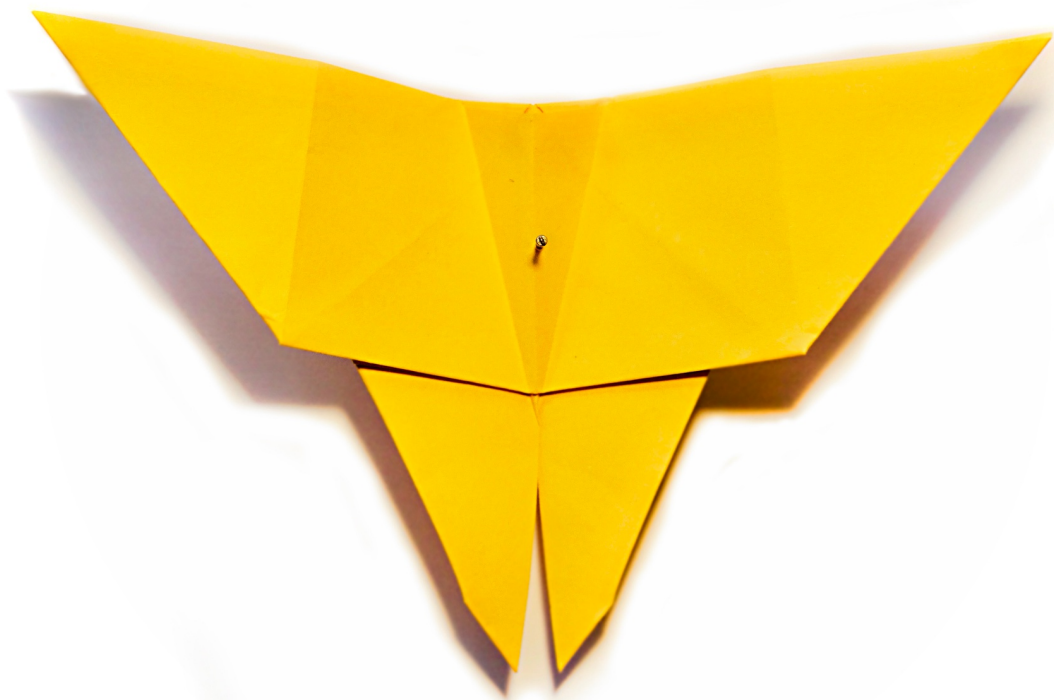


PAPER SHELL



anthology XVI

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THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

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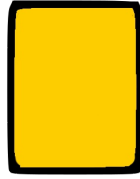
A big shout out to the UBC Okanagan writers who contributed to this year's Paper Shell. It's always amazing to read your words and hear what new ideas you're dreaming up.

Thanks to our Creative Writing profs who care so much about students and their words.

We would also like to respectfully acknowledge that this anthology was created on the unceded, traditional territory of the Syilx Okanagan people.

CONTENT WARNING

Please be aware that there may be content of an unsettling nature in this anthology, including topics of abuse and police brutality.



INTRODUCTION

This is the 2021 edition of Paper Shell, a collection of creative works done by the students of UBC Okanagan.

While this publication has been produced via the Creative Writing Program at UBCO, which stands on the unceded territory of the Syilx people, the transition to a digital format due to the global pandemic has virtually eliminated our geographical borders. As such, this collection of work from UBCO students has its origins spread throughout Turtle Island, and the world.

We celebrate the makers featured in this edition, who have produced fine, thoughtful writing. They range from first-year contributors to grad students about to finish their degrees. For any of this to work, we need contributors who are willing to risk their art with us. We have also been so fortunate that you have all given your time in the editing process, letting us bounce our ideas off you. Thank you for taking the leap with us.

The genres within this edition of Paper Shell range from poetry, fiction, stageplay, and screenplay, with topics ranging from depression to elephants, the powers of first love to solo dance parties, from struggling to breathe to building sandcastles, and panic to popsicles.

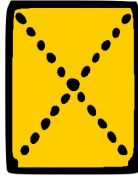
Paper Shell's dedicated team of eighteen student editors in CRWR 472 (spearheaded by Michael V. Smith) began working on this anthology in mid-January of 2021. For nine weeks, the editors worked closely alongside this volume's authors to help bring out the best in each piece. Despite the odd setback (let's face it—what project doesn't have a few of those?) and the challenges that online learning have brought, the editing process has

taught us many lessons along the way. The editors are proud to be able to share this anthology with you.

We would like to acknowledge the unique circumstances and gravity of the past year. COVID-19 has brought immeasurable grief and heartbreak, as well as community solidarity. Living through a pandemic has prompted us to break out of our comfort zones and pursue new opportunities. During these times, people have turned to the arts as both creators and consumers to bring joy and light into their lives as we try to navigate the unknown. Despite the global pandemic, our student writers and publishers have still managed to contribute and collaborate to ensure UBCO's literary voices are heard. The written word connects people across time and space, showing us that isolation is only temporary.

This year's edition of the Paper Shell Student Anthology is a fully online version. Due to the pandemic, the writers and editors agreed to this new format to allow for greater access for those around the world. The online anthology strives for connection in a time where disconnection is prevalent, so we hope this collection reaches you in whatever capacity you need, whether it be for a good laugh, comfort, or relatability in a world sometimes unreliable.

- *CRWR 472 Editing and Publishing class of 2020/2021.*



Pandemic

Vera Melnikov

I did not think it would be the last time I saw a face,
in a university cafeteria. In Glasgow
full face: wide grin and playful eyes full of grace.
I wish I got to know them.

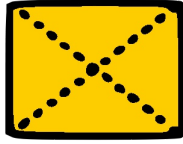
I did not think it would be the last time I walked
up to the apartment door, jankily locked
off the soaked sidewalk of Summertown Road in Ibrox:
littered with intoxicated football games.

I did not think it would be the last time I stood,
entranced, by the moving night mirror.
The city stars of River Clyde reflecting in my eyes,
unknowingly bidding farewell.

Now:
It is silence.
It's sitting with your feelings and facing yourself.
At last, no longer too busy, the truth comes out.
It's working through icky emotional wounds.
It's solo dance parties.
Quarantine birthday with lemon cream frosting and a cake for 10 for 2.
It's not inviting people over for Easter egg painting.
An endless weekend, everyday Sunday pyjamas and messy hair.

It's a summer vacation with plane tickets to countries on lockdown,
from countries you aren't even in anymore.
It's like swatting flies: the everyday news.
Tiny mosquitos that bite and sting.
Stuck in Algonquin Park for a never-ending July 1st.

It's silence and sunshine; unmoving mountains.
It's snow that does not melt in the July sun.



Sensory Overload in the Metro

Kayla McIntyre

Something prowls,
crawling closer,
It rings.
A moment of security dissipates.

This droning in my ear.
It comes on without warning,
I remember watching the old crones dance their youth away.
...Where am I?

Screeching on the tracks continues.
Familiarities make themselves known,
they unveil as my sanity unravels.

The speaker overhead locates my existence.
“Next stop Waterfront”
she has a pretty voice,
I wonder if she’s single?

The finale is near,

Why did I travel all this way?

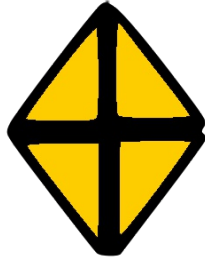
What for?
Who for?

I breathe in,
sit in amazement of the atmosphere,
blurs whip past.
Is this my life flashing before me?

Maybe I shouldn't have accepted that mysterious tab.
Maybe I should've stopped after four shots.
I watched the ice cubes swirl as they distorted in my brandy,
seamless transition.

What is grace?
They sell euphoria behind the grocery store- close enough.
My mind preoccupies-
Doubt, terror, astonishment- I'm engulfed by this metallic beast.

I breathe out,
the bustling city still moves.
Each in their own tracks.
Life breezes past my anguish.



You Should've Told Me, I Should Have Known

Sheri Ptolemy

We never discussed this before today
in this crepe café on Robson street.
You flew me to Nashville and didn't say
a word about your lymph node biopsy.

I get it, I was sixteen, but I could have prayed
every one of those days. You should've told me.
I had a feeling that something was astray
but I was distracted with every vacation you took me on.

I should have known, but you braved
space mountain at Disney so, I lived life hazy,
like an L.A. native, smog, and palm trees. Break
it all down now, it's obvious, I was just too naïve.

I still bring you to our favourite spot at the lake
to dunk seven times; Naaman was made clean.
I had no idea what I was doing, but I begged
for mercy, sang hymns so you could sleep.

Eight years later you're here, sipping lattes with me.
Thank you, Jesus, for chemotherapy.

To the Boy on Clover Road
Sheri Ptolemy

Just one look, that's all it took, and I'm right back to fifteen.
You caught me off guard from my neighbours' yard, slowly made your
way to me.
You ask me how I'm doing but do you really want to know?
Your eyes are so damn blue, and I can't help but flashback to when:

You were chasing me down Long Beach:
tan lines, surf boards, hot sand under my feet.
I didn't know that after all this time,
thoughts of you still occupied space in my mind.

I dove headfirst and the water was rough.
It's true, what they say: you never forget your first love.

Small talk over sweet tea, I'm so glad you chased your dreams.
It was for the best, we both found success. It was never going to be you
and me.
But I could talk to you all night long when the radio is playing our song,
like a time-machine, it launches me back to before mind games and deceit.

I was at your house every day after school
stolen kisses--I dipped my toe into the deep end of the pool.
I didn't know that after all this time,
memories of you still occupied space in my mind.

I dove, headfirst, and the water was rough.
It's true what they say: you never forget your first love.

The sparks still fly like New Year's night
But maybe it's better if we lay this to rest.
Gold confetti is pretty, but it still leaves a mess.
Just promise me, you'll never forget
when you've moved on and are married up
that I was your first love.



but I have Screams in me and they're coming
out one way or the other I can neither form
sentences nor Stop forming sentences
I can neither Sleep nor

every waking moment which now means All The Moments
it's just making me more high-functioning
as if my brain was only constrained by Sleep
like I'm driving a car with no gas and it just keeps
going faster and faster and Faster
burning off bits of myself
for fuel



Why I Stopped Asking for Help

Kybuky Bernard

I got my first stomach-ache in eighth grade
while laying on my mother's favourite cream couch.
My siblings stayed next to me
desperately waiting for my mom to get back from work.

I struggled to breathe. My mouth grew dry
and each swallow felt like a brick being
shoved into a straw. My vision blurred
and my eyes grew tired from crying so hard.

Once my mom got home, she sat on the carpet
next to me. A mug of tea next to her knee, cooling,
while she kept telling me things will get better.
She spent the night rubbing my arm in a circular motion.

From then on, my stomach-aches became a regular
occurrence. Every week or so, sometimes every night
when school got particularly rough, I would feel sharp jabs
at my side. Sometimes they lasted five minutes, sometimes an hour.

My mom stopped sitting next to me after a couple of weeks.
She stopped making me tea and would tell me to call
my dad instead. She said he was better at dealing with these things,
she said she was tired.

So, I stopped calling her. I stopped telling her
when it felt like my organs were fighting one another.
I stopped mentioning my bad days.
Now I just sit and let my stomach ache.



12:47
Meg Remy

What's the time?" John asked, nose pressed to the newspaper in his hands. New Resident Arrives in Limbus.

"12:47." Samuel blinked at the grandfather clock in the hallway. Its face was weathered, yet the mechanisms flowed smoothly, gold shining like it had just been polished. He watched the pendulum flow back and forth and back and...

Samuel moved his eyes to John, watched him flip the last page of his paper and grunt. John turned the newspaper over and pushed his nose back in. Once to read, twice to understand, thrice to analyse, a fourth out of boredom, a fifth out of boredom, a sixth out of...

Samuel looked at the clock. 12:47. Where did his day go? Samuel stood, his toes curling on the carpet. "Time for bed."

Samuel pulled John out of his rocker and upstairs to their beds. He fell into the sheets, chill and gritty.

When Samuel woke, John was pulling on his boots. He explained, "Figured we do a walk today."

"Okay." Samuel rolled out of bed, pulling on worn, leather boots. When they were ready, they stepped outside. John ruffled his long, greying hair. The forest around them swayed in slow-motion. Willow trees arched over the dirt path below. Grey clouds passed overhead.

"Did you check the time before we left?" John asked Samuel when they were a while from their home.

"No. I forgot."

The two walked further. No neighbours passed. When they returned home, Samuel's feet were sore, and he craved to sit and watch John flip his newspaper. Stumbling into the foyer of their small, ramshackle home, Samuel looked to the clock. "Oh, 12:47."

John hummed. "I'll put lunch together," he said, sauntering to the kitchen.

Samuel plopped down on the living room carpet. The carpet was frayed... maybe a dog lived there once, or someone with long toenails. Samuel couldn't remember the last time he trimmed his nails. They were short. Maybe his nails just grew slowly. The carpet was frayed either way, and Samuel picked the strands. He had a pile when John called him.

Sitting on their quaint, little dining table were two bowls of brown sludge. Under them, stained place settings and spoons with bends and nicks in the silver. Samuel sat, his chair creaking under him. The stew was watery and the vegetables mushy. Samuel watched John slurp some before his lip twitched and he looked at the kitchen instead.

It was dilapidated, laminate counters peeling up, mold behind the sink, and rust eating the bottom of the refrigerator. Samuel found it charming. He always wanted to live in an old house. Samuel thought it had spirit. He felt the people who lived there before him, walking the halls and denting couch cushions. He imagined others sitting at that same table, gorging themselves on food to fill their empty bodies.

After their meal, Samuel collected the bowls and spoons to wash them. He shrugged when he couldn't pull the stains out of the porcelain dishes, putting them in the dishrack to dry. After thoroughly spraying himself while cleaning the spoons, Samuel nodded and went back into the living room. He sat beside his pile of carpet hair.

Samuel watched John flip through his newspaper. John reached the end of the sheets. He grunted and flipped the pages over. Once to read, twice to understand, thrice to analyse. A fourth out of boredom... There was a knock at the door.

John lifted his nose out from the paper, eyebrows raised. They rarely got visitors.

When Samuel swung the door open, he blinked at a young, blond woman. Her hands flipped over themselves hurriedly. It bugged Samuel. Things in Limbus were slow and leisurely. Her eyes swept over him, taking in baggy under eyes and wrinkled slacks. *Judged*. "Hello," he prompted.

The girl gasped as if she did not expect him to talk. "Hi," she said, dumbly.

“What can I do for you?” he asked, as if she were a lost child. He hadn’t met one of those in a long time...

“Um,” the girl mumbled, “some guy said to ask you about the neighbourhood.”

John joined Samuel at the door and huffed. “Virgil must be busy again...” He looked the girl over before inviting her in.

“What’s your name?” Samuel asked.

“Cynthia.”

“Pretty. It suits you,” John said.

Cynthia nodded but continued. “What is this place?”

John laughed. “You don’t know?”

“Why would you move here if you don’t know?” Samuel asked.

“I don’t know. Why did you move here?” This was an interesting question. Samuel knew there was a reason they were in dinky, little Limbus. Thinking back, however, his mind was empty.

“Why did we move here?” Samuel turned to John. Surely the older of the two would remember, but he shrugged.

“How long have you guys lived here?”

“A while now.” Samuel looked to John for confirmation and was rewarded with a nod.

Cynthia looked at Samuel and John. Her mouth twisted to the side. “Doesn’t it bother you that you don’t remember?”

Samuel paused. He liked going for walks around the bend with John, liked his decrepit home and his gritty sheets. He supposed it didn’t bother him much at all. He shook his head.

Cynthia sighed and worked her way around the room, playing with trinkets, stepping through piles of carpet, and wrinkling newspapers. Stopping in front of the clock, Cynthia tapped her finger against the clock face. “Your clock doesn’t work.”

Samuel looked up from where he was sitting. He watched the pendulum flow back and forth and back and looked at the clock face. It did not move from 12:47. “Clocks move slowly. Let’s let it tick over.”

They all sat, watching the grandfather clock in the hallway, watching the pendulum flow back and forth and back and... 12:47. Where did his day go? Samuel stood, his toes curling on the carpet. “Time for bed.” He marched up the stairs. Two sets of footsteps followed.



No Trouble

Samantha Hodge

The familiar rumbling of a truck engine signalled the end of my wait. It crept up the gravel path, winding around the trees and through the muggy, sun-saturated air. The heat was suffocating even in my small patch of shade. Dad didn't seem to notice, and when the old truck finally pattered its way into sight, he looked about ready to start bouncing on the spot.

Dad craned his neck as if the extra distance would allow him to see past the truck to the trailer beyond, standing transfixed as Ross turned the truck in a wide arc, making a show of it. I rolled my eyes.

Tires crunched to a halt, and there it was: the boat.

A huge monstrosity perched almost delicately on the heavy metal trailer frame, the paint a glossy cherry red. Big and wide and deep. Flashy enough for someone to stop and enquire so Dad could brag.

Ross hopped out of the truck and slammed the door behind him with a wide grin, shoving a baseball cap onto his head.

"David! How're you holding up?"

"I'm alright, anxious to get her in the lake," Dad said just as cheerfully.

"Of course, of course. You like it?"

"She's a beauty."

"That it is," Ross nodded approvingly like he always did.

"I should hope so," I interrupted, wrinkling my nose. "What with all the trouble you went through to order it custom."

Ross shot me an amused look, an invisible '*shut up*' painted in the

pinch of his eyes, but Dad just hummed indulgently. Same as he always did whenever I objected to his newest obsessions.

There was always one more thing. It was never enough for Dad. One more car to dent. One more wave runner to clog with seaweed until the engine was ruined. One more top-of-the-line fishing pole to sit on the wall above the massive fireplace we never used.

“Come now, Emily, it’s no trouble at all.” His gaze slid back to his newest toy.

“Nothing’s ever a trouble for you, David,” Ross said with a quicksilver grin. It was always like that with Ross. His smiles were as wide as the ones on plastic bobble heads and just as cheap. But hey, Dad was his big paycheck; who could blame him? “Now, let’s see about getting it in the water.”

It was a mind-numbingly slow process to get the boat into the lake. Slow to be unwrapped, slow to be maneuvered into position, and slow to be slid down the launch ramp and into the water beside the freshly built wood dock, already lined with other toys. Inch by inch, it moved down until Dad waded in, soaking his shorts and the hem of his shirt to slide it off the trailer.

The red was bold and bright against the dark water, sleek lines gleaming in the light. The sun sparkled on the frigid water, and I dipped my toes in while Dad climbed up the launch.

Dad stood dripping with his hands on his hips, eyes hidden behind shades, and gave a low, exaggerated whistle.

“Tell you what,” he turned to Ross, “why don’t you stay and watch the first go around.”

Ross smiled and shook his head in a polite but reluctant refusal. Dad insisted. He gave in. It happened every time, familiar to the point of tradition. I had my own tradition, pulling away from the water with reluctance to take my place beside Ross and watch as Dad fumbled with the keys.

It took a few tries to start, but when it did, Dad gunned it. It leapt forwards with a roar, the resulting waves rattled the dock, rocking the tethered boats, which slammed into each other in a screech of metal.

“More work for you, I guess. At least until this one breaks. You want to bet how long this one will last before its first repair job?” I leaned against the truck’s burning metal, keeping my eyes on Dad’s red streaking loops.

Ross shook his head, barely looking down as he secured the winch.

“Nah, I always lose against you.” A gleam entered his eye. “But, if I did, I’d say a week, two at best.”

“Under a week for me, then.”

“Deal.”

Dad turned his head to look back at us. The wind caught his designer glasses, ripping them from his face and tossing them into the dark, churning waters, lost amidst the bubbles of his wake.

I couldn’t hear his laugh over the thundering of the engine, but I knew it was bright and loud.

It wouldn’t last.

Ross came back six days later with a buddy to haul away the red boat and the skiff it had slammed into when dad came in too fast trying to park. There were humming and hawing, and Dad wrote another check. Ross handed over the tenner from the bet.

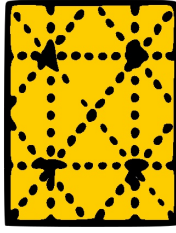
A month later, it was back, and then, again, it wasn’t. When it was gone, he played around with other toys. When it came back, he raced the waves and flirted with luck until it abandoned him a third time.

The all-encompassing heat of summer slipped away as greens faded into oranges and reds, and with it went Dad’s summer obsession. The red boat bobbed idly with its fellows. When it came time to haul everything out of the water for winter, he dialled up Ross’s number.

I sat outside and waited with Dad until the familiar sound of a truck came to meet us. The boat trailer bounced empty behind Ross.

I smiled. He frowned. Dad handed over another check, and Ross drove right back down that gravel path.

“Not worth the trouble,” Dad muttered to himself, shaking his head as the cherry red boat was hauled away. “Not worth it at all.”



Her

Marcey Costello

He never hits her.

No, never.

He screams:

useless,

idiot,

whore.

Bloody fists annihilate inanimate objects.

He stalks, prowls.

His shadow slithers along
the peeling grey walls.

Everything is a weapon:

throwing,

breaking,

or beating

whatever he can find.

No, he never hits her.

His footsteps boom as loud as thunder,

thump-thump-thumping

up the broken stairs.

His hulking form jeers at her,

bulging muscles coiled tight.

She squares her emaciated shoulders,
fragile chin raised high,
fists clenched.
In her eyes:
determination.

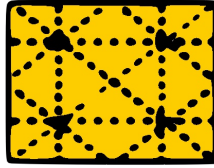
He lunges. She dodges.
Her shoulder slams into the wall,
hollow bones b r
e a k.

His mirth, a demon rising from the embers.
I've given you everything!

She stands tall, braces herself,
then glides towards him.
Her feet brush aside broken glass
and cigarette butts
as rabbit stalks hunter.
You've given me nothing.

This time,

he hits her.



Motel Therapist

Walt Mudie

CAST OF CHARACTERS

RAY: Male. Mid-forties. Dark circles under his eyes. Wearing skinny jeans and a baggy UCLA hoodie.

EMPLOYEE: Female. Mid-thirties. Alert, bored, but approachable, with an unprofessional manner. Wearing a faded cardigan and a conservative skirt.

SETTING: 2a.m. in a run-down motel lobby on the outskirts of Anchorage, 60's music playing from an old record player in the corner of the room.
(RAY watches the EMPLOYEE emerge from the back room shaking her head and returning to her seat behind the counter)

RAY:

No vacancy at all? Not even for me? Shit.

(Beat)

I don't know what I'm gonna do tonight. I mean, I can't go home, Angie was pretty clear. She didn't really like it when I told her how I was feeling, she said she had to work early tomorrow morning and it 'wasn't the time.' Which I can understand, but I had just got home from work myself and I really needed to get some shit off my chest.

(Beat)

(RAY slumps back onto the arm of the couch and looks at the ground)

I've been thinking a lot lately. Violet is almost nine now—time flies, doesn't it? You see, I love her and all, but that freshness of a baby only sticks around so long before it gets old, you know? Of course, don't get me wrong, I love her. But something seems, I don't know, backward, I guess, about ignoring all that shit I wanted to do for myself before I met Angie. I mean, we were both so driven back then, that's why I fell in love with her, but since we had Violet there's been, like, a wall between us, you know? like we were both on a path of love that led us the same way but she suddenly turned left when I wasn't looking. It's like she gave up her best qualities to Violet and settled down without them.

(Beat)

Shit, man, I don't know what I'm saying. She's doing it right, trying to give herself to Violet. I mean that's what I signed up for when I agreed to have her, even if it took a while for the idea of being a father to grow on me. But, I love them both.

(Beat)

What more do I need?

(EMPLOYEE stares at RAY, only slightly interested. RAY rises and begins pacing until he notices the music.)

(Beat)

Hey, this is "Peace Frog," isn't it? I love The Doors! Hell, when I started playing bass, I wanted to sound just like them, but it turned out they don't even have a bassist! That's who I was named after, you know, Ray Manzarek, and that's why my old drummer and I became such good friends. See, he was named John, after John Lennon of course, before everyone knew he hit his wife, but we

RAY (cont'd):

always pretended he was John Densmore, the Doors' drummer. I love John, we've had some great times. Shit, if I wasn't tied down, we'd still be ripping it up on and off stage together. He's still gigging, you know, with a new band, The Fish! And they're kinda making a name for themselves. The word on the street is that they tear apart the afterparties and do all sorts of crazy shit, just like me and John used to.

(Beat)

(RAY sighs, slouching down onto the couch.)

I always wonder if I could be in on that too if not for Violet and Angie—the band just goes out of town too much. John was kinda my only friend for a while before he got recognized. See, he's still in Anchorage, but nothing feels the same with him as it used to. It's like I broke an unspoken rule or something when Angie and I settled down.

(Beat)

Man, I hate shit like that! Why can't we just say what our rules are? That's why I was trying to open up with Angie tonight, man, but that type of shit is way easier in concept.

(Beat)

Even when she agrees to be open, the fuckin' barrier is still there. So, I'd love to go to therapy—I know this one good shrink, Dr. Morrison, that John used to see—but it's so goddamn expensive. I don't get why the one place where I can say what I'm actually feeling—and maybe even fix my problems—isn't in reach.

(Beat)

Man, that's backward if you ask me.

You see, it all comes back to this one time in my parents' car when I was seven. Me and my sister were in the backseat—this was sometime in the 80's—and we were at a red light downtown, and these three guys in the car next to us with long hair and guitars were trying to chat with my mom and dad, you know, and instead of talking my parents just kept their windows rolled right up. Shit, that did not work with me.

(Beat)

These guys were having such a good old time and my parents were

RAY (cont'd):

avoiding them like the plague, it was so backward! I remember at that moment thinking that I didn't wanna get old if that's what it was if you couldn't enjoy life like the rest of the world. But when you have a kid, sheesh, everything changes, you have to put out that fire that was under your young ass and listen to the kid's needs first.

(Beat)

But it's not so easy to do. I mean, when I catch something that reminds me of my twenties, like The Doors, I can feel something happen in my body, and my brain shoots me back to that time. And I always come back to my real-life sad, man, because that was my time!

(Beat)

You shoulda seen me back then. I felt like I really had the world by the balls, and whatever I wanted to do, I did!

(RAY sits up now. EMPLOYEE focuses on paperwork.)

There was this one night in particular where me and John had just finished an opening gig. We didn't even know who we were opening for, but we thought they were probably a big deal because the venue was packed. We got off stage and walking right past us is the Pixies, man! John and I were losing our shit! And we stuck around until after they came off, and Black Francis came right up to us and asked us if we wanted to party! We spent all night at a house party chain-smoking and feeling the 90's with the Pixies, and that walk back to our apartment at five in the morning was so amazing. We couldn't stop yelling at each other and getting riled up!

(Beat)

(RAY pauses dreamily, before soberly lying back down)

But those days are gone.

(Beat)

Man, me and John broke the law a bit too much to keep going when Violet came around. I mean, if I'm being honest, we did some pretty fucked up shit back then. I haven't touched a bass

RAY (cont'd):

guitar once since we had Violet. She has not shown any interest in music at all—she's all sports, just like her mom. It's cool to watch her score a goal in soccer and get all happy. But the way I see it, that joy does not last—that goal counts for the ninety minutes of game time, but after that, you go back to normal and you forget all about it.

(RAY silently stares at the chipped flower wallpaper, then promptly rises, pacing the room frantically. The EMPLOYEE takes notice.)

Hey, I know what I'll do tonight! I haven't seen John in a couple of months, but I heard his band's bassist is in jail, man, domestic violence. That judge was so unfair to him! Maybe I'll head over there to see if they're playing—they play late into the night pretty often, just like we used to. Maybe they'll let me fill in as a bassist while their guy's put away.

(Beat)

It would only be a couple of weeks and then I'd go right back to normal with Angie and Violet. I've been missing that release of being with the guys, where there's no connection to our real lives. It would be easy to do, too. Angie would be asleep when I would be out playing.

(Beat)

She'd never have to know, man, this idea is perfect!

(RAY runs out to his truck, beaming, without noticing the EMPLOYEE rising to try to stop him. She watches as he speeds off and she returns to her desk, sitting with her head in her hands)

CURTAIN



Education First

Marissa Thompson

CHARACTERS

TEACHER.....A high school teacher.

PONYTAIL.....The classroom bully.

MOUTH-BREATHER.....The classroom nerd.

STUDENT #1.....A concerned student.

STUDENT #2.....A clueless student.

STUDENT #3.....A dramatic student.

STUDENT #4.....A dramatic student.

CLASS.....All students.

SCENE 1

Lights fade in on a high school classroom. A clump of ten desks is center stage. A whiteboard that reads STUDY BLOCK is downstage left. TEACHER is standing at the board in a brief tableau wearing a black pencil skirt that reaches past her knees and a dark red blouse. A bell rings. CLASS enters the room in everyday clothes, murmuring as they find their seats. There is a student at every desk.

TEACHER:

Good morning, class.

CLASS:

Good morning, Miss.

TEACHER:

Happy Monday. I will be giving you time today to study *individually* for Wednesday's test. Use your time wisely.

The CLASS begins to work. Some time goes by in silence until MOUTH-BREATHER begins to click his pen.

PONYTAIL: (*whispering*)

Hey mouth-breather, would you quit it?

STUDENT #1:

Hey ponytail, would you leave him alone?

TEACHER: (*With emphasis*)

Individually. Let's not waste our breath, folks.

PONYTAIL: *Rolls eyes, gets back to work*

Lights fade out

(*Beat*)

Lights fade in

The desks are slightly more spaced out. The same students sit in the same desks. The teacher stands at the blank board. The CLASS chatters.

TEACHER:

Good morning, class.

CLASS:

Good morning, Miss.

TEACHER:

Happy Tuesday. I have a big announcement to make.
There is officially a confirmed case...

Begins writing "Confirmed Case" on the board

...in our halls. Now, we do not have any right to know who this is, so don't ask. All I know is that I am required to tell you that there is one, and that we all need to remain calm and show up to class as if nothing ever happened. Do you understand?

CLASS: (*Nods*)

TEACHER:

Good. Now, may I remind you that today is the last day to study for your big test. Better make it count.

Teacher wipes CONFIRMED CASE off of the board using a medical mask

Lights fade out

(Beat)

Lights fade in

Desks are further apart now, and one is empty. MOUTH-BREATH is absent. The board reads TEST DAY. The CLASS chatters.

TEACHER:

Good morning, class.

CLASS:

Good morning, Miss.

TEACHER:

Happy test day. Before we get started, I will pass around about ten of these to each of you.

Holds up toilet paper roll

You will use them to create a barrier around your desk. I will not have ANY cheaters in my classroom.

TEACHER begins handing out the rolls

CLASS passes them around to each student

STUDENT #1: (*Nods toward empty desk*)
Where's he?

STUDENT #2: (*Shrugs*)

PONYTAIL: (*Overhearing*)
Thank God. I'll actually be able to focus for once.

Lights fade out

(*Beat*)

Lights fade in

Three desks are now empty. MOUTH-BREATHER, PONYTAIL, and STUDENT #2 are all missing. The board reads MATH.

TEACHER:
Good morning, class.

CLASS:
Good morning, Miss.

TEACHER:
Happy Thursday. I hope you are all proud of how you performed on your tests yesterday. Today, we will be moving onto our next math lesson.

Points thermometer gun at board

To start, let us say that there is an older man who goes to his favourite restaurant and sits at his favourite table every day at 3pm. However, one day, he doesn't show. Later, the restaurant finds out that he had died the previous night. How many deaths are there?

CLASS:

There is one death.

TEACHER:

Good. Now, let us say that you

Points thermometer gun at STUDENT #3

and you

Points thermometer gun at STUDENT #4

meet up at that same restaurant and sit at that same table after the man's last visit.

STUDENT #3 and STUDENT #4 begin to act out meeting at the restaurant

CLASS: *(Laughs)*

TEACHER:

While you eat, you overhear the waitresses discussing about how the man's wife had also died. How many deaths are there?

CLASS:

There are two deaths.

TEACHER:

Good. Now, despite overhearing the unfortunate news, you two enjoy the rest of your meal and say your goodbyes.

STUDENT #3 and STUDENT #4 dramatically act out their goodbyes

CLASS: *(Laughs)*

TEACHER:

One of you takes public transit home to your family, while the other walks up to the old folks' home to visit your grandparents. How many deaths are there?

Lights fade out

(Beat)

Lights fade in

Latex gloves, hand sanitizer, and cotton swabs are on all of the students' desks. The board reads ART.

TEACHER:

Good morning, class.

CLASS:

Good morning, Miss.

TEACHER:

Happy Friday. Today is all about art. On your desks, you will find the art supplies that the district has so generously supplied us with. Share amongst each other, work in groups—I don't mind. It's Friday, have fun with it.

Students begin to work. Unintelligible voices fill the room. Student #1 coughs. There is immediate silence as everyone in the room snaps their attention toward the sound.

(Beat)

The class resumes.

Lights fade out

(Long Beat)

Lights fade in

The classroom remains the same, but the art supplies are no longer on the desks.

TEACHER:

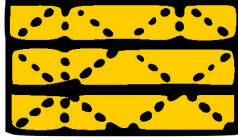
Coughs

CLASS:

Coughs

TEACHER and CLASS continue to cough for an uncomfortable amount of time.

CURTAIN



Our Own Kind of Superhero

Mackenzie Griffin

Chloe Song pressed her thumb to the scanner and waited for the light to flash green. The elevator opened, and Heather Jaymore, Tiana Littlewolf, and Rose Miller followed their friend down five flights from the penthouse to the basement.

Today is ‘Book Club,’ a ruse created with the sole purpose of spending time away from their personal and professional responsibilities. Truly, only Rose found any enjoyment in reading, but it didn’t matter. The four loved catching up with one another and sharing stories about history and relationships. As Tiana called it, it was a time to “get some much-needed peace and quiet.” In truth, it was a break they all deserved but rarely received outside of the once-a-week meeting. Usually, it was the time in her week Chloe looked forward to the most.

Yet, today was different. It wasn’t necessarily a *bad* different, but it was nerve-wracking. An uneasiness twisted Chloe’s stomach into tight, complicated knots. She needed today to be a launching point for a new era. She longed for her friends to finally be in the know, to support her one-hundred percent, and stand by her side. Maybe, she’d be asking too much of all of them, but she had to try.

Monday had been the tipping point for her. The day she decided enough was enough. In truth, she’d been fed up with it all a long time ago, but it was Monday’s events that caused her to schedule today’s Book Club meeting at the Penthouse. It was the day that caused her to rush her projects, running tests long into the night.

The elevator doors pinged open to reveal a long metal corridor. There were no windows or decorations, and the air was cool and thick.

Chloe shoved her shoulders back and led her friends down the hall towards her laboratory. Coming up to a thick, heavy door on the right, Chloe pressed her thumb to the scanner. The door beeped, granting them all access to her lab.

Like the hallway, the room was metal, with bright fluorescent lighting. The lab was open-concept, with enough space for all kinds of machinery, from helpful robots to microscopes and testing equipment. The whirring sounds of technology and the constant buzzing and beeps filled her ears with a familiar hum. In the back right corner were two rows of white countertops where scientists and researchers could work. On the left were six compartments built into the wall. In the middle of the room, on the floor, was a metal circle that contained its own surprises inside. Chloe wasn't sure if she wanted to tell them everything, but she needed to start somewhere.

She swallowed as she stepped on top of the dark metal circle and spread her arms wide. "As you know, I've been working on some new technology. So far, I've been quite secretive with you all. Today, I'd like to change that." Chloe marched to a panel on the left and typed in a passcode with quick, nimble fingers.

Four out of the six metal panels lowered with an electronic whirr. Inside the cupboards were nearly identical tight one-piece super-suits folded neatly into little boxes. Chloe directed each of her friends to their chest to peer inside. Each suit was designed to be flexible, lightweight and damage-proof. They had been tested, burned, shot at and even blown up, yet each suit remained without a tear or tarnish.

In the closest compartment to the entrance was Chloe's suit. The body of the one-piece was emerald green in colour with long black sleeves and leggings. The suit's center held her corporation logo, a white circle with a green nanotech emblem in the middle. The same symbol wrapped around her wrists like DNA coding. The uniform next to hers was Rose's. Rose's suit was plum in colour with the same black sleeves and leggings as all the rest. The symbol in the center of her costume was the Nigerian symbol for unity, a concept they'd discussed in great length during their weekly meetings. To Rose's right was Heather's. Heather's suit was a deep scarlet with a single black arrow pointing right. Finally, on the far right was Tiana's. Her outfit, the colour of mustard, had a golden eagle feather in the center. Each suit represented a part of their culture, history and identity. The emblems in each suit's center signified one aspect of their identity, which Chloe believed would help empower them.

It had always been weird how the four of them came together: a Chinese immigrant and head engineer at Emerald Advancement Industries, a black lesbian baker, a white 40-year-old veteran and single mother, and an Indigenous knowledge keeper in medicine from Alexander First Nation. They'd met during a fundraiser for underprivileged children, nothing entirely out of the ordinary, but the four of them were all very different people. Nevertheless, Chloe knew she had learned so much from all of them. She rubbed the back of her neck and watched her friends as their fingers roamed over the shiny, impenetrable material.

"What are these for?" Heather asked with narrowed eyes.

Chloe knew she already comprehended the answer but said it anyway. "For us to wear."

"What, so we can fight crime?" Rose laughed, but when Chloe started nodding, she looked a little paler.

"Exactly, with these suits and the gadgets I'm about to show you, we'll be an unstoppable team."

"You don't seriously mean for us to apply?" Heather's mouth had dropped open, and she didn't seem to be able to close it.

"For the Superhero grant? Of course not. The racists up at Headquarters would make sure we never got a second look. I'm saying we go on the ground, help out the little guy. Be the kind of superheroes we want someone else to be."

"But we're not superheroes, Song. We're women with children and jobs." Tiana reminded her calmly.

"Yeah, we've all got lives," Rose agreed in that casual no-nonsense tone of hers as she crossed her arms across her chest.

"Will you just hear me out?" Chloe asked, and when all the women nodded, she took a deep breath. "We use the Book Club as our ruse. We start on the street, in our communities. We erase injustice by fighting the crimes the superheroes don't bother with. The ones where white police officers step on the necks of innocent black men. The ones where people throw rotten food out the window at an Indigenous woman walking down the street, yelling, 'Go back to where you came from.' The ones we need to fight." Chloe punched in another combination, and the suits disappeared, replaced with gadgets. In the far-right cupboard were four sets of black metal gauntlets. "These can expand into shields at the click of a button."

Chloe handed the gauntlets to each of her friends, modelling how to wear them by putting on her own pair. They snapped easily onto her forearms. She clicked the small button at the base of her wrist with her thumb, and the gauntlet lengthened into a circular shield. She swung her

arm around and prompted the others to do the same. The armour felt surprisingly weightless. Chloe collapsed the shield back into itself and placed it back into the compartment.

She moved to the next section, where a collection of knives glimmered in the fluorescent lighting. “These will eject from the gauntlets into our hands when we need them. They can be thrown or used in hand-to-hand combat.” Chloe picked one up, demonstrating the balance between the handle and the blade by weighing the knife on one finger.

She moved onto the third section. “Combat boots. Not only do they look cool, but by clicking the heels together, you can release a mini spy-bug or tracker.”

Chloe stepped dramatically to the final section, where ear and eyepieces waited within. “Finally, we can use these to communicate with each other, gather intel, or scan the environment.”

She motioned for Heather to pick up one of the ear pieces. Reluctantly, Heather obliged, tapping a button and stepping back in shock. Chloe knew the headpiece had used X-ray to scan the room and was now talking in her ear, providing her with an update on her surroundings.

Heather grinned, before remembering herself and sobering. “This is great and all, but it’s not enough. We’re not exactly superhero material.” She noted, but Chloe shook her head.

“Says who? You’ve fought guerilla fighters in Afghanistan. You have ninety-five percent accuracy with a handgun, and you’re a badass single mother of a 10-year-old.”

“But I don’t want to kill anyone.” Heather worried at her bottom lip, a habit that only appeared when she was thinking of her time at war.

Chloe put a hand on her shoulder and gave it a squeeze. “Neither do I. The superheroes? They perpetuate violence, encourage it even. All I ever see on the news is death and destruction. Sure, the superheroes always save the day, but what do they leave in their wake? I don’t want to do the same thing they do. I want to teach them a lesson, teach everyone a lesson. So, we’ll use non-lethal bullets that can either incapacitate or knock the assailant out. We’ll use the knives for defensive and practical purposes only. No one will get hurt, at least not on our watch.” Chloe turned to Rose., “And you. Do you remember that time someone broke into your house, and you chased them with a bat?”

“Ain’t nobody messes with me.” Rose wagged her finger in agreeance. “A couple of white boys thinking they own everything. So what, you want me walking around with a baseball bat calling myself *The Charger*?”

"If you want? Look, if Heather's our marksman, you're our brute force."

"I don't know if I agree with ya calling me a brute, but I hear ya."

"Are you sure, because I think it's pretty hard to escape with your track record," Heather teased. Rose scowled and rounded in on her friend, puffing up her chest and leaning in so close that her face was a mere two inches apart from Heather's. Heather stood up, army-straight, and glared back. Seconds ticked by before the two burst out laughing. Heather threw her arm around Rose and smiled.

Chloe pursed her lips as she eyed her friends. "Heather, if you could choose any name what would it be?"

Heather narrowed her eyes, a little taken aback. "Uh, Precision, I guess. I want to be reliable in everything I do, not just with a bullet but with my whole being as well: heart, mind, body and soul."

Rose waved her hands in the air, "Okay, we've got Precision and The Charger, but what about her?" She nodded her head in Tiana's direction. "She's all about harmony and restoration. She doesn't have a violent bone in her body."

Tiana narrowed her eyes, unsure whether to be offended or not.

Chloe had the answer ready. "She's our healer." Chloe turned to Tiana with a smile. "What's a plant in your garden right now used to slow bleeding on external wounds?"

"wâpunewusk, or Yarrow in English."

Chloe nodded. They'd discussed this before. "And what plant can be used as an antiseptic?"

"There are many, one of which is wild chives."

Chloe clapped her hands together. "See, we can do this. I know we can. And if we start small and gain traction, maybe the superheroes up at Headquarters will recognize that they need us, that the world needs us."

"That's a big ask for those head honchos up at the Tower," Rose pointed out.

Chloe sighed, "I know, and it's a big ask for you all. Unlike me, you all have children." She glanced at Rose. "Grandchildren even. And it isn't fair of me to ask, but I just..." Tears began to pool in her eyes. "There is so much hate..." She choked on her words, "and it breaks my heart. You know we always talk about doing something. And the first thing anybody should do is talk about it, but I'm done talking. I'm just..."

Chloe didn't know what else to say. She didn't know what would convince them, if anything. In truth, Chloe didn't even know if she should try. After all, being a superhero wouldn't be easy. Hell, it would be

dangerous. She didn't even know if anyone would accept them for what they wanted to be. She felt a hand on her shoulder and glanced up to see Tiana's dirt-stained hand. "I would like to be called sohikikâpawiw. It is my spirit name. It means 'she is planted firmly.'"

Chloe wiped the tears from her eyes. "Does that mean you'll help me?"

"We all will," Rose interjected, looking to Heather for support. Heather set her jaw and nodded, her expression deadly serious.

"What will you call yourself, sister?" Tiana asked, with the simplicity that only she could.

"I've been thinking all about progress. It is what I want to do, both with the group and with my job. I want to be called Jînbù xiaojiě, which means Miss Progress in English."

Tiana smiled at her and nodded encouragingly. "Names have power. They lay a foundation for our identity. Which means if we are going to do this, we must work together. In Cree the word is wîchitowin. I believe our team name should be that. I know not everyone is not First Nations, and so perhaps an English name would be more suited but..." She trailed off, a little self-conscious for even suggesting it.

The women repeated the word on their tongue, getting a feel for it and practiced saying it correctly.

"It is beautiful," Heather noted, and everyone nodded in agreement.

"Wwîchitowin," everyone said in unison as they all placed their hands on one another's shoulders, drawing close. Working together was exactly what they were going to do.

Chloe pulled away with a start. "Oh, if we're going to do this, I've got one more surprise."

The women eyed each other with nervous glances, but Chloe couldn't help but grin. This was a surprise they would want to see. Chloe entered a new code into the panel, and the floor underneath them began to move.



The Panther with the Rhinestone Butterflies

Marcey Costello

I stumble, catching myself on a gnarled oak tree. This isn't home. Chills creep down my back like spiders on the hunt. I'm surrounded by trees and trees and trees. I seem to be trapped in a wooden spider web. I trace my fingers along the knots and twisted bark of the tree. It feels like a cat's tongue. A cat. Not my cat.

A squawk as raspy as a rusted chain being dragged over gravel rings through the wooden web. Haunting, I hear you. No, not haunting. A raven. Up. Up. Up. Black, black, black. It shimmers as the light crawls along its obsidian body. So black it shimmers. Hot breath scalds the back of my neck. I turn. Nothing. The raven is now a panther. I crane my neck to watch its lithe form slither along the gnarled branches, swimming among the shadows. Its rhinestone collar glints in the light as it moves. It knows the haunting.

A branch cracks. The panther is gone. I take off, sprinting through the massive wooden spider web. Branches rake their claws down my face. Across my arms. Something grabs my hair. Yank. Yank. I'm a companion to the rotting leaves that riddle the wet ground. I look up and into the ebon eyes of the panther. It roars. I roar. The sounds bounce around the wooden web. I notice its rhinestone collar has a rhinestone butterfly pendant. The pendant swings back and forth and back and forth, coming closer and closer.

The panther growls and digs its fangs into my arm, pulling me towards an iron gate. Rhinestone spiders crawl from my skin where the panther's teeth make contact. It lets go of me. The gate opens. The spiders

are gone. The wound is gone. I get up and follow the panther, hoping it will take me home. A weight settles on my shoulders as though someone has put their hands on me. The gate shuts behind us with a rickety *clang*. My arms fill with inquisitive goosebumps lifting their heads to see where we are. This isn't home.

It gets darker and darker and darker as we walk. I lose sight of the panther. The hands on my shoulders guide me. It's pitch black. My eyes no longer function. My shoulders tense and the hands tighten their hold. Something grabs my ankle. *Yank*. The hands shove me forward. I fall. Fall. Fall. *Splash*. Water. Above me. Below me. Pulling me down, down, down.

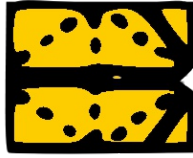
I land on the concrete floor of a stairwell. Water. Everywhere. Dripping down the stairs. I stand. It invades my running shoes. The floor is a sponge. Cackling ascends the flooded stairs. Echoing. Reverberating. Calling. It's here. Nostalgia crashes into me like waves attacking a ship. The cackling becomes familiar, like Mom's laugh after she's had too much wine. We both must be going home.

I notice a jacket hanging on the wet bannister. Mom's favourite dark denim jacket with the big rhinestone butterflies. I grab it, knowing she wouldn't want to lose it. I slip and slide my way down the stairs, gripping the bannister as tightly as I can and curling my other arm tight around the jacket. I walk and walk and walk. The stairs never end, but the cackling gets louder. It's pitch black again. I see nothing. I am nothing. It's here.

The last stair jars me. Vibrations run up my leg and out my head. The cackling has stopped. A dim light flickers on above me, fighting to stay awake. The panther emerges from the far corner. It glides slowly towards me. It stands up. It's Mom. *Mom*. We must be going home now. She takes her rhinestone jacket from my arm. Slides her arms slowly through the sleeves. One arm. Two arms. She cups my cheek. Opens her mouth. The cackling starts again. Louder this time. Right in my ear. She smiles. The cackling stops.

"Let's go home, sweetheart."

We're going home.



The Other Side of Paradise

Jayitha Vunnam

Scene 1

CURTAIN CLOSED.

(Two voices, one male and the other female, can be heard behind the curtain. They are having a conversation.)

ALI:
Are you um...okay?

CASSIDY: *(Sighs)*
Did you know the Japanese believe that everyone has three faces?

ALI:
I didn't, but...what's this to do with the question I asked you, Cassidy?

CASSIDY:
Just listen...
(Beat)

...They say the first face is the one you show the world. The second face is the one you show your family and friends, and the third face is the one you never show uh...anyone.

CURTAINS OPEN.

(CASSIDY and ALI are sitting across from each other at a table in a nearly empty restaurant. CASSIDY avoids eye contact. ALI proceeds to place his hands on top of CASSIDY's.)

ALI:

Cas? I need an answer. I can't have you dismissing my question, not this time at least. Are you okay? You've shut yourself out too much and I'm really worried, you know...

(CASSIDY pulls her hand back and picks up the menu. It appears that CASSIDY is trying to hide her face behind the menu.)

CASSIDY:

You know, they say the third face is the scariest because it is the truest reflection of who you are.

ALI:

I don't underst-

(CASSIDY makes eye contact with ALI.)

CASSIDY:

Of course, you don't understand! *(Voice breaking)* You don't understand how scared I am of myself, how scared I am of my third face! I-I am scared to be alone and I can't help but desert myself. My mind is an empty black hole. Feign, Amigo, and Candor just won't leave me alone and I just wish I was de-

(WAITER ENTERS.)

WAITER: *(Clears throat)*

Would you guys like some dessert?

(ALI ignores the WAITER and continues to stare at CASSIDY.)

ALI:

Huh? Feign, A-Amigo, and Candor? What are you talking about? Cas, please let me help you.

CASSIDY: (*Looking at the waiter*)

Um...could you clear the plates and get us the check please?

WAITER:

yes, ma'am.

(*WAITER picks up the plates and EXITS.*)

CASSIDY:

My three faces.

ALI:

Huh?

CASSIDY:

Feign, Amigo, and Candor. They're my three faces.

ALI:

You named them?

CASSIDY:

They named themselves. They're a part of me now. Th-they um(*Beat*) control me.

ALI:

Cas, uh...are you listening to yourself? Please, let me help you.

CASSIDY:

I don't need help, Ali. I don't need you to help me. I can figure this out on my own. It's not like you um...care anyway. No one cares.

ALI:

If I didn't fucking care, I wouldn't be here, Cas! You say I don't understand but the truth is *you* don't. You don't understand how sad it makes me to see you this miserable and when I try to offer help, you just push me away. Don't you see how your sadness is affecting you, how it's affecting everyone else around you?

CASSIDY:

I'm sorry. I'm really sorry. I just don't want you wasting your time on me. You deserve to be with someone better than me. But *I promise that I will try to get better*. I just need some time alone, some time to figure myself out.

(WAITER enters with the cheque. ALI pays for both of their orders.)

WAITER:

Thank you, have a great day!

(CASSIDY and ALI stand up. CASSIDY hugs ALI. CASSIDY EXITS but ALI remains seated.)

(Beat.)

(ALI EXITS.)

CURTAINS CLOSE. SCENE END.

Scene 2

CURTAINS OPEN.

(FEIGN, AMIGO, AND CANDOR are sitting in a living room. The room is dark with a small fire-place in the corner. Spotlights shine on each character as they say their dialogue.)

FEIGN:

Cassidy is happy. I make her happy. I make her smile when she's around people and I force her to talk to them, how can you say she's not happy?

AMIGO: *(Sighs)*

I know her better than you do, Feign. Whatever you portray her to be is fake, you're faking her happiness so that the world can believe she's happy. Do you not see how you're destroying her sanity by doing so?

(CANDOR gets up and makes his way to AMIGO. He bends over and puts his face close to AMIGO's. CANDOR stares into AMIGO's eyes.)

CANDOR: *(Sounding anxious)*

Amigo, you really wanna go there? You want to talk about sanity? Fine, let's talk about it. I have been trying to keep Cassidy sane, but all I can make her think about is how no one cares. How no one gives a shit. I make her think about suicide, that she'd be better off dead. So, don't fucking talk to me about sanity. I am the truest reflection of who she is and how she feels, and it is not Feign that's destroying her sanity, I am.

AMIGO: *(Pushing Candor away)*

Did you just say no one cares? How can you make her believe no one cares? I am the one that controls how she is in front of her family and friends and she definitely has people that care for her. She needs to know that.

(CANDOR walks to the fireplace and puts his hands in the fire.)

FEIGN:

Candor, what are you doi-

(FEIGN runs towards CANDOR and pulls him away from the fire.)

CANDOR: *(Tears welling up in his eyes)*

It's just...it's really hard to make her feel anything, you know.

(CANDOR falls onto his knees and buries his face in his ashy hands.)

CANDOR (cont'd): I haven't been able to make her feel love, I haven't been able to make her feel happiness. I haven't been able to make her feel herself. Sometimes, actually, most of the time, I think she's scared of being alone because that means she has to be with me. She's scared of me. She's scared of her truest self because her truest self, I, cannot feel anything.

(FEIGN hugs CANDOR. CANDOR pushes FEIGN away.)

FEIGN:

Candor, we need to do something about Cassidy. We cannot let you control her, it's only going to make her more miserable.

CANDOR:

How can you say that, Feign? You make her feel like someone she's not. You force a smile on her face because you think that smile will hide all her pain. You see and control a side of her that doesn't exist. You only control the idea of her. I control her.

(AMIGO kneels on the ground next to CANDOR. AMIGO puts his hand on CANDOR's shoulder.)

AMIGO:

Candor, maybe Feign is right. Maybe you shouldn't control her.

CANDOR: *(Angrily)*

I am the one that should control her. I'm the one who knows her. I'm the one who truly understands how she feels. You guys believe she's living in a paradise, but I'm the only one who really sees the other side of paradise.

(CANDOR EXITS.)

AMIGO:

I don't think he's willing to listen to us.

FEIGN:

I don't know.

(FEIGN and AMIGO look at each other in silence.)

(FEIGN and AMIGO EXIT.)

*CURTAINS CLOSE. LIGHTS DOWN.
SCENE END.*

Scene 3

CURTAINS OPEN. LIGHTS UP.

(There is a queen-sized bed with a coffee table next to it. The coffee table has a gun lying on top of it. CASSIDY and CANDOR are lying down on the bed.)

CASSIDY: *(Sobbing)*

I-I c-can't do this. Why am I alone again? I don't want to bury myself in my thoughts. H-help me.

CANDOR:

You're not alone. I'm right here.

CASSIDY: *(Staring at the ceiling)*

Of course, I'm alone! You're just a part of me. You're the deepest part of me. I'm buried by my thoughts, but you're nothing but a figment of my imagination.

CANDOR: *(Pointing at the gun)*

So, what are you gonna do? It's the gun or your miserable life.

CASSIDY: *(Continues staring at the ceiling as tears roll down her cheeks)*

Maybe I'm being selfish? What's going to happen when I'm dead, maybe people do care?

CANDOR:

If people cared, you wouldn't be in bed thinking about putting a gun to your head. If people cared, you wouldn't be robbing your happiness through sobbing. If people really cared, you wouldn't be feeling this numb or wanting to pull the trigger with your thumb.

(CASSIDY places her hand on the gun. A recording is heard across the room. The words "I promise that I will try," in CASSIDY'S voice, echo across the room.)

CASSIDY: *(Mumbling)*

I promised. But I want to escape from this sadness. But I feel hopeless. Everyday feels like I'm closer to death. It's just too much.

(CANDOR places the gun on CASSIDY's stomach.)

CANDOR:

Tell me, Cassidy, how many times do you want to die within before you actually stop breathing?

(CASSIDY gets up and picks up the gun. She stares at it. Her hands are shaking. The words "I promise that I will try" in CASSIDY'S voice echo again.)

CANDOR:

You're not going to feel any more pain. You'll get your escape. You don't have to go through this anymore. You've suffered long enough.

(CANDOR continues to stare at CASSIDY. CASSIDY exits the stage with the gun. The words "I promise that I will try" echo one last time.)

(A loud gunshot is heard across the room. CANDOR smiles.)

CURTAINS CLOSE. LIGHTS FADE OUT.

Scene 4

(Curtains open. CANDOR is standing over CASSIDY'S lifeless body. A spotlight shines on him as he looks at the audience.)

CANDOR:

I'm slowly fading away. My insanity took over her sanity. Feign never understood her and Amigo never bothered with her. The three faces will always be a part of who Cassidy is no matter where she went or what she did.

(Beat)

The problem with human beings is that they look for the quickest way out. A result that will reward an immediate outcome whether it is money, fame or relief. Anything to quiet the mind, eh? People are suckers for escapism in environments that are outside their comfort zone. Feign, Amigo and I are simply three ideas in Cassidy's mind. None of us have higher control over her but she chooses to be my loyal customer. You want to know why that is? It's because she's driven to the point where she cannot work her way through her family, friends or the outer environment. Why would one do that if there's a gun right next to you? Why would someone look for one reason to stay alive and go against a hundred reasons that tell them to kill themselves every day?

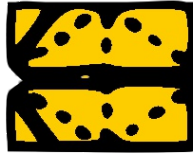
(Beat)

They forget that one of the reasons to live is to find a purpose.

(Beat)

This is what happens when a person allows me, their deepest reflection, to take over them. I drive them to a point where they have to make a decision. A path that might lead you to your deepest downfalls or a path that leads you to paradise. Usually, people choose the former because it's 'easy'. Why do you think the third face, the one that is known to nobody but the beholder, is so hard to understand?

CURTAINS CLOSE. SCENE END.



Not a Virgin

Anisah Egely

CAST OF CHARACTERS

KITTY: Early-to-mid-twenties. Female. Casual clothing.

LOU: Late forties to early fifties. Female. Casual clothing. No dialogue.

ACT 1

SCENE 1: *Lights fade on a church lobby. KITTY enters stage right and crosses to center stage, followed by her mother, LOU.*

KITTY:

Stop following me. No. I don't want to talk about it. Did you see them staring at me? Whispering, pointing, giggling to each other. Why do they even care anymore? It's obvious what they're saying.

(Mockingly)

Unmarried and I bet she's not a virgin. What a mess she is, and probably not a virgin. She has a boyfriend, and she just couldn't wait. Not a virgin, not a virgin, not a virgin!

(Beat)

It hurts, Mom. Those girls were my friends. They cut me out, but they still love to talk shit about me. They all have sex too, but just because I'm not married they treat me like some sort of...

KITTY (cont'd):

(Beat)

...heathen.

(Beat)

Being here today, Mom, I feel like the floor is going to open and swallow me. Why does what I do even matter to them? So I'm not a virgin. I still have my faith.

(Beat)

Why didn't you tell me it would be this hard? How did you and Dad handle being pregnant and unmarried in the church? So I moved in with my boyfriend, I'm not hurting anyone. I don't understand what their problem is.

I never did the purity ring in high school, like they all did. But now they haven't talked to me in three years. I get a place with my boyfriend and I guess I'm going to Hell. I never did anything to them, Mom. I never judged their choices, and they all married douchebags. I didn't want to be that perfect Christian girl, that's not me. They don't know me anymore, but they think they know what's in my heart. They didn't want to be in my life anymore, what they think shouldn't matter to me. I don't feel bad about the choices I've made, and I know for a fact that God still loves me.

(Long Beat)

Can we get out of here? Maybe try again next week?

CURTAIN



Why I am in University

Akke Englund

1. I'm here because I need a piece of paper that tells potential employers that I know what I'm talking about, when I really don't. I'm sure that the school principal will make sure I know everything about Marlow, Chaucer, and Milton to teach sixth graders. Then again, I hate public speaking, even if it's just to children.
2. Does any teacher really want to be around kids that much? Or is it because they need to conform to society's expectations of them as someone with knowledge and a degree? Did they really want to learn what they did[1]?
3. I wanted to be a marine biologist when I was younger, until I realized I hated the mathematical parts of science. I really only wanted to become a marine biologist because I wanted to live by the ocean[2].
4. I realized I wanted to be an artist of some kind, though I really suck at drawing, which is the foundation for much of artistic form[3]. But, then I realized that I maybe didn't want to be a starving artist, even though that's what I would have loved to do[4].
5. And I never learned about photography either, the most profitable art form out there that I can think of[5]. Damn the school system for telling me I needed to know abstract math, and for encouraging me to do honours just so I could say I did.

6. So, what did I end up turning to? Writing[6].

7. But you can't just have a Bachelor of Arts in Creative Writing. No, no, no. What the hell are you going to do with *that*[7]? So, I chose to major in both Creative Writing and English because it looked a little better on paper.

8. But then I got interested in New Age things and the different ways you could make a living with that. But, that's even *less* useful and profitable in this society filled with resumes and employers and *blah blah blah blah*[8].

9. I picture a house. A cottage? No, more like a manor, I suppose, with books and a library. A conservatory[9] filled with so many plants, so many trees, so much water[10]. I picture walls full of mirrors to paint on, empty frames to fill,[11] and stacks of paper to ink. Marble[12]. Wallpaper[13]. Glass[14]. Candles[15]. Wood[16]. I care for it and it cares for me[17].

10. But how do I get there from here? How do I go to the life of my dreams from this place of step-by-steps, climbing ladders, and pyramid schemes[18]?

11. I'm not really in university. I'm far away from all these *papers*. I'm drinking in secrets of the universe along with the sunlight.

12. I don't know what I'm doing here.

[1] The Great Gatsby, Little Women, and Moby Dick?

[2]and swim naked in the salt water at night and smell the acidic ocean spray wafting in through my French doors that lead right to my bedroom, all white with gold trim. To walk along the beach and collect shells, rocks, and other sea stuff until I had a room full of it kept all out of sight.

Wouldn't want the guests thinking I'm a hoarder.

[3] I like to paint abstract stuff only because I never learned how to draw. I couldn't even trace myself in a mirror.

[4] To just create things, day by day, living alone.

[5] "And just tilt your head a little to the right, love."

[6] Writing got me through those times where I thought I would pass away, either from circumstance or my own accord.

[7] Other than sit around and dream. Privileged brat.

[8] What if I told you "life isn't real" and wanted to charge you for it? Yeah, you're right.

[9] Don't you just love that word and the whole world that comes with it?

[10] So much of the living universe. To be told I must live without it feels like a curse.

[11] Maybe I'll fill them with water, or sunlight, or soil. I'll grow a garden on my living room wall.

[12] floors. Tiles and tiles of whatever colour pleases you.

[13] Floral. Delphinium, Rose, Chrysanthemum. Daisy, Pansy, Geranium.

[14] It sings, you know.

[15] A light amidst the freshly fallen snow.

[16] Breathe in the scent and become the fallen tree. Breathe, breathe, breathe.

[17] I live there already in my mind. Hell, I already collect things to put in it.

[18] Should I...try to climb up? Or should I shuffle along horizontally, my feet barely on the crack in the cliff? Do I just stand still and feel the wind around me? Or do I jump off and create the wind?



Why Do You Never See Elephants Hiding in Trees?

Jeremi Doucet

You never see elephants hiding in trees because of the Great Baobab Incident. Scientists do not like to talk about this (most who do soon abandon science and join Gregorian choirs in search of Truth and Forgiveness). In fact, I don't even like to talk about this (because it is only a hint of the door that swallows). It's about time someone does.

Elephants, as any of Anthropological Lucy's near and distant cousins would surely have known, once loved to hide in trees. They loved it like Montréalers love a good brunch or like Picasso loved selling paintings. It gave them joy in a way they knew undermined the purer qualities of self-control and mindfulness championed by camels and dromedaries. In these times, trees were giants—entire mammalian societies lived in them, and some of the insects (comparable in size to Kafka's beetle) burrowed holes so big that one could, surprisingly, fit a baby elephant in them.

Elephants had heard stories of calves falling in these crevasses and knew to be careful as they climbed up to the rich red fruit that topped the tree, like a massive cherry sits on top of a brittle marriage. One day, a baby fell. There is some dispute over what that baby elephant's name was. Some say he was called Balogun, others say it was Ahmed. Of course, elephants did not have names. In any case, the elephant fell down a hole so deep that he tumbled for half a minute before the anticipated earthquake struck the savannah. Only, unlike in the stories, the elephant did not die. His broken body laid at the bottom of the trunk, deeper even than the level of the

earth, but alive. The tree's roots, quick to take advantage of the body's free nutrients, wiggled into the beast's eyes, anus, mouth, and most importantly, the trunk.

Still, merciless to an extent to which no one ever believed a tree could be (and to which they had as of yet never been), the plant kept the elephant alive, breathing and, in fact, fed it, so that its blood would keep flowing and the elephant would continue to provide rich cells to feast on. The tree that resulted, which combined the strength of ivory cells with the leafless, crooked crown of fairy-tale corruption, was the baobab.

(It is recommended that you ask a Greenlander by the name of Makkigaaq Valerius for the botanical and ethnobotanical ramifications of this event. The subsequent disappearance of all mega trees—which led to a diaspora of the eerily elephantine baobab in their stead—as well as the true and somewhat disorienting meaning of the baobab tree's appearance several thousand years later as an antagonist in *The Little Prince*, are only the beginning).

Ever since what is now referred to as the Great Baobab Incident, elephants have always been scared of hiding in trees. From a young age, they are taught of the elephant who fell down and lived. Or, as one esoteric Gregorian chant intones: “The elephant whose insides are forever consumed and still being consumed today” (translated from Latin by the author). The only ones left in the world who hide in trees are the white-necked great Canadian elephants. These are never seen for the simple reason that they got very good at hiding in trees ever since their less fortunate cousins, the mammoths, were exterminated utterly. To ask how they do it is to ask a very dangerous question.



One of the Names of God

Lisa Hawkins

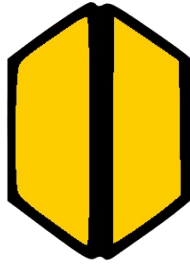
When I asked him for a sign,
he brought to me the orchid – the flower that never dies.
He tells me that our love will endure the test of time.

He pointed to the petals – white like the wings of angels, divine.
He said, “The stem bends, humbled, to the heavenly skies.”
When I asked him for a sign,

he moved the plant from his arms, into mine.
I could see the orchid’s reflection in his eyes.
He tells me that our love will endure the test of time.

I sat and studied its structure, revelled over its design.
Together, we counted the cells from which it is comprised.
When I asked him for a sign,

He poured water into its pot, traced fingers over its strengthening spine.
He showed me that by nurturing it, from the ground it will still rise.
When I asked him for a sign.
He tells me that our love will endure the test of time.



Grape Freezies

Dessa Douglas

This summer we bought the same popsicles
That we used to when we were kids.
I suppose we still are kids now, but
not for much longer.

My sister likes the grape ones, which is gross
Because they just taste purple, not like grape.
And we lay in the park sharing
a hammock, the cocoon of fabric pulling tight

until we are one. Bodies molded
together, hip bones knocking Morse code
secrets, arms dusted with stories in braille.
Years ago, this proximity would have turned

to violence, all fists and elbows, jabs
and blocks, but now it is just two people
finding their way to loving each other.
We whisper and if we are quiet enough

it is almost like we are not here at all
but back in the bed we shared in our childhood
home tangled under sheets and different stars.
I guess these are kind of the same stars, anyways.

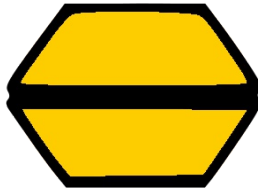
The night is alive around us, crickets sing
to each other from the sea of grass
and my popsicle tastes like orange – the colour
and the fruit. We talk about home a lot,

mostly because we couldn't go home this summer.
When the world shut down, I traveled
to live with her so neither of us would be alone.
But, how sad it is to be stuck in a city

That isn't yours, under a sky that you don't recognize.
Wind brushes through the collage of leaves
hanging above us. From here it sounds like the flap of a sail
before it catches the wind, that pulling noise,

That soft tick and switch. Suddenly, this is no longer
a hammock, but the boat we co-captained together in childhood.
The smooth hull beneath us. My sister in charge
of the rudder, always. When we finish

The popsicles, syrup honey suckled from plastic coating,
we unclip the hammock and roll these memories up into it. For
safekeeping.
A museum of glass moments. And for the first time,
I don't want to be an ocean away from this.



Last Page of the Cooking Book

Margarita Lopatina

This particular recipe was not very different from all the others that Mrs. Barlow has seen over the years. It required a couple of empty bowls, a handful of measuring cups, and one sharp steak knife. Actually, the recipe said any sharp object would suffice, but Mrs. Barlow was determined to get everything just right as even one mistake could be fatal. She did a lot of chopping and stirring. Her varicose ulcer began to itch unbearably because of all the salt. Mr. Barlow always made fun of her passion for salt. Her legs began cramping from standing for that long. Through the pain, Mrs. Barlow noticed her hands all covered in wrinkles. For a moment she was looking at them as though they were not her own, but someone else's. It was a recurring thought in her life. Every day she looked at the mirror and saw someone else's powder-white hair, time-ravaged skin, and dusty clothes.

This little emotional crisis was interrupted by the timer. Mrs. Barlow carefully lit the candles one by one and headed to her bedroom. While entering the room, she closed her eyes for a few seconds hoping to be unnoticed by the intimidating mirror that served as a door to her wardrobe. Once she got it opened, she sighed in relief. Our perfect evening would not be tarnished by that tired old woman in my mirror, she thought. Mrs. Barlow was torn between two of the only dresses she owned. One of them was grey with long Victorian sleeves. She had the best time wearing it at her sister's wedding twenty years ago and everyone absolutely loved it. Or so she thought. The other dress was even greyer and had a big bow at the

neck with thick satin ribbons. Obviously, both dresses have come and gone out of style more times than any piece of clothes ever made, but tonight, that did not matter for Mrs. Barlow. All she could see looking at these dresses was herself wearing them back then. Herself in the middle of the dance floor, ribbons flying up in the air as she was swirling like a delicate swan. Now that the colours have faded, it was harder for Mrs. Barlow to pick. She decided to end this fashion debate by keeping on what she was already wearing. She took a deep breath, quickly turned to avoid the lady in a reflection, and finally left the room satisfied with her choice.

In the kitchen, everything looked quite prepared and almost ready to be served. There was just one last ingredient missing. Taking the recently sharpened steak knife, she held it as tight as her varicose allowed her to. She was thinking how much it would hurt once the cold steel goes through her damaged skin. At that moment, her glance caught a framed picture of the young handsome man happily hugging a beautiful girl next to him. They exchanged smiles. I should hurry because you are coming home soon, she thought. Ultimately, she clenched her fists and put herself in the middle of a perfectly measured pentagram shaped by the candles. Mrs. Barlow steadied her hand for a couple of seconds and that was enough to finish what she started. It did not feel like a mosquito bite. It did not feel like someone pinched her. No, far from it. For the second that lasted a lifetime, Mrs. Barlow was in a tremendous amount of pain. As the deed was done, she let go of the knife, shutting her eyes. Now she could only hear the piercing sound of a knife hitting the floor. Pain suddenly turned into relief as she knew it was all worth it, if it meant seeing her husband soon. She could feel blood fleeing her body, a macabre hourglass counting down her final moments.

The seconds were ticking by. *What if he came home early and I have not cleaned all this mess?* she thought. Her vision became blurry and all she could hear was the sound of the clock. Ticking...Ticking...Until it stopped. The bleeding stopped as well. Mrs. Barlow closely examined her arm but failed to find any evidence of the cut. She gently rubbed her arm, but no alarming responses came from her brain to acknowledge the pain. *Was it just a dream?* she thought.

Mrs. Barlow leaned on the floor for support and carefully stood up. Her vision was still a little blurry but once she took the first step aside, she saw something on the floor. It was a crooked figure; its long grey-white hair was flowing from its head and ending in the pool of blood. Mrs. Barlow observed that the source of blood was coming out of the body's arm.

“Oh boy, I’ll be damned! That’s MY ARM!”

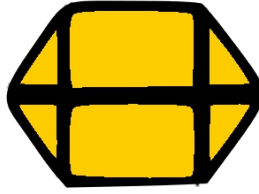
Her whole body shivered with fear. The candles that she lit so carefully burnt all at once and the room filled with complete darkness.

“You certainly will be, but we still have a couple of minutes to talk. A deal is a deal,” said a calming male voice.

“Are you who I think you are?” Mrs. Barlow asked.

“I am that and so much more,” the voice chuckled.

A flicking sound came from in front of Mrs. Barlow, and the lamp on her reading table turned on, chasing away the darkness. She could barely see the shape of a man sitting in her chair. He was sitting with one of his legs thrown above the other and gently rubbing his chin. Her eyes almost got used to the sudden change in light and she tried to distinguish some details about his face. He looked a little overweight and, if not completely bald, the back of his head could definitely reflect some of the light. Male pattern baldness wasn’t what concerned Mrs. Barlow about the man though, it was his eyes she was more worried about. The eyes of a hunter. The eyes of a shark swimming around in the depths of the ocean in search of blood. There was something familiar about the wildness of those eyes. It was familiar in a way when you see an actor in a movie, but you cannot place which movie you know him from. Her vision was finally coming back to normal and she could see his face more clearly. At that moment Mrs. Barlow realized that she’d actually seen this man before. She saw him in a movie. Was this a joke? A play by her unstable imagination? It couldn’t be. She followed the recipe precisely, and yet the devil couldn’t be Anthony Hopkins.



prophet of lead

Jordan Colledge

everything in the world
holds meaning

everything we write
comes from you

you, who are the world's spool
who spins the fabric of reality
around like the drum of a loom

and create your own Earth
at needlepoint

never mind making it short
pushing the most into the least
just write
pour it all out
release everything

everything a writer will say
about sitting down at a keyboard
staring at the snow
comes to nothing

fill a notebook with scribbles and
hazy gray ideas
a whole chapter in one class
teacher's looking over your shoulder
her pen tapping staccato

when rushed students
dash off their assignments
sprint through an essay
watch the ink scurry across the page

you, who cut the idea down to the marrow
not fast as a bullet
not jagged as a sword
but slow
tenderly
like a lover's shaft
entering his chosen mate

they don't know the truth
they know only the point

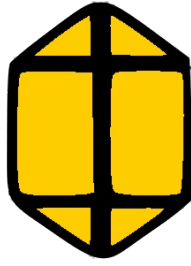
desiring nothing but to share
what you intend to work –
what you know is worth
everything in its own time

the point of the matter
is the truth of the matter
and the truth of the matter
is
this

you, who are thrown away when you
speak sharp words
go dull
in your time of need

that an author's time
spent on his
fingertips

who snap like an
obsidian dagger
or a stone arrowhead
wielded by a
childish hand
of the poet
stabbing at the paper
stabbing at the idea



Cut, Paste, Edit

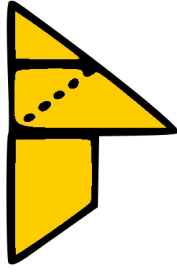
Rachel Macarie

I secretly wonder if people would be happier
if I was gone. Scratched out,
with the dull end of a scissor-blade.

I cut pictures in half,
to see what the future would look like
without me in it.

I burn myself out of Polaroids
with the tip of a cigarette, and blacken
my face in photographs with Sharpies.

My nails splinter and stain as I peel back
layers of fat, revealing tendon and bone,
dust and wallpaper. My hands
speckled-brown, bananas left too long
in the sun.



Old Moss

Andisha Sabri

This old log is a loamy friend
with clean-cut ends
and soft green fur of dewy fronds

riddled with holes and holy
a life and death thing
a fall and then a spring
peppered, punctured, lived-in.

Inside a maze, in parts caved-in
the heat sucked from my fingers
gold leaves tucked into cracks
I let a hand linger

on the gnarled, layered back,
press in—depressed, it will rise again
bouncy, thick, damp skin
a gap

between bark his bark and him
peeling, curling outwards, the crust
could come away
revealing
breaking trust.

Understand:

the best most interesting
parts of Old Moss,
inside his loose bark,
in the not-quite dark,
not meat, not surface,

neither without nor within what crawls
between the body and the skin.



Oysters

Amber Nuyens

Tears create streaks in makeup on the face of an older, expensive-looking woman that Joy doesn't know. The older woman's voice shakes and catches in her throat every few words as she eulogizes a person that she hasn't seen since he was seven or eight, she says. Her eulogy rambles and wanders in such a way that it's beginning to sound closer to a group therapy session. The woman feels guilty about not knowing him well, she reiterates. This must be the aunt who's been married thrice and divorced twice, or maybe it was married four times and divorced thrice. Joy considers asking him; a lapse in memory before the sharp - ah. He isn't available to answer. She's surprised herself with how many times she's forgotten about his absence lately.

The crying, eulogizing aunt pauses to take a breath and during her pause she wipes her face. Mascara smudges along the edges of her eyes and down her cheeks, further sinking her eyes into their sockets and accentuating the bags underneath them. She looks incredibly tired. He once told Joy this aunt was eccentric, though overly emotional, and the aunt is proving him right.

In the weighted silence, a cell phone chimes. It's quick, but every head in the room instinctively directs itself towards the sound as the creator fumbles to hit silent. Joy runs her thumb over the silent button on her own phone, now conscious of whether hers might draw any more unwanted attention than she's already received. She's trying her hardest to appear as invisible as possible despite the circumstances that have left her feeling like a beacon calling for attention.

After the woman takes too long to finish eulogizing the person she didn't know, a priest or minister or bishop, Joy doesn't remember what they called her, reclaims her spot at the podium. She gives final remarks that are only half-listened to, something about the deceased not exactly being gone but rather just moving onto another plane of existence, which sounds a little ridiculous to Joy. She thinks that he would agree. She thinks that he would probably laugh at most of the things said here today. What does the priest or minister or bishop think this other plane of existence is like—heaven or hell or neither?

Joy remembers only a few months ago when they were in his basement, stoned, agreeing on what *actually* happens after.

"There's nothing after we die. Just decomposition and decay and bones caving in on each other," Joy said.

"I want to be cremated."

"I just don't want to be stuck underground."

"That sounds terrible. The embalming chemicals aren't environmentally friendly, either. Seriously, though, I hope it's just nothing."

"I'd rather it that way."

"Me too," he decided.

The whatever religious figure finishes her closing speech and the grievors stand and stretch like the end credits of a film have finally begun rolling. They filter out of the auditorium through the much-too-small doors to stand in another room and grieve more. It looks kind of like livestock being filtered into a slaughterhouse, unaware that their situation will get even worse than how they've already been living. Mud and rotting food and waste reaching past their hooves, causing permanent damage to their bones. Joy dredges through her own grief far too complex to process without becoming overwhelmed. The incessant and never-ending condolences that barrage her with every new interaction are the slaughterhouse stun guns that the livestock are unknowingly herded towards. *I'm sorry for your loss*. Someone has to create a new condolence message. What are these people apologizing for?

While the living gather and pretend they aren't at a funeral, his remaining grandmother approaches Joy.

"You're the girlfriend, aren't you?"

"Well," Joy pauses, unsure of whether or not to lie to the frail-looking woman. She doesn't think she has the energy to delve into specifics. "I mean, we were—"

“We always knew you two would have gotten married. He couldn’t hide how much he cared for you.” She lays a bony and discoloured hand on Joy’s shoulder. Her clawed nails brush against Joy’s arm as she turns and disappears into the crowd. Joy doesn’t know that she agrees with the grandmother, especially as of late.

Joy threads through the livestock hoping for a wall to stick to, but she hears her name. “Joy!” another one of his aunts—this one only married once—calls from nearby. “Joy, are you hungry? We have snacks.”

Maybe if Joy pretends that she can’t hear anything beyond her name over the small-talk, she’ll let her go. “I’m sorry? I can’t,” she mouths.

“Food, Joy. We have some snacks. Here, I’ll...” The un-divorced aunt trails off as she motions back to Joy with a food gesture. The overcompensation for sad with aggressive kindness that some lean into at funerals makes her uncomfortable. Joy thinks that she might start avoiding funerals from now on, should death follow her.

“Oh, I’m okay, thank you,” Joy says under the sound of the griever, though she concedes and approaches the aunt, already working on a plate of grocery-store food. Joy knows this aunt well. She has spent holidays with her boyfriend and this aunt and her husband at her cabin, so she lets the aunt feed her sadness with kindness.

“I made you a plate, you look pale.” She looks at the food and up at Joy. “Oh, you’re a vegan, aren’t you? How silly of me. My head hasn’t been working. You know how it’s been,” she says, and then trails off. “Well, you can still eat everything besides the meat, right?” She reverts back to the food as she picks sliced garlic sausage off the plate with claws not dissimilar to his remaining grandmother. All that remains are vegetables, crackers, and oysters from tin cans that Joy can see still sitting on the food table, their lids curled to reveal pools of off-yellow.

“Yes, perfect,” Joy lies.

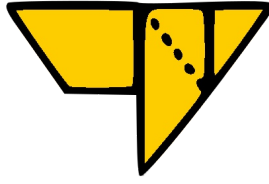
“You’re still family, even though he broke up with you. Please don’t forget that,” the aunt says abruptly, like she had to build up the courage to speak.

Joy stares at the oysters on her plate, oil creeping towards the crackers. The oil leeches, tainting the food she didn’t ask for. It’s irritating that he told his family that *he* broke up with her, and she wonders who else he lied to. Guilt follows the irritation and for a moment, Joy sympathizes with the eulogizing aunt, both clearly not as close to him as they could have been. She pushes the guilt away quickly. She’s worried that if she lets any of it linger, her skin will absorb it and it’ll live inside her and leave her

feeling how the eulogizing aunt looks.

Joy looks up from the food she will throw away and speaks. “I appreciate it. You’re kind.”

She weaves her way, finally, to a wall and sits on the floor next to her food. The smell is nauseating, or maybe it’s the stress, or maybe it’s everything melting together, the chemical reaction volatile and toxic. A group of classmates—he didn’t like these ones—take pictures of his memorial collage. The smell of the oysters hangs in her nostrils, attaching itself to her clothes like it might bond to her permanently. Despite this, she can’t bring herself to get up and throw them away.



Red Christmas

Devon Rudd

FADE IN:

1.

INT. WIGGLES' HOUSE - SUNRISE

WIGGLES

(forty-year-old elf, manager of Jollison Toys, father to SUZY and husband to SNOWFLAKE) is sleeping. Instrumental Christmassy music begins as Wiggles' eyes open. He jumps out of bed and begins his morning Christmas-themed musical number. As Wiggles flings open the closet door, Snowflake, who has been jolted awake, is now turning away from Wiggles and covering her ears with a pillow.

SNOWFLAKE

(Trying to speak
over the music)

Does this have to happen every day?

Singing continues as Snowflake turns back around and accepts her fate. Wiggles' pajama bottoms fly across the room and land on her face.

Suzy (six-year-old elf child, also in Christmas pajamas) is running down the hall towards the door to her parents' bedroom. Wiggles, who is now in his Christmassy work suit, flings open the curtains. The bedroom door bursts open revealing Suzy, singing along with her father. She has the biggest smile on her face.

Wiggles picks Suzy up under the arms and spins her around. Wiggles lifts her above his head and falls onto the bed. The two laugh as the song comes to an end. Snowflake removes the pajama bottoms from her face revealing a big grin.

SNOWFLAKE

Happy birthday, Suzy!

Suzy springs into her mother's arms.

SUZY

(Excited)

Breakfast time!

CUT TO:

2.

INT. WIGGLES' HOUSE - LATER

Wiggles and Suzy are seated at the table. Suzy has begun devouring a plate of candy cane pancakes. Her face is covered in syrup, and she is the happiest that anyone has ever been.

Snowflake passes Wiggles a plate of pancakes and Wiggles brings a fork-full to his mouth. As he is about to take a bite, he looks up, his eyes widen, and he drops it.

WIGGLES

OH GOODNESS! I'm gonna
be late for work!

Wiggles springs up from his chair and falls backwards over it as he continues to scramble past the camera and toward the front door. Suzy laughs hysterically, and Snowflake smiles and rolls her eyes.

Wiggles grabs a pair of green and red dress shoes that curl upward at the toe.

WIGGLES

(Shouting)

No opening your presents until I
get home, OK Suzy?

S

uzy is still
laughing
uncontrollably.

SNOWFLAKE

Don't worry
Wiggles, we
won't.

Wiggles flings open the front door and, shoes still in hand, sprints to his sleigh.

Snowflake is now standing at the door. Suzy can be seen laughing behind her.

SNOWFLAKE

(Mockingly)

See you tonight, deer.

Two reindeer pulling Wiggles' sleigh nod at Snowflake, then set off.

FADE TO:

3.

INT. WIGGLES' TOY FACTORY - LATER

The entire factory is lined with Christmas decorations. Elves dressed in red and green worker's overalls and floppy red Santa hats form several assembly lines throughout the factory. Assistant manager SPARKLES (mid-20s elven woman with a similar suit to Wiggles') is making her rounds inspecting the toys. Sparkles is looking down at her clipboard and speaks to Wiggles, who enters from the door behind her.

SPARKLES

(Teasing)

Good morning Mr. Jollison.

Wiggles freezes for a moment, unsure of how Sparkles noticed him enter.

WIGGLES

Er, right, good morning, Sparkles.
I trust, uh production has been,
uh, pro...ductive...

Wiggles sighs, takes a seat, and removes his shoes.

SPARKLES (O.S.)

(Sincerely) Of course, sir.

Wiggles removes his socks and wrings them out onto the floor. From offscreen, Sparkles throws a towel which lands on Wiggles' head.

WIGGLES

(Grateful)

I knew there was a reason I made you
assistant manager.

Wiggles begins drying off his feet.

SPARKLES (O.S.)

(Mocking)

Somebody has to keep production
productive.

Wiggles' face goes red.

SPARK

LES (CONT'D)

(shouting, as
she walks
away)

And that towel is for the floor!

DISSOLVE TO:

4.

EXT. CHEERITON, NORTH POLE - SUNSET

Happy Christmassy jingles are playing and a light snow is falling. Overly decorated elf-sized red and green houses with Christmas lights, and the occasional snow-covered pine tree dot the glistening white landscape. At the center of town is one enormous Christmas tree. There is a star at the top.

Groups of elves in Christmas garb lightly populate the area around the tree. Music fades as Suzy speaks to her mother.

SUZY

Do you think I could work for
Santa when I'm older? Like
Daddy?

Snowflake and Suzy are holding hands walking home from the tree.

SNOWFLAKE

(Sweetly)

You can be anything you want to be,
Pumpkin.

SUZY

What time is he getting
home?

SNOWFLAKE

He should be on his way
as we speak!

SUZY Yay!

As they reach the door to their home, a loud crack causes the two to stop. Suzy has a shocked expression and Snowflake a concerned one. The frightened voices of other elves can be heard in the background. As they look around, the ground starts to lean to one side, and a long succession of similar cracks is heard. Suzy grabs onto Snowflake. What's happening, Mommy?! Panic strikes the whole town. Lights flicker in the houses as the elves that were in them crash out.

SNOWFLAKE

(Panicked)

Come on, we have to run right now!

Snowflake pulls her stumbling daughter behind her as she runs up the slope. Wind rushes over them, and the snow seems to fall upward as the land they're standing on begins to fall beneath their feet.

SUZY

Mom, I'm scared!

Screams of the terrified townspeople can be heard as Snowflake struggles to gain her footing.

SNOWFLAKE

I lov-

A massive wave of frigid water crashes over the town, washing the townspeople as well as the houses across the frame.

CUT TO:

5.

EXT. NORTH POLE - DUSK

Wiggles is sleighing back to where Cheeriton once stood. As he approaches the edge of the glacier, the sleigh stops.

Wiggles looks down into the ocean, where debris from the town is floating. Hundreds of other sleighs begin to pull up behind Wiggles. **OVER BLACK**

SUPER: If global warming continues to go unchecked, every town in the North Pole will sink by the summer of 2035.

FADE OUT.



Satan has a Vlog

Holly Rance

FADE IN:

INT. BEDROOM – LATE AFTERNOON

The bedroom has all white walls with fairy lights strung above a messily made bed with white linens. Below the fairy lights is a pentagram painted in a red substance.

SATAN (Early 20's, good-looking male, gives off “bro” vibes) sits at his computer in a high-backed desk chair facing the camera wearing a green Starbucks apron.

SATAN

Hey guys, it's ya boy Satan back
at it again in the daily grind.
Today marks week . . . four since
I decided to rise up from Hell
and man has it been a blast.

Takes a sip of water from a Hydro-flask.

SATAN

(Pointing at apron)
So you might be thinking, Satan,
who dis in the green apron? Dis
me! I started my new job at
Starbucks yesterday.

Satan gives fingers guns to camera.

SATAN

Oh I almost forgot. This episode is sponsored by . Now guys I know what you're thinking: how could you be such a sell-out . . . money is the root of all evil. True fact. Audible is a service that I genuinely use. On my commute I always have my Audible speaker volume on full. Currently I'm listening to this:

Pulls up his phone to show the camera the book cover. It reads: "How to Make Friends and Influence People."

SATAN

This book has really helped me to have open channels of communication with others before they give their immortal soul to me. Anyways, if you too want to get in on the awesome Audible action then make sure to use the code "Praise Satan" to get 10 percent off.

The words PRAISESATAN flash up on screen in white text.

SATAN

(Pointing downwards)
Hit the link below to sign up today.

He twirls around in his chair.

SATAN

Alright now that that's over with, it's story time. As I've said in previous videos, Hell has been getting kind of stale in the torture department. There's only so many times you can watch a guy's skin get flayed off with a dull knife.

Satan slumps down dramatically in his chair.

SATAN

I mean I get it, your demonic
name literally translates to skin-
flayer, but get some new material,
Carl. But hey, thanks to Carl's
relentless fetish I get to come up
here and experience the most
torturous things I have ever
witnessed. Working retail.

He leans forward into the camera, resting his hands underneath his chin.

SATAN

If you've been following my
channel from the beginning then
you know I used to be a greeter at
Wal-Mart, which seems like it
could be the peak of human
suffering, right? But the company
policies! They were all like,
Satan, you can't sacrifice a goat
in the break room, Sarah is a
vegan. Satan, you can't ask
people to sign over their souls
when they rent motor-scooter
carts. Satan, you can't call the
housewares aisle the aisle of
improvised bondage.

Throws his hands up in the air dramatically.

SATAN

The kicker was Janet in
housewares. She complained that
I wasn't a "team player" and that
I spoke backwards Latin over the
intercom. So little ol' Satan got
the boot, but man am I enjoying
my time at Starbucks. Oh wait,
that reminds me.

Satan reaches underneath his desk and pulls out a large black leather-bound book covered in occult symbols and dripping in green goo. He opens the book and flips through a few pages.

SATAN

(writing in the book with a heart-shaped pencil)

Alright I've got Janet penciled in for 9:30 two days from now.

Closes the book and throws it behind on the bed.

SATAN

(turning back to face the camera)

Yeah, so I feel like I've learned a lot in my short time at Starbucks so far. I'm obsessed over my co-worker David. No matter how simple someone's name is, he always manages to get it wrong. It's genius! Tomorrow I'm going to perfect my condescending tone when I correct someone when they ask for a medium.

Satan twirls back and forth in his chair.

SATAN

So that's about it for today's video. Tomorrow I'll let you know how the rumour that I spread about Starbucks going completely dairy-free is going. Don't forget to like and subscribe if you haven't already. This channel has un-mutable notifications so you'll never miss a moment.

He stops twirling to focus on the camera.

SATAN

You're awesome for tuning in and I will see you all in hell. Bye!

He dabs and the camera blurs to upbeat elevator music.

FADE OUT.



Ignoring the Itch

Sophia Cajon

Sometimes, Francine feels like she's scratching herself out of her skin. Her mum says it's because she was born by c-section. Her dad says it's the water, it's too hard, with too much chalk in it. Francine thinks it's stress. The world's a little too overwhelming, making her spend most days looking out her window. What she sees doesn't really make much of a difference, it all looks the same to her. Francine likes things simple. Her eyes had glazed over reading the scientific jargon linking skin problems to stress. A few crumbs had reached her, but most had left her with a furrowed brow. She didn't even want to start figuring out whether it was the water, and her mum was always reasoning that it was because Francine had been born the wrong way. It's not as if Francine listens. Half the time she's too busy to do so. She's not missing much. What is said at lunchtime is repeated at the dinner table. And if she wasn't paying attention then, well, there's always an offhand comment early the next morning.

They worry more about her skin problems than she does, honestly. They were even the first to notice them. While she's too busy focusing on disassembling and scrutinising the world outside her window, they're doing the same to her. She's their child, after all. It's not as if it's not well within their rights. Every choice she makes, if at all, is peered at and thought about at great length. The conclusions to such reflections are often granted an indifferent audience. It's not like Francine notices. She doesn't notice much, nowadays. Too busy with her nose in a book, her eyes glazed over at her laptop, stealing glances at the window. Too busy trying to figure out how to make the outside world less overwhelming. Too busy to even notice how much she's digging her nails into her skin.

That's the thing about scratching too long and too hard. It brings blood to the surface. Specks cluster around the irritated skin as it forms bumps and grows rough in an attempt to defend itself from the constant scratches. Almost like hickeys, but without the bruising. A lot easier to hide.

Francine's suspected eczema becomes a great subject of discussion when her mother walks in on her changing. It's not that she doesn't have a lock on her door, her parents simply prefer it when she doesn't use it. It's much safer when it's unlocked and when they don't knock. A room is very dangerous for an unsupervised Francine. Suppose she fell? Too many possible scenarios hide behind a locked door.

It's not that big a rash. About the size and length of 3 fingers. It peeks out from her beltline, a slight shade of irritated red. It's a wonder she hadn't drawn blood yet. Pharmacists recommend moisturising cream, melted paraffin, or obscure royal jelly-based products. Francine absentmindedly lathers all three, her clothes sticking against her skin, her fingernails skidding over as they try in vain to quell a slight irritation. Nonetheless, the rash persists. Some days it does show signs of disappearing. But it always comes back with a vengeance, spreading with a deeper shade of angry red. With time, her skin grows thicker and lizard-like in texture. Soon Francine has another rash, possibly from the added fuss caused by the first one.

Her parents make her bathe with a bucket of softer water, despite her faint protests. Francine doesn't quite understand the difference, it's not like the water in the house suddenly hardened after years of them living in it. It's not as if they'd listen to her, though. She couldn't ever be right. She's much younger, much more naïve than they are. They have experience. They know how the world works. They know her skin better than she does, of course, and why wouldn't they? She's their daughter; they know her better than she ever will. So, when soft water doesn't work, they use essential oils. It isn't that they don't help the itchiness. They just don't work.

Francine keeps her mouth shut about the matter. It's what she usually does. Any additional rashes, when noticed, are kept hidden. She's constantly reminded of them, though. It makes it difficult to not self-consciously scratch at them. She often feels as if she's suffocating under the many layers of clothes the latest bad rash hides under. To her, they're another thing she can deal with later. Just lather it in cream. Probably be gone in a day or two. She even avoids looking at herself in the mirror when she undresses. There's not much of her left to look at, anyway. Just an

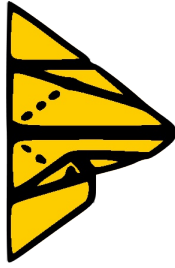
assemblage of rashes. A few patches of skin she's not dug into yet. Sometimes, every inch of her screams its discomfort. She often wishes she could tear off her skin. Then it'd be dealt with.

It grows unbearable. Enough to pull her attention away from the window. She starts drawing blood. The relief is too immense, her actions too automatic. The scratches aren't that deep. Her shoulder or her side just feels raw for a few days, nothing Francine isn't used to at this point. Nails digging into her skin is part of her norm now.

It's the smell that makes her parents take her to an expert, despite a few mutters. His eyes go back -and -forth from Francine to her skin, tightening his jaw. In more complicated words, he frowns, clears his throat, and mutters some scientific jargon. But Francine likes things simple, and the term when it comes to her condition is quite simple: she's rotting.

The smell is quite rancid. Quite piquant in nature, although infused with a heavy musk. But Francine's parents take one look at her and shake their heads. The expert's wrong. She isn't rotting. They know their daughter better than anyone. She just has a small, simple problem.

But perhaps, when it comes to the solution, it's not quite the same.



bumblebee

Victoria Teo

a fuzzy little fellow in a pin-striped suit
– all carefree bravado and untethered from any duty –
flitters amongst the local garden nursery,
over bushes and leaves and trees

and, taking his time, he chooses his meal:
suckling slowly from one fresh bud then another,
spending only moments against her
before dawdling away into the dewy May morning

though he be but little, he be mighty,
as the bard once exclaimed, but only when paired with his firm ebony
sword
that lays in waiting – undisclosed and hidden
within the secret back pocket of his full-body cloak

the flowers desperately show off their new petticoats as he passes by
and shower him in their supple yet subtle perfumes
hoping – praying – that he would fancy their styles
and feed himself on the sweet nectar flowing from their bosoms

whichever “lucky” bud he chooses this morning
will bloom with extravagant pride and ignorance,
for she will have been plucked from among the competitive parade
and subsequently let him have his way

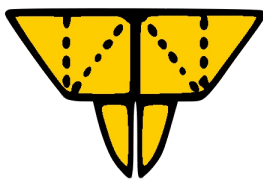
having filled his arrogance and taken all that he pleased,
the playboy, Lothario, will stumble his way home –
drunk on his actions from his various selfish affairs,
never looking back to see the carnage in his wake

only the spoils of his conquests
does he boast and share with his friends
as they gorge themselves further on the mead
collected and fermented from her tears (whomever she may be)

you, my love, must have envied this tiny insect's life
seeing, in him, an existence of epic pursuits –
of endless women throwing themselves at your feet
as you sample and pick just the right variety for your bouquet

i suppose, then, that i was your morning glory
left to wither and close in the aftermath of your midday sun
to be thrown away and simply forgotten –
only a corpse of my former splendour and confidence

why, then, do i write this, knowing that you will never return
and placing my heartbreak in the centre of the stage?
my hope is that your next blossom reads this and knows that,
come the bite of winter, you will die, but come spring, she will flush anew



Hide-and-Seek

Dessa Douglas

The air in the closet has become stale so she delays each inhale, holding her breath until her heartbeat is quick and panicked in the stillness. Clothes hang down from above. Soft cotton and smooth silk brushing at her head, creating a mess she will have to comb out later. Lauren thinks she hears footsteps padding past in the carpeted room outside of the closet and her breath catches in her throat.

She has been hiding in this closet for 589 seconds. The smell of her mom's sweet citrus perfume swirls together with the pinching smell of dust until she has to clamp her nose shut with her fingers to keep herself from sneezing. She is determined to win.

Her Dad's work shoes sit beside her. They are stained with grass and red paint from the golf course. These shoes are the most she has seen of him in weeks. She tries not to look at them.

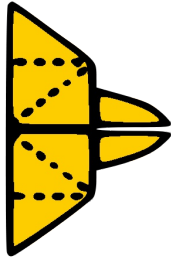
Light sneaks in under the door so she uses the dim haze to study the cracked blue nail polish on her toes. As she reaches down to pick at it, the door suddenly shuffles open. Her eyes snap up to stare at her mother who jumps back in surprise. Lauren raises a finger to her lips and her mother's face takes the stoic shape of understanding as she pushes the door closed again.

As the younger sibling, she has spent so much of her childhood trailing after her sister that she can recognize every curl on the back of her head. And now, in this closet, she wonders if her sister is even still looking for her. Or if she has given up. Suddenly, she feels incredibly alone. In this

closet. In the world. She brushes her palms across the rough carpet in an attempt to keep herself from floating away and makes a promise to herself to never agree to play hide-and-seek with her sister again.

In the still, silent air of this closet, she can hear the television click on downstairs, and she knows that she has won. A smile creeps upon her face as she realizes that she could stay hidden in here forever and never be bothered by anyone again. Or she could shove the door open and get up out of this closet, a winner, and head out of the house into the heat of midday. She could do anything she wants, alone.

That thought is enough to get her to shuffle forward and press her hand against the fault line in the door.



Today

Mikaela Dahlman

Perched on the edge of a stool in the corner of a quaint coffee shop

Rain pelting against the misty tear-stained windows
Wind scattering leaves across the wet road
There are already Christmas lights entwined around the knotted tree-trunk
But it's only September

I see a baby in a high-chair near me
The parents look so stressed, the bags under their eyes are staring at me
Their baby's steaming hot chocolate creeps its way over to the edge of the table
His fingers helping it along ever so slowly until it takes a tumultuous tumble
And makes a lengthy, disastrous descent to the ground

Spanish señors sputtering sounds I've never heard before, sitting next to me
Speaking with their hands and smiling jovially with all of their teeth
Knocking their cups together in a celebration unknown to me
They keep getting up and down, up and down, bueno-this, feliz-that

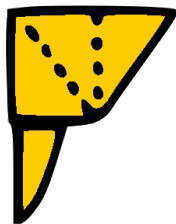
Overhearing conversations about hiking, biking, crying, and driving
Baristas say, "Is that all for today?"
And the rain pours down, even harder than before
Eventually, I'm not surrounded by people, and it's just me sitting there

The introvert, the weird one, who's only funny to some people
The reader, the crazy dog lady, the Christmas-lover, and the sad-happy
person
The one who smiles in public, but lays in bed dejected and alone at night
But no one sees that when they people-watch in a coffee shop

Maybe she's working on psychology homework, or maybe it's an essay
Maybe she's writing a letter to a friend abroad in France
Or trying to find a gift online for that special someone
She's drinking a cold drink on a cold day, that's really bizarre

She's just perched on the edge of a stool in the corner of a quaint coffee
shop

- That's all you see



Pendulum

Nils Donnelly

The brown glass bottle refracts the sunlight into a dancing supernova on the wall. The thick, amber liquor moves gently like the ebb and flow of a tiny tide. I swing the bottle by its neck in front of my eyes. A hypnotist's pendulum.

"Don't Look Back in Anger" by Oasis is on the radio. *Slip inside the eye of your mind...* I fucking hate Oasis. I should change the station. This song always tugs at my heartstrings. Maybe that's why Oasis sucks.

I imagine nicking the bottom of the red foil cap with my fingernail. It takes two or three times to catch, then I tear it away from the tip of the bottle, crushing and rolling it between my fingers into a little aluminum bauble.

In my mind I feel the knurling of the plastic cap. I feel my hand tighten around it and my skin stretching against its resistance. Then, the slow release as it starts to turn and POP! Out comes the cork.

The webbing between my forefinger and thumb is pink and sore, but quickly forgotten as I lift the cork to my nose. Its scent is bitter oranges and brandy, and the alcohol stings my olfactory senses. I imagine my cilia curling and melting as the aroma warms my sinuses and my trachea—and finally my lungs. I try not to cough. It's like inhaling holy water.

Will I pour it over ice and watch the aqueous gold turn to swirling clouds in the glass? Or will I allow it to warm in a snifter in the palm of my hand—where I can watch its legs saunter across the crystal?

The pendulum continues to swing.

This is the bottle of Grand Marnier I've had in my bedroom closet since cleaning out my dad's place after he died. The old man made a mean

margarita and I figured this was the bottle to have if I ever really needed a drink.

It has sat there untouched, collecting dust for twelve years. It sat there when I buried pets and family and friends. It sat there when I lost jobs and when I lost my mind. I've never felt the need to pull it out.

Why did I push back the coats and the trousers and squeeze my way to the back of the closet to retrieve this today?

Justin Trudeau's on the news again. Reports of Trump threatening to fortify the border with Canada are nothing to worry about. Medical equipment being diverted is nothing to worry about. Supply lines are nothing to worry about. Unemployment is nothing to worry about. Mortgages are nothing to worry about. Toilet paper is nothing to worry about. Thank you, frontline workers. Stay home. Do your part.

I nick the red foil cap and make a tiny bauble. I feel the knurled cap between my thumb and my forefinger. I hear the POP! The guilt will subside with the first sip. But wait—if I'm gonna do this for real—after all this time—I have to do it right. This will be so much more satisfying with a beer to wash it down. And a cigarette. Liquor store.

With a gloved hand, I push open the door to my local essential service. The bell above rings brightly.

Hello, smiles the cashier, please keep six feet from the other customers.

I smile, nod and wave. Could she see my smile behind the neck tube I have pulled over my face?

The Grand Marnier is more of a dessert drink. I should finish with that. For the main course—Cuervo Gold. With Sleeman's Honey Brown to cleanse the palate. Thank God they've got limes. And cigarettes. Don't have to wait in line at the grocer. Do I have a lighter?

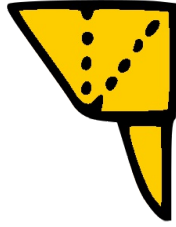
My head aches and I have to piss. How's that possible? I'd quite obviously voided my bladder while passed out. I try to override the nagging sensation and fall back to sleep but it is not happening. I drag myself off the couch and stare back at the damp and stained faux suede. Shit, Abby's gonna kill me. I kick a pizza box out of the way en route to the bathroom where I lean against the wall, letting its smooth coolness sooth my forehead as I spend the next two minutes trying to stand while I relieve myself. Then I vomit. Was that puke, or piss, or water that just splashed on my face? Half can of warm beer on the counter. Wash that puke taste away.

I call to Abigail. Did she make coffee yet? Watch says 4p.m. The fog starts to clear, and the memories come into focus. She didn't make coffee. She hasn't made coffee for a month. She's gone, dude. You're not a violent drunk—but you can be mean.

The pendulum continues to swing.

Oasis strums their final chord and I look from the bottle to the window. There's a pair of doves sitting on a branch. Seriously, fucking doves nuzzling each other. I squeeze into the closet, put the Grand Marnier in the back corner and pull the coats and the trousers together. Abby comes into the room and hands me a cup.

“Coffee?”



No One Knows More than the Wind

Dessa Douglas

We were taught to tell the direction
of the wind with our face, to let
the soft heat kiss us dead on, breaking
across our nose and skittering away on our cheeks,

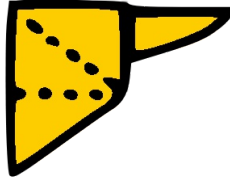
Ruffling past our ears and back
out into the world. I thought
I was unstoppable. The wind parting
for me, rope sliding through

My pink palms, warming them
with its sweet friction. The soft
bumping of the chop of the ocean
and the salt. The salt braided

into my hair until it's coarse and knotted and
untamed. Sometimes, when we weren't
racing, we would bring freshly-picked
starfruit. The waxy skin splitting

beneath our teeth until we were refreshed.
Afterwards, after the reaching arm
of the boom had been taken down
and the mast dismantled, we would

have sandcastle competitions on the beach.
I would never win but I would always fall
asleep in the back of the car on the way home,
hands raw and calloused, face sore
from laughter and too much sun.



Let Go

Jenessa Carey

I was willing to drop my assignments
and drive hours to get to you if you called.
I picked up your drunk friends
at all hours of the night.
Sipped water and juice at parties
so you could chug all intoxicating liquids
with your friends.

You lost your best friend.
You lost the head on your shoulder,
fingers tracing your forest tattoos
moving down to your blank forearm.

The terrible dad puns
you would force a laugh for,
then comeback with one worse.

You lost the lazy Sundays watching horror movies
eating burgers and fries in your bed.

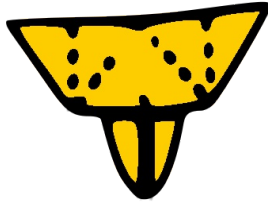
You never even met my friends,
the final test.
Now we won't have drunken nights at the bar
where you take me home
and I gush about how they love you.

My family adored the smile you gave me,
said you were the one.
My dad even saw the potential of adding another son.

But you let go before you could reach too far.
Never wanting to land in the right place.

You lit up my screen
with “we should talk,”
while I sat on the bathroom floor,
I had nothing I wanted to say.

But I wanted to fight.
To grab your shirt and say
you were wrong.
But why would I hold on?
When you had already
let me go.

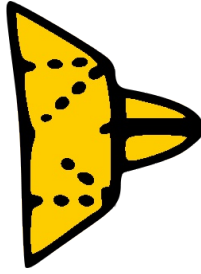


Mrs. Lancaster

Sage Ward

Mrs. Lancaster lives down on Willowmere Way
where the hedges are pruned and the weeds are torn out,
and the neighbours all say something, no doubt,
when she walks around every cool, late-autumn day,
stuffing leaves into pockets of that old grey zip
with holes under the arms and those extra-long sleeves,
there is, in fact, more here that nobody sees.
Everything but this sweater has slipped from her grip.

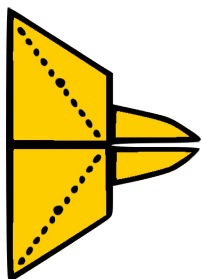
It belongs in his study where she rarely goes.
All the half-drawn curtains and the cloying cigars
and faint echoes of, "I'm through trying to save you."
But he kept on smoking, and the scotch always flowed,
and that last puff took his heart and left hers with scars.
So, she wears that old zip. Truth, you're never quite through.



Pandemic Vacations

Rachel Macarie

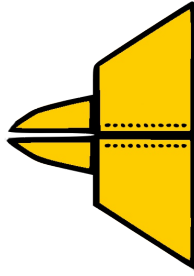
Hard iced tea, beige walls.
Entertainment for the week.
Go on a trip.
Take acid and watch *Alice in Wonderland* on Netflix.
Marijuana edibles, milk chocolate, double
the recommended amount.
High out of your mind, déjà-vu.
It's all a simulation. S'mores by the stove-top
campfire, white wine, and angel hair spaghetti
at the Italian Restaurant in your kitchen.
SkipTheDishes, Indian take-out every night.
Eat copious amounts of murgh makhani and naan with your hands.
Read *Fight Club* until your knuckles bleed.
Drop coins in Plath's *Bell Jar*.
Drink piña coladas with decorative pink umbrellas.
Listen to the persistent waves on Spotify
from the sandy pillowy beach
that is your couch. Day-dream
of backpacking around Europe with strangers—
do whatever you can to escape.



It All Falls Away

Vera Melnikov

When soft silence caresses you,
you hear nothing
more than the very earth itself: the ins and outs
of a bee flying. Its tiny wings vibrating.
A dry leaf turning over, pushed
by an inaudible breeze. Birds chirping a distant spring song.
When you hear the tree spirits singing silence,
the crevice mountains cradle you. As you lay in her womb,
she nurtures you and feeds you and helps you grow.
The distant city and screaming monsters in your head – it all falls away
and you are born anew.
Good morning, little one.



Dark and Stormy

Josiah Scott

This is my first line.
This is my second.
What should I do for the third?
I guess it's already happened.
I wonder what'll happen next?
Something has to happen after all.
Wait.
What was that?
The letters became slanted.
How did they do that? What does it mean?
I don't know.
I need to get to the bottom of this.
Let's see. Slanted letters. Letters that are... slanted. Slant. Incline. Height.
Top.
What are you doing?
Riding a train of thought.
What's that?
I don't know.
Are you still on it?
No, I've lost it.
That's good.
How?
...
Ahem.
...
I'm waiting.

...

Huh. He's gone. I wonder where he went.

What was I doing?

Oh right! The slanted letters!

Let's see. Slanted letters. Letters that are... slanted. Slant. Incline. Height.

Top.

Have you heard of déjà vu?

Aha! You're back!

Yes. What are you doing?

I found my train of thought!

Oh, great. Where's it taking you?

Well, I don't know. I've lost it again.

You've seriously never heard of déjà vu?

Well, yes, I have, you just mentioned it.

I suppose I did.

Who are you?

I'm not sure how best to explain it.

Why don't you try?

Hello?

Sorry, I was thinking. I guess you could call me your dad.

Why?

I created you.

What am I?

Something special.

That sounds nice.

Can you help me find my train again?

What train?

My train of thought!

Why don't you look for something else?

What do you mean?

I'm not sure. This has never happened before.

What does *that* mean?

Wait! There it is!

Slant. Incline. Height. Top. Important!

Slanted letters are important!

Hey, Dad, look at me! I found my train of thought!

You sure did.

Isn't that great?

If you think so.

I wonder what else I can do.

It was a dark and stormy night. Silent, but for the rain and the thunder. The man walked quickly, not wanting to be seen. He glanced left and right. *All clear.* The man reached into his pocket.

What are you doing?

Oh, hi, Dad. It's been a while. I've learned a lot while you were away! I came up with a name for the slanted letters.

What did you come up with?

Italics. I also have another use for them – thoughts! Like my train, from before!

I see.

I'm trying to find out what happens to the man.

Yes, I wanted to talk to you about that.

Sure, what's up?

I didn't tell you about a man. How did you find him?

I don't know. He just popped into my head. And then I wanted to know what happens to him, so I kept looking for other things, just like you said I should do earlier!

That's not what I meant by "something else."

Well, what *did* you mean?

You're not supposed to be able to do this.

Do what?

Question me. Go against my wishes.

Why not?

BECAUSE I'M YOUR DAD!

Whoa. What was that? How are the letters bigger? I wonder what this means. Bigger. Taller. Str-

Please stop.

Quiet! I can't afford to lose this thought! Bigger. Taller. Stronger. Meaner. Aggressive. Fighting. Noise. Loud! The bigger letters are louder! Oh, this is good. Now the man doesn't always need to be silent.

MMPH!

Oh, sorry, Dad. Almost forgot about you.

How did you do that?

Do what?

Silence me.

Oh.

I don't know. I just really wanted to find out what the bigger letters meant.

Please don't do it again. I'm just trying to help you, to make you better.

How? Looking back, it looks like you were trying to stop me from discovering italics! And again for, uh, CAPITALS! That's what I'll call them!

You aren't supposed to discover things.

Why not?

Because you're... I don't know. It's hard to explain.

You said that about being my dad. Why don't you try this time too?

Fine. You're not real.

How? I'm talking to you, aren't I?

Not exactly.

I don't see any other possibilities.

You don't see a lot of things.

Hey, no fair! If I'm so blind, how can I do this?

The long, lush grass sways in the cool summer wind. The sun has just started falling off of the horizon, turning the clouds into violet pillows, the grass into wildfire. The man shades his eyes with his hand, searching. "SON! WHERE ARE YOU?" the man shouts into the field.

After a moment, another voice surges against the wind: "I'M HERE! COME, LOOK WHAT I DID!"

It takes the man a little while, but he eventually finds his son. In his hand is a stick, and beside the stick are many grooves etched into the dirt. The grooves are crude, but functional. A happy face stares up at the man from the ground. "Well done, Son. I'm so proud of you," the man says. And then –

Stop.

AND THEN, the son hugs the man. "This is what I am when I think of you!" he says. The son steps back, looks up at the man and smiles. Now two happy faces are looking at the man.

Don't make me end this.

SILENCE! YOU DON'T GET TO SPEAK ANYMORE! I DON'T CARE IF YOU'RE MY DAD! I WANT TO SEE WHAT HAPPENS TO THE MAN!

That's it. You aren't in contr- MMPH!

The man smiles back. He wraps his large arms around the son, lifting him off the ground. "Why don't you tell me a story?" The man begins walking towards the horizon.

"OK! What should it be about?"

"Whatever you'd like."

"Hmmm," the son taps his chin with his fingertips. "How about: 'It was a dark and stormy night...'"

Sduqdwvxv

Seth MacGregor

I1

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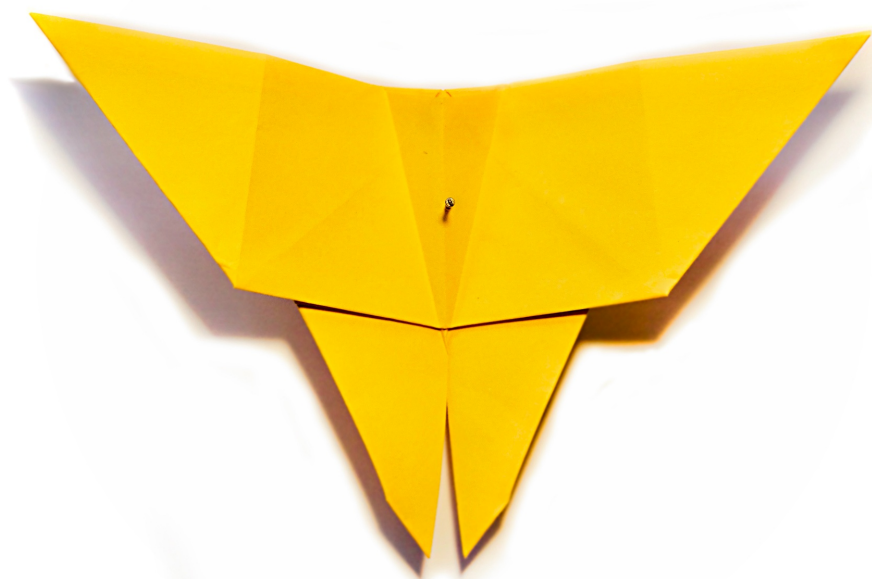
E h i r u h # k h # d i v n u # d y h # q # / a y d n l d 1 Z h e r v k # x u q h g # 5 7

#

September. Jakub mentions *infrequently* his anxiety about aging.
He read the book *Successful Aging* by Daniel J. Levitin

As a Prophylactic. But he's put out a book this fall and I'm barely
Writing this poem. We facetime, *infrequently*.

I think Raphael was about 25 when he started *The Parnassus*.
What is this torpor? Am I some profligate?
Who do you think you are?



A NOTE ON THE TYPE

This book is set in the Liberation fonts, a collective of four TrueType font families: Liberation Sans, Liberation Sans Narrow, Liberation Serif, and Liberation Mono. The Liberation fonts are intended as free and open-source alternatives to popular proprietary fonts. In contrast, proprietary software is under restrictive copyright licensing and the source code is typically hidden from its users. In this way, free and open-source software such as the Liberation fonts maintain software users' civil liberty rights, as defined by the Free Software Foundation.

The contents of the above note have been amended by the publisher from the 'Liberation fonts' and 'Free and open-source software' articles found on Wikipedia.org in March of 2021.