top of their class.

There must be something else to achieve out there besides well written analytical papers and cryptic books that nobody reads.

What is the arc of this story that she would like to set in a converted bread factory that looks like a little Beaubourg? She likes to think that a woman who reaches sixty and who hasn't fulfilled her life dream yet might finish a play and receive an offer from some arts organization to produce it. Or maybe her dress project will end up in an exhibit somewhere, some small museum with a focus on recycled art. At the opening of this exhibit in which her dress project has been included, she would wear an interesting outfit, thus satisfying her desire to go to the ball. She will be wearing a very PC outfit from a lesser-known designer who has retrofitted an old dress. Easy enough. The vintage clothing store in her building has plenty of retrofitted old gowns to choose from.

Back to Glasgow. The city of incredibly friendly people and incredible coincidences. The man living across the landing from her, the husband of her Airbnb hostess, is somebody she knows through her work on comics. She didn't know he lived there though. She knew this neighbor across the landing guy through conferences and reading his work. Weird. But heck, this trip, in a pandemic, with all the other weird stuff that's going on, has to have some kismet, right?

It's lonely in Glasgow, despite the aforementioned accidental encounter with her neighbor and her daughter Flora, the intended purpose of this trip. She has spent a great deal of time alone. It's a good thing that she was able to watch Netflix. Fun to watch British series while in Britain. First "Sex Education" (season 3 was a bit problematic, the feminazi principal who can't reproduce vs the mother earth sex goddess therapist: what's the point? Don't repress? Repression is bad for you? Of course it is). Now it's "Motherland" which has a working mom that nails the balancing act right on the head. Except that she does drink an awful lot of coffee in a café. Realistically a working mom does not have time for that.

Flora has also recommended an old series with a young David Tennant, "Taking over the Asylum." She watches a bit of it on YouTube because none of the streaming services that she subscribes to has it. When DT says "*BEG*" for "big," she pauses the computer and views it again and again. She loves the Scottish accent.

So what is she doing here? Flora doesn't need her. She can't really do anything for her. They did have a good set of conversations during their meals and walks. But there's always a need to keep herself in check, for fear of saying something that might upset Flora. And she is visiting during abnormal times (unless of course, this is the beginning of a new normal, in which one swabs one's nose constantly, and worries constantly that one of us is sick).

She quite liked the Hunterian gallery. The Whistlers, the ones with barely anything on them, were amazing. And his wife, poor Beatrix, was an accomplished artist herself. What a wonderful surprise to see the Chardin as well. The first paper that she ever delivered was on women's work in Chardin and Rousseau. In Florida, when she was very pregnant with Caroline, her other daughter, the one who lives in New Mexico. Chardin, meanwhile, elevated female labor to a higher aesthetic, to make the viewer appreciate the labor of the working classes, male and female, but mostly female.

Speaking of Rousseau and Chardin, she finally encountered some Glaswegian unfriendliness. In the mess of a bookstore called “Voltaire and Rousseau,” a cat was flopped on a pile of books right next to the owner, seated behind a desk. She asked him (the owner, not the cat) if she could get a photo (which admittedly is annoying), and he barely looked at her in silence with a “no” on his face.

Glasgow’s West End has perfect rows of row houses with their perfectly planted front gardens. She wonders, from the perspective of an immigrant or a refugee, whether this is the apotheosis of colonization. That’s what it was all for, so that hundreds of thousands of Brits could have their nice rowhouse with their tidy front garden.

Back to “Motherland.” She quite likes the character named Liz, she’s incredibly funny and gets the best lines. She noticed that Liz had an accent that she couldn’t place. Turns out the actress is from Manchester. She gets to say things like, “I’ve had it with the yummy mummification of the High Street” and “I wouldn’t mind getting poisoned, you know, go into hospital, have a bit of a rest.”

Being alone means that she has time to draw, like that fireplace in her bedroom in Glasgow. She did loads of cross-hatching. Bloody hell as they say here. Seeing the Whistlers at the Hunterian reminded her that drawing and sketching are hard work.

Now she is in Carlisle, England, just south of the Scottish border. It’s a halfway point of sorts between Glasgow, and Manchester where she will spend a few days hanging out with her friend Elise. The train from Glasgow to Carlisle was a party on wheels. Total pandemonium. Fortunately, she sat with three passengers who were lovely. She was lucky to get a seat. British trains are notoriously a shit show. The British have another major flaw: they drink too much. (*Montage of drinking on the train, drinking outside pubs, drinking in a park, drinking at a cheap hotel bar. For the drinking scene on the train, it would be in slow-mo, with two enormous cases of Budweiser being ripped open, cans being passed–tossed–around*).

Carlisle has the rich pretty side and the poor ugly side. Her hotel is on the poor ugly side. (*She goes down to breakfast. Inspects what is underneath the metal lids. First sausage, then bacon, then mystery food–deep fried triangles: fish?–then obviously beans by the look of the spoon ––for any meal, really unappetizing–then mushrooms–for breakfast?–then eggs. She scoops eggs onto her plate. She goes to the coffee machine. Makes her selection. There are four spouts. One of the spouts is spewing liquid and missing her cup. She quickly moves the cup into better position. What is “white coffee”? She sits down and eats in a corner. The music is playing “Oh what a night.”*)

This is the land of the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Pink Floyd, Led Zeppelin, not to mention Eric Clapton and all the British bands of the sixties, from the Animals to the Zombies,

and this is the music we have to listen to during breakfast? Why can't we eat our eggs to the sounds of Marianne Faithful instead?

(Cut to scene of her eating her eggs, and Marianne Faithful sings on the sound system. First "As Tears go by," then cut, no, "Broken English" then cut no, maybe that's not the music she wants to hear while eating her eggs. Kate Bush sings a more current song. That's better.)

She walks to the town center, gets her bearings, wanders into the most incredible second-hand bookshop, browses, chats with the chap behind the desk, a white rasta who seems very sharp (browsing inside cavernous bookstore). A Posy Simmonds graphic novel is displayed in a glass case. He doesn't know who Simmonds is, she tells him that she made a lot of money denouncing the ways of the privileged classes, so how does that even work? She buys the Posy Simmonds to add to her collection of graphic novels. She also buys a book of short stories written by a local author.

She walked in the countryside, she petted a cow, she chatted with an elderly fisherman who offered her his cane so that she could climb back up the bank after watching a heron take off in flight. She went to M+S to buy a small bottle of wine and a sandwich, which she is drinking and eating in her hotel room as she types on her computer. It's lonely, but one has to learn to live with loneliness.

She woke up in the middle of the night and thought about Flora, and she wept like she hadn't in years. It's hard to realize that, at a certain point, what you had with your child, all that intimacy and closeness and sharing of experiences are gone. Flora felt like a stranger. She has chosen Angus (her boyfriend) and Glasgow, and has quite literally put a huge space between herself and her family.

It's a good thing that her friend Rasmus back home keeps sending her the Jumble® from the daily newspaper (the very newspaper that is delivered in those aforementioned plastic bags). The Jumble® keeps her mind going, and it gives her the feeling that Rasmus really cares about her.

Now for Manchester. The train trip was spectacular. Beautiful countryside. *(Face glued to train window).*

Her Airbnb hosts in Manchester—Whalley Range to be exact—are Italian. The husband helped her lock a bike that she borrowed from her friend Elise. He also smokes dope and drinks wine and leaves the dope butts in little glass jars all over the small rear garden. And the old Italian grandma is walking around with nothing to do. It's a bit weird.

She has the whole top floor all to herself. (*The grandmother accidentally walks into her room, mistaking it for her daughter's study*). Her friend Elise was waiting for her in the crowded Manchester Piccadilly train station. She learned to ride a bike on the left side of the road, it wasn't that hard, while Elise peddled a stealth electric bike with a carriage on the front where she could put her baby and a stroller. They ate incredible lunches in various pubs. Elise's baby Colin was always so easygoing, a happy little guy who was so pleasant to hold, cuddle, sing to and sing to sleep.

They went into a few clothes shops, and she held Colin while Elise tried on some sweaters. One evening, Elise had a friend come for dinner. She asked them why the English drank so much. She explained that she had watched a guy drink three pints of beer without ordering any food in a pub in Carlisle (*flashback to that pub, with greasy haired guy looking at his phone and drinking beer at stop motion speed*). They claimed that the English drink so much because they are socially inept. They need alcohol to help them communicate. Really?

She is now at the airport in Manchester waiting for her flight back to the States. Did you know that you could do a free Scotch tasting at the duty-free? As she sits in the waiting area, she recalls her visit with Flora. She wishes that her daughter would write to her more often and tell her what's on her mind. With baby Colin, the caretaking gestures came back so naturally, holding a baby, singing songs and rocking him to sleep, pushing the stroller back and forth to keep it in motion while not going anywhere, clipping and unclipping the snugly, playing peekaboo, and just the sheer joy of holding him and watching his grin turn into a laugh. She must have been a happy mother with her children when they were little. She had fantasized that her daughters and she would remain close into their years of adulthood. It's really painful to see your children drifting away from you.

She has Claire Tomalin's memoir to read for the trip home. It turns out that her friend Rasmus had already read it (he just texted her letting her know after she texted him what she was reading). Another coincidence given that she picked it out in a Waterstone's (another bookstore in Carlisle) that was chock a block full of books. She had almost picked up the newest Sally Rooney but went for Claire Tomalin instead. She remembers that she could also work on the Jumble® and should get some water. (*Cut to black. Then a plane slowly touches down at Logan airport with Olof Arnalds' "Surrender" playing over the credits*).

ANNABELLE CONE

El Mundo de Mercedes

“Claudia is coming tomorrow to interview my mother,” Luis Carlos blurts out as he rushes in the front door of the apartment in the Vedado section of Havana where he grew up.

“CNN is doing a story about casas particulares, and they’re coming to our apartment to do the video!”

I’m not surprised that out of the hundreds of private homes in Havana licensed by the government to rent rooms to tourists, CNN singled out the one operated by Luis Carlos’ mother, Mercedes Gonzalez. You can find it in the guidebooks and it’s one of the nicest we’ve found in all of Cuba.

It’s 2011, and I’m here on a two-week trip with my wife Virginia who is working on a photographic project she’s calling “Hemingway in Cuba.” We just happen to be staying at “Casa Mercy” when CNN decides to do a feature story for its series *Destinos*, about the types of accommodations available to tourists visiting this island nation.

But I’m embarrassed to admit to Luis Carlos that I don’t know who Claudia is.

“Claudia, Claudia Palacios,” he says, politely instructing me that her name is pronounced KLOW-dee-ah and not KLAW-dee-uh. “She’s big; she’s one of the anchors. And she’s very cute,” he adds with a smile.

I watch the 24-hour news channel on occasion, usually during elections or to follow breaking national news stories, but I can’t recall seeing Claudia Palacios doing the reporting. Luis Carlos explains that she’s on the Spanish language affiliate, CNN en Español.

“Si, si of course,” I nod.

I’ve never really watched CNN en Español except to catch a few minutes of a soccer game while channel surfing in Cuban hotel rooms. And that would only be in a resort hotel where we hardly ever stay. More modest Cuban hotels or casa particulares, where we prefer to stay, are forbidden to have cable or satellite TV and only receive a handful of government-approved channels with old-fashioned antennas.

It would have been a good idea to tune into the channel before traveling to catch up on news from Cuba and the rest of Latin America in Spanish. But I never found the time and now Luis Carlos tells us that since we’re the only guests staying at Casa Mercy at the moment, Claudia may want to interview us about what it’s like to stay in a private home, why we stay there, what we like about the experience, and when was the first time we stayed at Casa Mercy.

I’m really getting nervous thinking that they will probably want to do the interview in Spanish. And while I have taken night classes in the “community language program” back home in New Hampshire—always placing myself one level above “rank beginner”—my

language skills remain rudimentary. I can order food in a restaurant, ask simple directions, and make a few short quips, but not really carry on a full conversation. So I converse primarily in English, except in emergencies, when I rely on Virginia to come to the rescue.

“Don’t worry about it,” our young friend assures us, “it will be fun.”

Luis Carlos is 26 and tall with short black hair. He wears jeans and a sea foam green Lacoste polo shirt—the stretch-fabric kind—that accentuates his broad shoulders, muscular arms and slim mid-section.

“I’ve lost weight,” he says, “And I’m working on my six pack.”

He glides around the apartment straightening up for the CNN visit. He takes a wide blue ribbon off the small brown rocking chair in the living room that has been placed across the seat to prevent guests from sitting down and damaging it further. It’s been that way for at least our last two visits. He lifts a larger white rocking chair, also broken, from the balcony and carries it to a neighbor’s apartment. Standing at the bookcase that dominates the front wall of the living room, he pulls out volumes with controversial titles or critical of the Castro regime and moves them to obscure corners above and below eye level. This is both for CNN and for the Cuban “handler” who will accompany the film crew and whom Luis Carlos assures us will be a government agent.

It’s the first time I’ve seen Luis Carlos helping out with domestic chores. He has a reputation for being something of a playboy among the American students I know who have stayed at Casa Mercy. He seems to know all the hot nightspots and he makes no bones about his party animal reputation. This trip he seems more serious and tells us he’s planning to emigrate.

“There are no jobs here, no future for me.”

He comes to see his mother, who has cooked him a lunch of pollo asado over white rice, before going off to French class or to lift weights and attend a spinning class at a nearby gym. The French classes are part of the immigration requirements for moving to Quebec, Canada. To qualify for a work permit he must pass language tests in English and French and have at least \$3,000 to support him for three months while he finds a job. He attended the University of Havana where he majored in accounting. After graduation he completed two years compulsory service in the army, but since then it’s been difficult to find a job that would lead to a career. In many ways he’s emblematic of many Cubans his age: well-educated, gregarious, and eager for opportunities that are so rarely available for young people in Cuba.

“I’m the last person in my class still in Cuba,” he says, referring to students from his high school years.

“All the rest have already gone to Europe, Mexico, Australia or the States.”

He plans to move to Montreal as soon as possible and with the full support of his parents.

“I’ll get a job as a waiter or whatever I can get,” he says.

I ask about working as an accountant there.

“I have to take more courses in Canada. My degree from the University here is not strong enough.”

Luis Carlos lives in an apartment a few blocks away that belonged to his grandmother. Mercedes has made it clear that it is not his apartment, part of her subtle encouragement to make his own way in the world. She is not happy with his playboy lifestyle and some the schemes he has begun to use to make money—selling boxes of Cohiba cigars to guests at Casa Mercy, for example.

The evidence that he benefits in other ways from his mother's work in the tourist economy is readily apparent—a new iPod, a first generation iPhone and even a Mac laptop, all left behind or brought to Havana by guests to show their gratitude for Mercedes' hospitality or the desire that Luis Carlos experience the consumer products that so many of his contemporaries outside of Cuba possess.

Mercedes drives the boat that keeps this family afloat. Also a graduate of the University of Havana and the spouse of an economist there, she is the real breadwinner for the family. In the mid 1990s when tourism surpassed sugar as the primary source of foreign exchange, Mercedes became directly involved in the trade. Her access to tourist dollars and more recently convertible pesos (CUCS—pronounced “kooks”) from renting rooms, tips and gifts—clothes, cameras, electronics and even parts for her 1968 VW Beetle—provide a better life for her family and her only son than is possible for most Cubans. It allows an occasional dinner out or a long weekend at the family's favorite vacation spot, in Soroa, with its sandy beach, waterfall, and pools of water said to have medicinal value.

Our host is kinetic, effervescent. She always greets us with a warm smile and a hug. “Buenas dias, Michael. Que tal? How did you sleep?” Petite and spunky, she moves seamlessly from one task to the next, collecting passports from guests and recording names, numbers, nationalities in a logbook that she must take to a Ministry of Interior (MINIT) office within 24 hours of new arrivals. (MINIT monitors the whereabouts of all tourists and especially Americans traveling in Cuba.) Preparing elegant breakfasts of eggs—omelets with onions; tortilla style eggs with tomatoes and onions; poached eggs, soft or slightly runny; eggs over easy or scrambled—colorful smoothies made with papayas, watermelon, mangos, and oranges; and strong black coffee with warm milk served in a pastel glass lined thermoses from the 1950s.

After a conversation about where we will go that day, she moves on to cleaning the two guest rooms, sometimes with help from a woman she hires a couple of days a week, doing laundry, preparing lunch for Luis Carlos, and shopping. She's often on the phone taking reservations or finding rooms for travelers if her casa is full. She carefully screens guests who come to the door turning away any party boys or otherwise suspicious characters.

She's a fixer and travel agent, connecting us with her network of friends and contacts. She helps us map out our itinerary and then calls ahead to reserve rooms at almost every stop. She set us up in Casa Vivi in the remote fishing village of Bahia Honda, west of Havana. In the beautiful and popular Viñales valley in the tobacco-growing region west of Havana, she arranged for us to stay at Casa Carlos and Rosa (Mercedes worked with Carlos in Russia, when that country was Cuba's primary trading partner.) In Santa Clara in central

Cuba she recommended the sprawling colonial home of Angel, a friend and former civil engineer—“he have a very, very nice house.” And in Moron along the north coast she sent us to Casa Martha and Beto, which was full but led to us staying nearby in the apartment of a friend and doctor.

This is El Mundo de Mercedes—The World of Mercedes—and it extends to the furthest reaches of Cuba. She can arrange for car rentals and make restaurant recommendations such as the *Paladar Gringo Viejo*—The Old Gringo—a cozy Creole restaurant in the basement of a nearby mansion, or the large open-air *El Aljibe* in Miramar, with its specialty of all-you-can-eat chicken, beans and rice prepared in a sweet-and-sour garlic gravy. (On a previous visit we said hello to legendary Cuban jazz pianist Chucho Valdez, who was also dining there.)

In 2007 when Virginia’s suitcase “went missing” from the Havana airport with all her clothes and her tripod, Mercedes outfitted Virginia with the necessities and took her to a tiny mall near the University of Havana to buy underwear and blouses. Virginia looked so convincingly Cuban that a hotel clerk in the Bay of Pigs town of Giron mistook her for a native until Virginia inquired about a room in English.

Mercedes is a stickler for security both for the household and for her guests while traveling around Cuba. “You must lock everything at all times” is the unbreakable rule.

The keys to the building and apartment are numbered—front door of building (1), elevator (2), apartment front door (3), guest room (4), and back stairwell/kitchen door (5). She insists we park in a 24-hour parking lot with an attendant three blocks away that costs \$2 a night.

“Never leave your car on the street, never, never, never,” she cautions. “Only park next to the apartment when you load or unload.” She also tells us never to pick up hitchhikers in Cuba, although there are always dozens of them at almost every exit ramp or major intersection outside city limits throughout the country. Hitchhiking is encouraged by the government because of the shortage of buses and trains. While we generally follow her advice, we have picked up people from time to time, most recently a young doctor just back from Venezuela and his girlfriend who were traveling from Viñales to their hometown, 25 miles away. Doctors receive valuable experience and often larger salaries on these “medical missions” to other countries. And Cuba receives much needed foreign currency from medical services their doctors provide.

After dinner at a nearby restaurant Virginia and I return to Casa Mercy and scan through the guidebook for places to visit and photograph outside of Havana before going to sleep. The next morning we are up early. Mercedes and Luis Carlos are busy preparing for the film crew. I notice pink gladiolas in vases next to the balcony and entrance to the kitchen and new candles on the coffee table in the living room. The bamboo awning on the balcony is down to provide shade from the harsh morning light.

Claudia and the CNN crew are supposed to arrive around 8:30. I have been busy thinking about what I might say and whether it would need to be in Spanish. Claudia might not be

sympathetic if I stumble—“How can you go to Cuba so many times and not be able to speak the language?” I imagine her asking.

One of the good things about staying in the homes of Cubans is that we can practice the language and learn more about the culture firsthand. Casa Mercy is not just a convenient and comfortable place to stay, it is our source of information about Cuba. Mercedes knows everything about Havana and the rest of the country.

Claudia arrives on time with five other people in a silver station wagon. I see them pull up next to the huge spiky agave cactus at the curb in front of the apartment house. It's the only car on the street.

Mercedes is dressed up for the occasion. She has on a black blouse scooped at the neckline and set off with a black necklace made of flat onyx on a silver chain and matching earrings. The gauzy blouse hangs over dressy blue jeans. She wears silver framed glasses and lipstick. Her shoulder length black hair is full and flowing.

The driver stays with the car while the rest of the crew unloads equipment. There's a cameraman, producer, tripod carrier, and a sixth person, a tall black man with a straw hat with a “Havanatur” band that matches the logo of the Cuban travel company on his white shirt. Since he seems uninterested in helping unload or carry the video equipment, I presume he is the “handler.” Luis Carlos says that the handlers are state security. They always accompany reporters, especially from the U.S., and are there to insure that they don't start interviewing average Cubans and asking questions that could reflect poorly on the government.

Mercedes and Luis Carlos take the elevator downstairs and meet them at the front door. Once upstairs I learn that they are based in Atlanta but also spend time in the Havana bureau. The cameraman, who is Puerto Rican, has been in the Havana bureau for the past three months.

“Havana is an easy place to work because it's so lively and the architecture is photogenic,” he says. “But I prefer getting out of the city to small towns that are less frenetic. The people seem more real.” He tells me he takes a small camera and shoots “B-roll” footage of the landscape and Cuban life so he can use it in almost any piece they put together about Cuba. Claudia is in the country for five days to do this story.

“I travel outside of Atlanta four times a year, as do the other six anchors on CNN en Espanol.”

She is from Colombia and has a 10-year-old son. I ask her if it is difficult to balance her busy work schedule with raising a young son in Atlanta.

Yes, of course, I would love to be back home in Colombia with my family, but there are no opportunities there that compare to my job at CNN.”

She is easy to talk to, and Luis Carlos is right, she is also beautiful. Straight long brown hair pulled back exposing her oval face and ears decorated with aqua and red dangling earrings. She has bright brown eyes and long natural eyebrows, perfect teeth exposed by her

easy smile, understated lipstick and a light layer of makeup that highlights her high cheekbones.

She wears a brown blouse with an open flyaway collar, “V” neck and flap pockets over sand colored pants. Her silver watch glints against flawless skin. She wears a lavalier microphone and carries the tools of her trade—a notepad, pen and a point-and-shoot camera. I learn later that she is 33.

Virginia shows Claudia her book of Cuba photographs. “Oh,” she says when she sees the coffee table sized volume. “You really have a book.” As she looks at the pictures she asks questions about traveling in Cuba and staying in people’s homes.

The cameraman starts shooting Claudia coming off the elevator with the Lonely Planet guidebook that lists Mercedes casa. The shot was Luis Carlos’ idea. They film around the apartment, and then tape an interview with Mercedes on the balcony and preparing our breakfast.

The crew moves into the bedroom off the living room, which has its own bathroom with a tub and shower, a double bed, dresser, closet, worktable with two chairs, refrigerator and air conditioner. Mercedes rents each bedroom suite for \$30 a night each and will provide breakfast for an additional \$10.

Our morning routine is disrupted, so we sit and chat while the film crew works. They ask us to just talk naturally, but we are not interviewed. What a relief. We relax and reminisce about the first time we came to Mercedes’ casa.

“A photographer and friend recommended it,” Virginia remembers. He also introduced us to Paquito, an art historian who serves as our guide while in Havana. He will take us to Finca Vigia where Hemingway lived for almost 20 years, Cojimar where he docked his fishing boat Pilar, the boat yard across Havana Harbor romantically called Casa Blanca, and the seaside community of Santa Fe on the northwest coast where Hemingway caught many legendary big-game fish.

After the filming is completed we exchange email addresses so Claudia can tell us when the piece will air. We pose for pictures with her. She is effusive and generous with her time.

By 10:30 they are packing up the car for the drive to Viñales on the western end of Cuba famous for the tobacco used to make Cuba’s best cigars. We stand on the balcony, wave and take a few last pictures.

Once they are out of sight down Calle 21, Mercedes collapses in a chair in the living room.

“Oh my god,” she says, excited about the morning but relieved that it is over.

“El Mundo de Mercedes!” Virginia shouts out.

“Si, El Mundo de Mercedes,” Mercedes echoes with a huge smile.

MICHAEL BEAHAN