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CML News—Studio Stories

As we were finalizing choices for this Fall issue, the reality of creating a quality audio file from home hit us hard. Nevertheless, we are not a glum lot, as you will discover as you read the 'recording tales' below. Enjoy!

Jay Popham

My wife and I had a little bit of experience with audio production prior to taking on our first story for the Summer issue, having taken a short certification course a few years prior. The editorial frame of mind firmly resists untried plans, but we knew CML was in a bind because of all the uncertainty surrounding business closures during the pandemic. We also knew that *not* publishing an issue, or publishing late, was off the table: this would be the ultimate "untried plan," the one we hope never to try. So the decision was made to put the old saying to the test, and to do for ourselves what needed doing.

Biking into the emptied town for the necessary at-home-recording equipment was my first real excursion during the pandemic. At once I felt the respective sharp and dull anxieties of surgery and jury duty, the state of medical advice being what it was in the spring. No problem. This part of the plan required no finesse, no speed, only caution: gloves, mask, glasses, ginger movements through the checkout line, avoidance of (excessive) talk and (any) physical contact, breaking the respiratory seal for hydration only once inside and scrubbed down—a sigh of relief. My wife, partner, and much-better half, **Kathleen Fletcher**'s signing on as narrator gave me reassurance that the hard part was behind us: welcome to 2020. We would quickly gain a greater appreciation for the staggering variety of mouth sounds, apartment creaks, and paper rustles a studio microphone is capable of capturing with crystal clarity. (*Oh well, take two.*) The way you said, "Yes..." on the other hand, well, it could use a little more "...yes." (*Leave it.*) Here, finesse and speed (Kathleen's fortes) took over, and my earlier caution was abandoned as our deadline loomed larger: we can edit that out, we'll let that little issue go.

Reader, I may break your heart when I tell you I will not be revealing our patented seven secrets for no-mess home studio recording—not in this newsletter, anyhow. They, like us, are still a work in progress, and I’ve already exceeded my word count here. We had a small adventure, but I want the real story here to be the stories and poems themselves: the dozen or so surprising, stirring poems and stories that have been entrusted over the last few years to Kathleen and our Associate Editor **Alfredo Franco**. It’s a pleasure to share their clarion voices with you, and to find new ways for CML to meet and overcome the unexpected.

Alfredo Franco

What I miss most about our CML headquarters in Port Washington, besides the daily interaction with my wonderful colleagues, is the recording studio that the multi-talented **Mike Tedeschi** built for us inside our volunteer reading room. While small, it is expertly sound-proofed, and has enabled us to supplement the professional recordings on each issue with some in-house offerings voiced by CML staff and volunteers, including Kathleen Fletcher and yours truly. When the pandemic hit and we switched to working from home, all that I had to work with was my cell phone.

Attempts to record in my kitchen or bedroom resulted in myriad background noises—the landscapers with their electric pruners and buzz saws, a fire truck siren, a motorcycle revving up, the neighbor’s TV. In desperation, I fled to our walk-in closet, which was thickly padded by three rows of coats, suits, shirts, jackets, and sweaters. (We keep promising to purge, my wife and I, but somehow never get to it!) All of this helped provide some sound-proofing. I then placed more garments over the door, plugging up even the small crack between it and the floor. (Wait a minute! How long will the air last?)

In our CML studio, I’d had a music stand and reading light to prop up my texts (not to mention a comfortable chair and a table for my water bottle). In the closet—no such amenities! I clipped the sheets of the poems I was to record onto a series of trouser hangers, the kind with the adjustable clips. My cell phone I propped up half-way inside a coat pocket, enough for the mic to jut out. One sneeze or careless gesture and the whole set-up would collapse. Primitive as it was, the closet did keep out all the ambient noise. Unfortunately, the mic picked up the slightest rustle of paper, the growl of a hungry tummy, my intakes of air. Back at the studio, these sounds were relatively easy to edit out, but impossible

here. There was no ability to hit pause or patch up a mistake. I had to start from the top again if I made the slightest error.

So, there I was, in a closet, roaring like an ancient Scottish bard...Fortunately, when I sent my recordings to fellow CML editor **Jay Popham**, he was able to clean up most of the incidental noises and get the recording to a more professional level. The recordings he made of Kathleen Fletcher for this issue are amazing. Someday we'll look back to our improvised recording "studios" in closets and think how much fun it was, after all—a bright spot in the midst of a terrible time.

Highlights

The ongoing pandemic has blurred the traditional seasonal changes. Summer passed with many of us still largely confined to our homes, eschewing vacations or visits to the beach. No wonder some are calling it "The Lost Summer"! Now, suddenly, it's autumn...At CML, we hope that our magazine has been a good companion during these challenging months as we continue to bring you the best journalism, creative writing, natural history, and more from the world's top magazines, all recorded by some of America's finest narrators (as well as two members of our own CML family).

We live in a singularly complex time in that we face not only a public health crisis but also an ongoing reckoning with social justice and racial inequality, as well as ever-intensifying climate change. A variety of pieces in this issue confront our current set of predicaments: **Jane Qiu** recounts the intense hunt for the source of the COVID-19 pandemic by Chinese virologist Shi Zhengli. A veteran of the fight against the 2002 SARS outbreak, Shi's painstaking disease surveillance efforts succeeded in identifying bats as the disease's natural reservoir. "Peine Forte et Dure" by **Hazel V. Carby** compares the 2020 killing of George Floyd by police officer Derek Chauvin with a horrific form of punishment practiced up until the late 18th century, *peine forte et dure*, which involved the crushing to death of defendants who refused to plead innocence or guilt in English courts. The practice was also recorded in the early American colonies for those accused of witchcraft and, possibly, to punish African American slaves. **Barbara Hurd's** essay, "Sinking into the Arctic," explores the thawing permafrost on the Arctic island of Svalbard, which has caused slumping hillsides and fatal avalanches, portending the eventual melting of the polar cap. Hurd's is a story, she says, about "what happens when things we've thought stable for thousands of years begin to collapse."

In the midst of so much bad news, we could all use a break. While vacations have been hard to come by this year, we could not help but be charmed by **Alan Pell Crawford's** "Meet the Beatle," in which we learn of George Harrison's 1963 journey to Harrisburg, Illinois, to visit his sister, who had married an American. Not yet famous in the United States, Harrison, dubbed "the quiet Beatle," delighted the small town as much with his love of tail-finned American cars as with his remarkable guitar skills and long hair.

Our fiction in this issue includes haunting short stories by **Fiona McFarlane** and **Hilary Leichter**, as well as a bittersweet, pandemic-tinged love story by Haitian-American author **Edwidge Danticat**. Our poetry offerings include work by **Tom Sleigh, Robin Robertson, Imran Boe Kahn, Andrew Motion**, and the late great Irish poet **Eavan Boland**, who passed away in April.

TOP PICKS

We highly recommend **Aaron Robertson's** essay, "It Was More Than a Notion," which salvages a forgotten but fascinating chapter in African-American history, the Reverend Albert Cleage Jr.'s Black Christian Nationalist movement and its attempt, amidst the decay of 1970s Detroit, to redefine African-American identity through Afrocentric education and communal living. Robertson also recalls childhood summers at his grandparents' home in Promise Land, Tennessee, itself a kind of all-black utopia that eventually succumbed to depopulation and near oblivion as its heirs left for urban areas.

We were startled by **Karla Cornejo Villavicencio's** "Ground Zero," an investigation into the lives and fates of Latinx subcontractors and deliverymen who perished in the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001. Many died trying to save people trapped in the towers, others vanished without a trace in the ensuing inferno, while still others, sent in in the aftermath to clean up the highly toxic debris without adequate protection, became fatally ill. Many were underpaid or cheated out of their meager earnings; to this day, survivors struggle to pay for health care while living in constant fear of deportation, their heroic service unacknowledged.

Finally, this issue brings you a new story by **Ernest Hemingway**. That's right! A new story by one of America's greatest twentieth-century writers! Well, it is not exactly new—"Pursuit as Happiness" was written sometime between 1933 and 1956 but was put aside by the author, remaining unpublished until June of this

year. Based upon an actual fishing trip that Hemingway undertook in Cuba in 1933, this story bears all the hallmarks of the famous Hemingway style—extreme linguistic economy, tight description, vivid dialogue, and sudden, penetrating, human insight.

The “D-B” Beat

Our first story in this issue, **Susan Dominus’s** “The Voice of God,” profiles the career of acclaimed audiobook narrator **Edoardo Ballerini**, whose work can be found on over fifty BARD titles. We’ve listed just a few below to get you started—ask your local reader advisor how to borrow these titles using the number prefixed with “DB”:

- Ha Jin’s *The Boat Rocker* [DB 86271]
- Karl Ove Knausgård’s *Autumn* [DB 89739]
- Salvatore Scibona’s *The Volunteer* [DB 94283]
- Andrew Gross’s *Button Man* [DB 92498]
- Christina Lynch’s *The Italian Party* [DB 90525]

And Special Thanks To...

Alice G., from Boulder, CO, who’s been listening for over a decade and said “I love the CML selections!” She also mentioned she has a “closet full of old cassettes” that she sometimes “digs through to find an old favorite.” What would we do without closets?

Happy fall from Mike, Raquel, Annie, Jay, and Alfredo!