

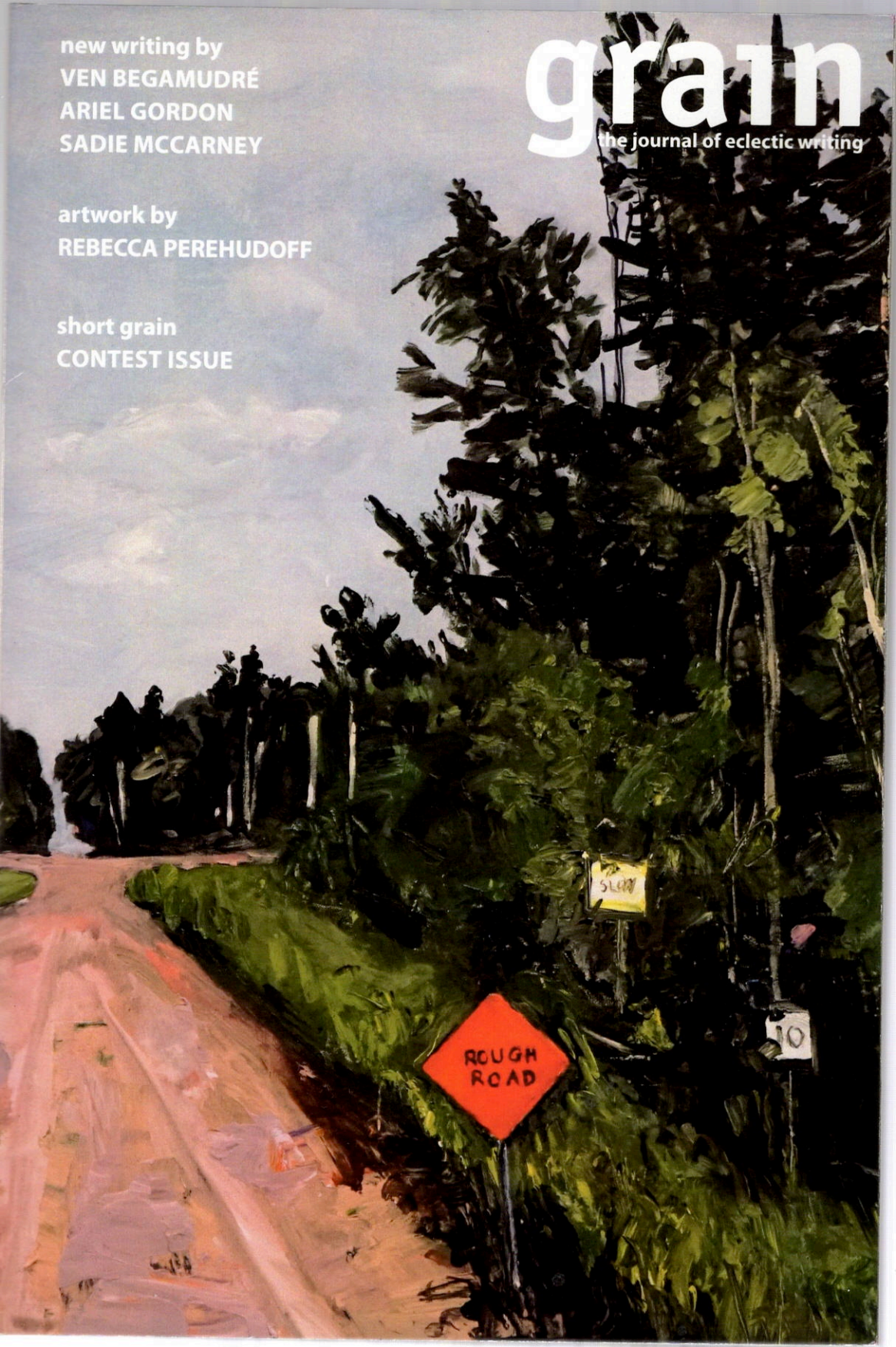
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# grain

the journal of eclectic writing

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## THE FERAL CATS OF OAKLAND

Tom Bentley-Fisher

I woke up in the middle of the night, startled by a vivid but boring dream. My first response was one of resentment. My dreams are usually interesting. This one was plain dull.

As I've aged, my dreams have begun to travel in width, where they meet other dreams, dreams I've had before. They meld together somehow, creating new shadows leaning into the corners of the same event, like old friends nudging me to gather new perspectives about their former selves. But this dream had no shadows. It was literal, static. Present only now.

In my dream I saw that the front door to my house was open. It was night; there was moonlight. The door was open, that was it. During the few seconds when I was awake I thought about the possibility of the door actually being open, but dismissed the idea, anxious to blanket myself in the escape of sleep.

When I went to the front door in the morning, sure enough, it was open, exactly as it was in my dream. Not wide open—more ajar—friendly almost, as if the idea of being entirely open might have appeared a bit rude.

I felt stupid. Vandals had smashed in my car windows a few weeks ago. Hoodlums. The week before, I'd heard gunshots. It's more than a little foolish to leave your front door open in Oakland. However gentrified my neighbourhood was becoming, it still had an undercurrent of the ghetto.

Maybe I hadn't locked it properly after I let the two feral cats skitter through the house to scoff down some food. Whatever the reason, it was unsettling. Why didn't I get up to check when my subconscious had sent me such an obvious warning?

And why did it create a nagging feeling in me—the hint of a memory swinging open at the back of my ribcage, a cautious pull towards the past. The image of the gap between the safety of my home and the outside world filled me with the sensation of something I had forgotten. It was not the street I feared. It was more internal—a portal to an unresolved feeling that demanded acknowledgement.

An open door usually leads me to the future. I've lived my life in a state of unease, anticipating the moment I'd run from another relationship, a profession, even a country. I've always had one foot on the street, ready to bolt. But the open door in front of me now seemed to be sucking me into the past. It made me feel old, a little hopeless. I shut the door and got on with my day.

A lot of what happens to me lately makes me feel hopeless. Or maybe it's what doesn't happen. The aging process is difficult. It's not the dying I'm afraid of—letting go of the conscious world—it's letting go of the unknown. The subconscious. It feels like a betrayal. After all that negotiation between the inner and outer life, the hidden forces, compounding, layer upon layer of stratification, pressing hard at the tectonic plates of our conscious self. How does the sediment accumulate? The pain of the battle, the occasional pleasure of release, the brief flashes of insight, how can it not evolve into a new beginning? And as one's life comes to an end, the pressure of the unresolved becomes a ghastly reality. Perhaps the internal battle plays itself out in dementia, or along the crack across the ceiling, as you lie waiting for death on the iron bed below. Whatever it is, I resent the process wholeheartedly.

I sit down at the computer and try to ignore the sensation of distress that came to me when I saw the open door. But instead of searching the Internet for a present to give my grandson I let my hands rest silently across the keyboard. They look prehistoric somehow, like ancient sea creatures that crawled their way up my legs to arrive on a table, not quite sure how to take their first breath, arresting me in the certainty of their stillness.

They are my mother's hands. The hands she stretched forward into mine on her hospital bed. "The same hands," she said. "We have the same beautiful hands."

I cannot write today. I cannot feign enthusiasm. I will not eat today. I will not take my vitamins. I shall not shave.

I shut the lid of my computer and sink into a welcoming solitude.

In my mind's eye I see an image. I see a complete set of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. It lines a bookcase in alphabetical order under a window. There is the hint of sun behind closed curtains. The room is still. There is no air. I am in the room. I am a boy. An open door leads to the rest of the house. I sit on a sofa looking at the encyclopedias. I am scared.

My mother used to feel sorry for the salesmen who came door to door, walking alone in their squeaky black shoes as they trudged their way up and down the hot pavement, hauling their sweaty briefcases through the treeless suburbs of the '60s. Chin up, full of masculinity, each one extolling the virtues of the encyclopedia. They were proud to be selling knowledge. And if they made their quota they'd be back to college in the fall. There was no shame in that—quite the contrary. We all must pay our price.

When I was eleven, a boy a few years younger lived across the street. He was awkward, spindly. His body seemed weightless, without gravity or presence. The other boys on the street had little to do with him. My mother said he was "sensitive." Both his parents were high school principals. We only saw them when they came home during their lunch break. They were seldom in view.

One day this boy showed up in my backyard where I was playing football with some other boys. The weightless boy sat on the fence. When a ball came towards him he fluttered his hands as if to deny the ball's existence. Then he slipped and his legs splayed onto either side of the fence. He started to cry and said he had to go home because he had hurt his penis. He didn't say "dick" or "prick" or even "wee-wee." He used the word "penis." And what about his balls? Surely that's what must have hurt? There was a collective confusion in the backyard. Why did the boy use the word penis? It felt very wrong. Disturbing. It almost seemed like an excuse for him to go home.

A few months later the boy was dead. He was found hanging from a rope in his basement. My mother went to great lengths to tell me that he must have been experimenting with some image he saw in a magazine. What a terrible accident, she cried. She felt very sorry for the high school principals.

My mother was like that. She once heard news on the radio that a teenager had been killed in a motorcycle accident and she cried so hard for the teenager's mother I had to spend the entire evening in my room until I promised I'd never go on a motorcycle, which was a promise, of course, I could not keep.

Several months later, my mother asked me to do her a favour. "Be of service," she said. She'd been talking with the high school principals and they'd purchased a brand new set of encyclopedias. They told my mother that if I wanted to look at the encyclopedias I could go over to their house sometime during my lunch hour.

It was very strange sitting in the small study at the front of their house staring at the encyclopedias. I didn't know what to do with them. The two high school principals were somewhere beyond the open door leading into their living room but I couldn't hear anything. Not a stir. So I just sat on a sofa looking silently at the symmetry of the books, lined up in alphabetic order on the bookcase.

I hear a cat crying out from the Oakland street and feel a knot tightening in my solar plexus. I try to negotiate a pause in my memory, thinking I should be deciding on a gift for my grandson. But I cannot focus. Instead I look at my hands lying in their stillness across the lid of the computer—my mother's hands, capturing me with the power of submission.

I give over to the timelessness and feel my body wanting to elevate above itself. My skin feels tingly and my eyes widen to the outermost limits of their peripheral vision.

In the distant shadows I can see all the furniture in that small study in suburbia—a tall lamp with a pale green shade to the right of a curtained window, an ordinary wooden chair with its back placed under a painting of the Rocky Mountains. I see a small circular table with a vase of purple lilacs placed squarely on top, a desk, sheets of paper stacked neatly in two piles, a plant stand with a fern, a coat rack, a footstool, a bench. I see the back of the front door, the curtains pulled tightly across the window as if to preserve a place in history that must never change.

I listen to the ebb and flow of my breath, receding and returning in shallow waves. I try to silence my heartbeat. My mouth is dry. I am afraid to swallow. Again I hear the cat.

I knew I was in danger in that room. I always knew when I was in danger. That was part of my "gift." Adults recognized it. They said I had a "power." I could tell when something had happened before other people knew. Sometimes I could tell what was going to happen. Other times my power protected me—even when I didn't want it to. That's when I would leave my body.

Once, my body rose above itself but I didn't want to follow. It was when I was living with my blind grandfather in a small prairie town—before I was eight when my mother came to take me away in a big brown Pontiac. I tried hard to stay in my body that morning. I even made a fist inside my ribcage and tried

to pull myself into my feet. I was meant to go with a father-man to sit in the engine of his train as he drove it up the tracks to the city. He was being of service. Trying to make a boy feel special.

Because I didn't have a father, men in that town felt sorry for me. They'd take me to do special manly things, like playing hockey or baseball. I was terrible at manly things and that made me feel very sorry—not for me, but for them. Guilty even. When the locomotive hit a line of coal cars waiting on the wrong track, I came back to my body. The father-man never walked again; he was paralyzed.

I don't often think about those first eight years of my life with my grandfather. I knew things that others didn't. Saw things. Maybe all children can. I don't know. What I do know is that when something very bad had taken place, it wrapped itself around me. Standing on a dirty lot in front of a house where something dark and creepy happened to a boy's sister. Hiding in my grandfather's wheelbarrow outside the beer parlor late at night, filled with sadness because in the morning something awful would be found pinned under a farmer's threshing machine. But mainly I knew about evil. It would come as a colour, a smell, a sensation of dread. Things happened in that small town and I was unable to escape the buried secrets of their consequences.

Sometimes it was fun, though, telling people what was going to happen. It reassured me in my belief that I was an alien, that I was not meant to be living with a crazy grandfather in his slum of a house. I was just visiting the planet.

My blind grandfather towered six feet above the streets of a forgotten town, pushing his wheelbarrow ahead of him as if it were a seeing eye dog. People were frightened of him. And they were frightened of me. I had a gift.

On Sundays I would help him shave. I would peer into the one eye that could still see shadows and watch the pale white clouds swimming in the wonder of his universe. Sometimes I wanted to escape in there with him, far away from the realities of what surrounded me. He filled me with the beauty of his remoteness. Even though he barked his intolerance along the sidewalks, throwing abuse at everything he disagreed with, even though he ate raw liver or stood naked in a farmer's wheat field feeding his formidable untamed body with the power of the sun, I loved my grandfather. But only on the inside of our house, with its cracked ceilings and the big iron bed—never out on the streets.

My chest tightens. I don't know why my mind is taking me in these directions. The tips of my fingers flinch ever so slightly, as if they are considering clawing into the lid of the computer, gathering the energy to bolt. I don't want to think about the time when I went to live with my mother, alone in the study with the books and the table with the lilacs. I don't want to remember. I just knew something very bad was going to happen. Not to others—but to me.

I waited in that room for what felt like an eternity, the outline of the sun still clinging to the sky somewhere beyond the curtains, my grandfather standing in a wheat field a hundred years away. There was a taste in my mouth that is hard to describe—it was like moss, except I've never tasted moss. It was old, ancient, and slightly acidic. And the air smelled of perfume. Unhappy perfume. Sour. I wanted it to rain in that room. But the stillness just got thicker.

I try to suppress my thoughts, to return to the present, but a feeling of foreboding pulls me into the hard certain spine of my chair. My body wants to lurch forward but I am caught within the authority of its grip. A shudder runs through my entire being. I hear sounds of impending movement echoing through the caverns of the high school principals' house. I am a child. I am afraid. I hear footsteps.

I want to leave, to cross the street to the safety of my home. I want to be an ordinary boy, to stand up and run. I want my body to rise above itself and take me away. But it will not. I am anchored in fear.

I fix my eyes on the encyclopedias and try to find safety in the comfort of objects. My eyes scan the furniture in the room, giving over to every detail of fabric and colour, texture and shape. I arch my mind in slow curves and the furniture begins to elevate from the floor. I raise the chair that is under the painting of the Rocky Mountains and glide it slowly through the air. I lift the potted plant with the fern across the curtained windows to the other end of the room ... the bench ... the table with the lilacs. I can move everything but myself. The sheets of paper. The footstool. The desk. But my body remains within its human bone cage, entrapped in muscle and cartilage, encased in a void like the viscous sediment of my grandfather's eye.

A man sighs. A woman bites her lip. A boy swings on a rope. A mother cries in a corner of her split-level house.

I hate my mother for making me be here. I hate my gift. I hate encyclopedias. I want to erase what will happen from my memory before it begins.

The footsteps float toward me in whispers now and I feel the presence of a shadow standing in the well of the doorframe over my left shoulder. Behind the shadow, far beyond my peripheral vision, I see the outline of two figures, tall and weightless, leaning toward me like huge trees falling in a windless storm. I want to cry out. But I am trapped. I am caught within the vastness of the storm. I am the shadow. I am the image of myself standing in the doorway. And that image of myself is as frightening as the sounds of fear coming at me from the other side. As scary as the smell of perfume, the stale warm moisture of breath on my face, the pounding of three hearts forging together into a single note. It is timeless, an unending dimension of width, expanding into darkness. I am alone.

The footsteps stop. They will come into the room. Something bad will happen. And they will leave.

I stop breathing and give over to my aloneness. And from somewhere deep inside I hear a voice. It is my voice. It tells me to open my arms like wings, to fill the door well with lightness. I must use my power to close the door, to seal myself off from the knowledge of a world beyond the peripheral eye. I know I cannot keep them out.

The figures lean further into the shadow of myself. I am lost.

Inside the cradle of my chest I hear the creaking of my subconscious. It is closing. It moves towards its destination with slow deliberation. It is heavy yet moves with elegance. The door is closing.

I gasp. A quivering stirs from deep inside, a stream of bantam explosions ricocheting through the core of my abdominal muscles. My breath becomes staccato. I hear myself sobbing and grab the table in front of me. I see the computer. I see the painting of Paul Klee on my living room wall. I see the photo of my grandson and the vase I picked up on my trip to Turkey.

Finally my breathing returns to normal and I hear the cry of cats. I hear many cats. Scratching. Scratching at my door.

And then I remember. I remember with clarity what I was really forgetting when I sat in that room in front of the encyclopedias. I did not close the door. I left it slightly open. I remember sitting in the room of that house thinking to myself with full consciousness. *Do not close the door all the way.*

It was a decision. A quiet decision, a secret perhaps. Between myself and my other self. I left the door ajar.

I see, once again, my mother's beautiful hands and place them back on the computer. I can't say with certainty what happened in that small study. I can say that I didn't want to be an alien anymore. I didn't want to know things. And that by shutting off what I knew was going to happen, I could shut off what really happens.

So here I am, sitting in my own body in my own home. Face to face with the onslaught of old age, alone in the distraction of my disguises.

I look around me. How does the sediment accumulate, I wonder again? I want to know before I die. I am tired of my fear, the fear of my loneliness, of the crack widening in the ceiling. I want to return to the ghetto of my childhood, to that place where we see with more than our eyes, where the light and the dark live side by side. I want to live outside my peripheral vision.

And then I think. Perhaps I am an alien after all?

I remove my mother's hands from the computer. I remember how much I loved my grandfather. I remember how much I love my grandson. I stand up and walk to the front of the house. I reach out with my hand, my own hand. And I swing the door open to the feral cats of Oakland.