



paper shell

MMXXII

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THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

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Edited by the CRWR 472 Creative Writing: Editing and Publishing class of 2021/2022:

El Bojin Armstrong

Marcey Costello

Aidan Donovan

Dessa Douglas

Veronica Fabian

Sarah Kloos

Nathalie Kurkjian

Calvin Nieman

Amber Nuyens

Helen Powers

Domi Szepessy

Marissa Thompson

Jenna Tulak

Produced by Michael V. Smith.

CONTENTS

| | |
|----------------------|----|
| Content Warning..... | v |
| Introduction..... | vi |

nonfiction

| | |
|---|---|
| Marshlands by Calise Jontz..... | 1 |
| Dear Baba by Kaito Hyde..... | 3 |
| If Only I Had a Brain by Kai Hugessen..... | 6 |
| The Remedy of Stillnessby Riley Kirsch..... | 9 |

fiction

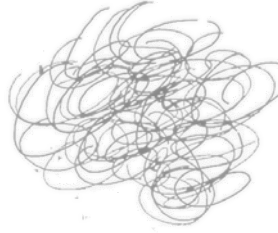
| | |
|---|----|
| The Woman’s Daughter Tells Her...by Amber Nuyens..... | 13 |
| Six Steps Gone by Lois L. K. Chan..... | 14 |
| Errands by Josiah Scott..... | 17 |
| Bite-sized by Sophia Cajon..... | 19 |
| Rebecca Was a Liar byKarly Larson..... | 22 |
| Carousels by Rachel Iserhoff..... | 24 |
| B by Ximena Gordillo Cruz..... | 27 |
| Summer Crush by Shawn Smith..... | 29 |
| Bluebells, Cockle Shells byMackenzie Blackwood..... | 32 |

poetry

| | |
|---|----|
| Metaphors by Maren MacIntosh | 37 |
| tell me how it feels to dream by Samantha Hodge..... | 39 |
| The Optometrist by Lois L. K Chan..... | 41 |
| My Kitchen Sink by Juliet McGauchie..... | 42 |
| “How would you like your steak?” by Renee Albreanna Garcia..... | 44 |
| Life by Ally Alfano..... | 45 |
| Kalamalka Eyes by Kyla Rohatynsky..... | 46 |
| Words Alone by Angela Chan..... | 48 |
| The Tears We Shed by Brianna Rayne Wallace..... | 49 |
| Triangle Slave Trade by Emma Schwartz..... | 51 |
| Motion Sickness by Trinity-Dawn Schiazza..... | 53 |
| Hands by Anna Ruckstuhl..... | 55 |
| Disorientation by Jahnvi Sachdeva..... | 57 |
| All of the Stars, The Sun and The Moon by Kyla Rohatynsky..... | 59 |
| Falling by Natasha Elliott..... | 60 |
| My Island by Ainslie Spence | 62 |
| crystal rabbit by Cassidy Schneider..... | 64 |
| History by Rhea Kjargaard..... | 67 |
| Concupiscence by Madeline Grove..... | 69 |
| Ssh!by Juhi Sarvaiya..... | 70 |
| Divine and Complete by Ruby Hart..... | 72 |
| Little Death by Ally Alfano..... | 76 |
| Where The Sweetgrass Grows by Shayla Raine..... | 77 |
| Since they say language doesn't allow us... by Lois L. K. Chan..... | 78 |

CONTENT WARNING

Before reading, please recognize that this anthology includes many works that contain serious topics about mental health, sexual assault, toxic relationships, and graphic depictions of death. These materials may not be suited for all audiences.
Readers' discretion is advised.



INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the University of British Columbia Okanagan campus's 2022 Paper Shell! This anthology's editors, and the writers published inside, thank you for taking the time to read and appreciate the works included.

UBCO is situated on the unceded, ancestral land of the Syilx Peoples. Please take the time to research the Indigenous Peoples' territory you interact with on a day-to-day basis and how you can work to build a relationship with the land and peoples of that territory.

Paper Shell is a virtual collection of poems, short fiction, and nonfiction. It shares the work of UBCO students from various majors and backgrounds, edited and published by the students of Creative Writing 472! The anthology comprises various types of creative work organized to flow together from one to the next with ease, starting with nonfiction, fiction, then poetry. Created and published in 2022, Paper Shell was influenced in some ways by the COVID-19 pandemic. The creative pieces include a range of topics that tackle the struggles of the pandemic: loneliness, a negative shift in mental stability and health. And lots of resilience too.

As this year's editors, we worked together, half online and then in-person, to create this collection by reading the submissions of numerous writers, then collaborating to construct a fluid and enjoyable reading experience.

We hope you enjoy Paper Shell 2022!

- CRWR 472 Creative Writing: Editing and Publishing class of 2021/2022.



nonfiction



Marshlands

Calise Jontz

There are poplars that grow on our farmland—they are thick like huge reeds by the water. The stream was harnessed and used for irrigation, but the poplars are wild and grow where they want. My dad calls them nuisances, always saying, “They shoot up so quickly, like weeds.” And it’s true, little saplings pop up on the hayfields each spring—my dad mows them before they get stronger. But I love all the poplars that grow here.

My horse Sunny and I would go loping, then I’d slide off his shoulders and unclip his halter. He would walk by the water and nose through the couch grass while I’d sit by the tree trunks and listen. There were leaves all around me, constantly rustling. It was like hearing the prophet Isaiah one time when he spoke to the Hebrews—he told them they would soon be rescued from Babylon. And when God would bring them home, Isaiah told them, “The trees in the fields will all clap their hands.”

Many people don’t care much for trees. They might say “there’s something peaceful about them,” or “they’re the necessary lungs of the earth,” but they wouldn’t say they really love them. But trees are important for the earth’s cycles, and I read that, in cities and especially around hospitals, they help residents improve their mental and physical health. Not only that, but trees also drain water from places covered up in cement, and their roots keep embankments on mountains beside highways from shifting and falling apart.

Love is kind of like trees. Many people don’t live for it, but they’d certainly hurt if it left. It might take a while, but it would hit them at some

point or another—the knowledge that something they relied on is no longer there. Something that helped them get by, move through life, and hang on. Something that kept them in place when they wanted to fall.

I tell myself that, only once, my heart has been broken, and it was when my sister-in-law split from my brother. The image of his clouded eyes and quiet voice saying she's left him is fresh in my mind.

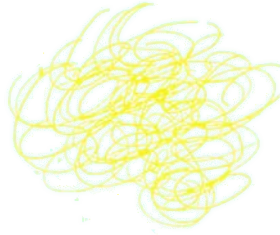
He hunches over the kitchen table.

“Leo,” I say, “why are you crying?” And his words always catch me off guard, like the sting of paralysis after turning my neck too quickly and pinching a nerve I’d forgotten was there.

Our farmland was once just a marshland, and I think all sorts of things used to live there. Tractors get stuck in the corners of the fields because the peat moss will never quite dry out, and the ducks and the herons that lived there still frequent the stream in our valley, though the marsh has been gone for a century. There were fish here, as well, though they’re limited now to a small passage through the fields in the stream. They stay in there, except for occasionally, when the stream overflows its borders and the whole field will flood and the marsh almost comes back. But these floods only last for a week or so, and the fish seem to understand fine.

I was fourteen when I went to the poplars and saw that the field had been flooded, but not enough to create a new current—the water just spread out and disappeared in the field. The stream had diverted itself in one spot, little trout must have followed it blindly, ending up in the hayfield, with no water to swim further. They flopped around under harsh sunlight as I hustled to get help fixing the stream and then finding the fish. My brothers (who were little then) and I took trips back and forth to the stream, keeping our eyes wide for small bodies, picking them up if they still were alive. They must have been shocked, swimming smoothly, then suddenly abandoned by the water.

Once, Leo’s ex-wife needed a box from my brother. My sister and I drove it to her and I suddenly felt like I couldn’t say a word. I actually hid in the back of the car and waited until she had left before looking out of the window. There was love, I had thought, then there wasn’t, and I was too proud to even say bye. I went home to the trees, still there, clapping, and I wished I could understand how.



Dear Baba

Kaito Hyde

How are you? I can't believe it's been two years since I last visited you in Japan, in Kita-Kyushu. Back then, my hair wasn't so long. Well, it was long, but it didn't touch my shoulders. Either way, when you came to pick us up at the airport and my twin and I walked out of those glass doors, you bolted up from the bench and our aunt Miyoko-san was astonished! You did it without your cane. That night I texted my mom about it, and she replied with this Japanese phrase: "For grandparents, they could put their grandkids in their eyeballs, and it wouldn't hurt." I think it just means you love us very much.

I hope you are doing alright. When I arrived in Japan that time, I was surprised: you had a large, black-purple bump on your forehead. A "tan-kobu", as it's called in Japanese. "I fell and hit my head," you said nonchalantly, holding the bump. I knew why you fell. Dad told me before I arrived that you had Parkinson's Disease. I nodded at him, like I understood, but understanding and seeing what it looks like is completely different. I learned that it would mean you walked around with a stroller, even inside the house. The night I came to visit—or a day after that, I think—I was exploring the house, eyeing the tatami on the floor, the delicate-looking dishes in the glass cupboards, when my eyes landed on you: frozen, in the space between the couch and the threshold of the door, hands gripping your stroller. I panicked, shouting, "Are you okay?" as I ran to your side. I held your arm to help you balance.

You thanked me softly and charmingly, saying, “You’re my hero.” Shaking my head awkwardly, I said, “Not a problem.”

I must admit, it wasn't easy getting used to helping you at first. Remember when we were getting off the van from the airport? I was so wobbly trying to help you! I think Miyoko-san urged me to hold onto you tighter, and we laughed when you, me, and my brother Shoya fell to the ground. I hope you were alright when that happened! When I go back to Japan again, I'll be more confident. I'll rush to your aid. I won't be as alarmed as before when you freeze or fall.

But hey, let's talk about other stuff. In fact, let's talk about talking. Right now, I regret that many of our conversations were one-sided, catch-up questions, like little twigs hacking at a lake that has frozen over. Questions like: “What are you learning in school?” and “Can you still speak Japanese fluently?” I think it's because we rarely see each other. After all, we live on opposite sides of the planet. I often ask myself what kind of person I would be if I grew up close to my grandparents. Probably wiser, with more experience taking care of people, and with more stories to tell. I might have even been the one to cook dinner for us. I would also know so much more about you. When I visited you, I learned what job you had when you were younger, for example. Your job was something about diagnosing patients and doing scans... Okay, it turns out my memory is pretty vague about your job, haha. You had the same job as Jiji, I think. You were both in the medical field, at least. And soon after, Miyoko-san would do the same job as one of you! But... that's about it. I barely know you.

On the other hand, you know a lot about me! You know that I like drawing because I send you my art often, online. You know I like to sing, and you know I like to dance too. When I visited, I told you I wanted to be a writer. I wasn't expecting surprise or disapproval from you, but I wasn't expecting what you told me either. You suggested, “Being a writer is like having a battle inside you, isn't it?”

And I drew my breath because it was like you understood. I leaned in excitedly and said, “Yeah, it's exactly like that!” It was like you knew why I wrote. You knew that I was able to grow through writing. Maybe you didn't suspect something like “Oh, he writes to combat his mental health challenges,” but still. What you said was special to me because back then I hadn't even shared with my parents why I wanted to be a writer. I didn't even tell them I had a journal. I never told them that I wanted to write a creative-nonfiction or a graphic novel memoir. I just told them I wanted to write. But somehow, Baba, you knew that writing was a battle.

So, your words, they felt so good to hear. Maybe you had a hint that I was fighting something as a writer.

In the short amount of time that I stayed over at your place, there were many moments like these where I felt this connection— like I was talking to you, not just “my grandmother who I barely know.” And because of that, I have even more I want to talk about with you. So please, don’t die just yet. There are so many things you know about me but so little I know about you. I’ve attached with this letter a merciless list of questions you can answer for me. The next time I visit you, we can sit at a table with some food, and you can read over each one and tell me so many stories and all your adventures.

Finally, I hope you are healthy. Staying indoors all the time is hard on your health, but it’s the pandemic and it’s hard to go outside, so... I understand. I’m glad you and Jiji got your vaccine. I hope Jiji is healthier too.

Love you lots. Stay safe and healthy,
Kaito



If Only I Had a Brain

Kai Hugessen

The brain named itself.

Well, that's what they say anyway.

The brain is the organ, entity, commitment, idea... thing which has dictated what everything in the body would be named, including itself. And here's the thing, the brain didn't just do it alone. But it didn't listen to the breathy lungs or the emotional heart or the local drunk that's known as the liver either. No, the brain shared the gift of its etymology with others of its own kind. You see, the brain is aware. Conscious. Willing. Not like all the other fleshy bits, who, despite being characterized by the brain, have about as much impact in the decision-making process as a shoebox.

Instead, the brain sought equals. Others like itself, capable of feeling and thinking about more than just the simple functions of life. And the brain, being the brilliant little psychopath that it was, defined itself with a word. The first word for the brain wasn't actually "brain" (at least I hope not, because if it was, that means the perfidious time travellers have injected the English language into a time before recorded history). Instead, it was probably ugh, or crug or bishy-boshy-braony-boxy. We don't know. What we do know, or can at the very least ascertain, is that at some point, the literal council of minds agreed that a brain was called a brain.

Of course, everything spiralled from there. Some clever little brain brought up the point that there was a difference between the organ and the processes, so the aforementioned council of minds could be referred to as a "council of minds" and not a "council of brains." How soon was this

distinction made? Personally, I don't know, but it must have been before the internet or Tumblr would have already coined the phrase "council of bishy-boshy-braony-boxy." Actually, knowing Tumblr, they would have gotten a better kick out of "council of crug."

Regardless, the brain has managed to not only name itself, but also reach a consensus with other brains that agree on the name and have come up with a non-exhaustive list of words to describe aspects of themselves.

The brain then encounters an unexpected problem. In this case, it is known simply as the Spanish Inquisition, which we will use as a stand-in for another prehistoric tribe who disagrees vehemently with the fundamental strength of the term "brain."

"We are brains," the brains say, chortling through their flabby mouthpieces attached to the flesh suit. "We have minds within who have the intelligence to declare this our name."

"No, somos cerebros," the Spanish Inquisition replies, switching to English part way through for clarity's sake. "We have mentes with which we stretch our inteligencia." Suddenly this was a problem. The concept of a synonym had not been discovered yet. So quite unexpectedly, the Spanish Inquisition and the brains entered a war of words.

Call it the granular consequences of the Tower of Babel or call it etymological diversity, but through time these fights would result in both words falling to ruin and new ones taking place. Two different groups would take a term and adopt it in different ways. The English and the Dutch both agree the word is Br-in, but the egotistical English egress on using "a" to bisect it while the devious Dutch decide on drawing an "e" down the middle.

In summary, brains accept, agree, argue, and anger each other. They turn their attention to fickle things, feel rage at the most minor of things and excel most when their petty desires are fulfilled. In short, brains are human.

That's right. It was you all along. Sitting there in the pitch-black cavity where you've curled up inside this flesh suit. Seeing through the eyes that are drilled into the skull whose purpose is to protect you, the hands of your domain resting somewhere or another. Everything, and I mean everything, that lives beyond the grey matter of the brain is an extension of our essence. We are the brains. And everything else just follows us.

The heart beats by the beat of our synapses; the lungs depend on the message from our subconscious mind, just the same as they occasionally depend on the conscious mind. Like right now. You're now

aware of your breathing, haha. Speaking of that, do the eyes direct their vision? Look to the corner of your screen. Do the legs move on their own? Kick the object in front of you.

This body is yours to command. You, the brain. And it's through this body that the brains can work their magic on the world.

It's through the brain that we can comprehend the majesty of the universe. Lovecraft was a bitch, and as an aside from his horrific home life, he also perverted the concept of wonder. Wonder is understanding that we are the universe observing itself. We are wonder. It is through our brains that we may comprehend the infinite beauty of our world. It's what sets us apart from the jellyfish. Well, that and a lot of things. But in this particular, ignorantly focused case, it's the brain. The brainless jellyfish cannot appreciate the beauty of the world, regardless of how brightly it shines without it. The jellyfish will forever be beautiful, yet never capable of knowing it.

Wow, that got weirdly introspective. Dove a little too deep there. Damn, jellyfish, your lives are depressing.

Moving past critically empty talk about marine life, to sum it all up, we need a brain to do more than live. We need a brain to understand, to turn the whole of reality into our playground. It's through brains that we look at the limits set upon us by the universe and say, "No." I mean, shit, dude, the strength of human brain power sent people's fleshy suits to the goddamn moon.

That's rad as fuck.

And you know what? We don't appreciate ourselves enough.

You're rad as fuck.



The Remedy of Stillness

Riley Kirsch

There is one unavoidable experience every person is destined to: the end of all vital functions within the body. The abrupt silence of a once-beating heart.

Death: no one has ever escaped it.

A few days ago, I met Amelia, a woman riddled with death. Her body was filled with cancer and her eyes were dull and unfocused. I winced as she ripped a butterfly needle out of her forearm. If she could focus on anything other than her pain, she would have known that she was only causing herself more in the future. The nurse would return about two hours later with yet another needle. She was curled in a fetal position, with an opaque, grey-green trail of mucus leaking from the side of her mouth. As I wiped her lips with my gloved hand, I wondered if she felt any sense of shame. There should be no shame in dying.

Death is never a pretty process.

Every breath she took was followed by a thick, gurgling death rattle from the back of her throat. With every inconsistent inhale, I wondered if it would be her last. There wasn't much else that I could do but hold her hand; I felt the desperate grasp of her fingers curling around my palm. Other than her gentle yet clammy grip, she was unable to respond. After a few hours she didn't even flinch when the nurse injected her with enough Dilaudid to make a horse feel numb. What was she thinking? Or was her body past the point of forming intelligent thought?

When your vital organ systems are steadily declining, you fade away into a process called 'active dying.' This means that your senses will deteriorate in a particular order: thirst and hunger are the first to leave.

Almost every dying patient I have encountered loses the craving for nutrients and water as soon as they accept the fact that their time is not far from finished. Except for alcoholics, who will still ask for a drink.

Speech comes next. Maybe it's just because I talk too much, but the thought of being silenced by your own inevitable ending is almost as unbearable as the pain. Day by day, I watched as Amelia lost the ability to speak. Incomprehensible muffled mumbles were all I could decipher, and every time I asked her to repeat herself, I felt a fraction of her dignity diminish. The idea of wanting to tell your loved ones your final words and wish them goodbye, but not being able to open your mouth to communicate, is petrifying. I wish I knew how to comfort her.

Typically, hearing and touch are the last senses to go. Even an unresponsive patient is capable of processing language. While her eyes were closed, and her chest rose unsteadily with weak breakthroughs of breath, I described the scenery out the window. I gave details about the vibrancy of the trees, how the wind passed by each leaf making them dance, and the activity of the magpies that loitered in the branches.

Did you know that magpies are one of the only birds that can recognize themselves in a mirror? I would like to imagine Amelia found this as interesting as I do.

As I held her hand close to my heart, I felt a weak pulse connect with mine to form a single, solid rhythm. I wondered if she felt lonely. My co-worker told me about a niece Amelia had in Florida that flew to visit on the weekends she could afford to spare. I have not met her yet, but I hope she is able to catch a flight before her aunt's last exhale deflates her lungs, leaving a lifeless corpse where her loved one once lay.

I talked to the night nurse outside of her bedroom. We thought she would wait to see her niece before passing. The amazing thing about gradual death is that even past the point of responsiveness, there remains an element of self-control. I've heard stories of patients waiting until all their loved ones have said their goodbyes, or until all of their friends and family have left the room before they decide to pass. I've always wondered what it feels like to simply let go of the drive to live and accept the end of your life. To let go of all train of thought, feeling your heartbeat slow as your breath turns insubstantial and shallow. I once read an article on Buddhist monks who practice meditation for hours a day, attempting to achieve mental clarity and stop the constant thread of irreverent thought. Even the masters of this practice can agree the most effective way to achieve this is through death. Life becomes so simple within those final moments. Acceptance takes over the body as your devoted attention shifts

towards your lungs expanding with every inhale, and the immediate relief washing over you with every corresponding exhale.

Death is sometimes a pretty process.

I grazed my hand across her forehead and brushed back her hair as I imagine her mother once did decades ago.

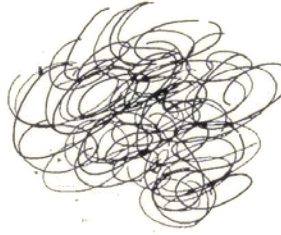
I believe there is too large of an emphasis on the overall fear of death and dying, despite its inevitability. For most it is not the halted end to a soul that brings anxiety, but the uncertainty of the unknown as we cannot confirm how unpleasant it will be. Everyone experiences death differently, and the fact that it is scientifically impossible to depict what an individual might feel in their last moment is, frankly, terrifying. Out of all the confusion and contradictions, we can all agree upon one thing.

Stillness.

Tonight, Amelia's niece will visit. Her flight is expected to arrive around 1am. She will comfort her aunt in the early hours of the morning and Amelia will at last see her long-awaited familiar face. I hope she feels at peace, despite being bound to a hospital bed, unable to move or communicate. Perhaps in this state of acceptance, there are no words left to share. Sitting in comfortable silence, breathing in sync, and being connected through pulse feels more intimate than spoken words can convey. Throughout life's abundance of stress, anxiety, and panic, there will always be the remedy of stillness.



fiction



The Woman's Daughter Tells Her She's Becoming a Flower

Amber Nuyens

She says that there are leaves growing from her hands. "I'm becoming a flower, Mama," she says again.

The woman, of course, tells her daughter that this is nonsense. "You're a person, dear. Flowers grow in a garden. You grew in me. I remember every second of you perfectly."

The daughter stares at her tiny fingers, examining them like foreign objects. Disappointed, she drops her hands to her side and walks off. Her mother must be right. She's her mother, after all.

The woman, then, picks at the leaves sprouting from her own nail beds.



Six Steps Gone

Lois L. K. Chan

When my father tells me about her from time to time, the image of her in my mind is metal on glass. She is elusive, haunting. Her hair is so black it becomes white in light.

My mother left in the dead of winter when I was six months old.

When I am thirteen, I begin to reason:

ONE: She was sick. I start to open childbearing handbooks, parenting manuals, gynecology papers. I read that Post-partum depression is a common occurrence; the chemistry of the brain under hormonal stress is quite differentiable from innate maternal feelings, and I slam the book shut, loud enough that the librarian looks at me strangely.

TWO: My father beat her. I don't like to think of this one. He has never done anything to prove the possibility, but to think I may be a souvenir of a time in power—the thought prowls in the back of my mind: taunting, malicious.

THREE: Another lover. This one is almost fun to think of because in her infidelity I can create as many paramours and half-siblings as I want. As I get older, the imagination leaks out of me in a steady drip. Every time I visit this universe, I see a smiling woman in a family portrait—the emptiness of me stark and unsettling.

FOUR: She is dead and unfound. I cry when this trickles into my mind because it would mean I'd never know the extent of regret and wanting she could've had, and because I was too stupid to think of it until then.

FIVE: She was scared. I hate her the most in this possibility.

SIX: Perhaps I was a blanket-tearing changeling with sharp teeth and a wail that made her deaf to the pleading of my father, begging her to stay.

But I don't like to blame myself. Maybe I get this self-righteousness from her, because how else did she rationalize her departure?

...

I wonder most days what kind of detriment I am to my father. I may become a weapon if I smile wrong, one way or another. A trait of hers was that she always left a mark.

Maybe I sound too harsh. But I promise that I'm still the sentimental type. I get that from my father; I have rolled up maps with markings of all the places she could've gone. There's Ecuador, California, and Cape Town—she liked the sun, and once tried to convince my father to buy a beachside condo. Maybe she went back to Florida to her parents because Dad said he called and they never picked up.

"She was never perfect," he once said, drunk with longing on his anniversary of abandonment. "But she was so good you had to believe she was almost that."

I was young enough to believe.

"Am I like her?" I asked.

I remember my father turning his face, the ghost of their love rippling a dark eclipse on his being.

...

I sit down at the table with my father.

Once I ask about her, he is unsettled. It's been years. We're older now: the taste of her on our tongues, dusty and curdled.

"Why?" he asks me.

I shrug. "I'm bored." When he thins his lips, I say, "I want to know."

He doesn't like that answer. "Why should you try to find her? You owe her nothing."

"She owes me a lot, though."

"She doesn't."

I scoff. My head tilts on instinct. "What—are you defending her?"

"No. When she left us, she dropped everything, all that she owed. She's not in our life anymore and that's good for us, not her."

I remain still and don't say anything. My father gets up to leave for work, and I keep on thinking, heart rioting:

ONE: I wish she took the stickiness of his memories with her.

TWO: I wish she took the shadows caught on his shoulders with her.

THREE: I wish she took her gaping maw of her absence with her.

FOUR: I wish she took the slant shape of my face with her.

FIVE: I wish she took all the nights I spent cradling myself with her.

SIX: This household does nothing but tremble under the weight of the woman that sits on its roof.

...

There is one picture of her that he keeps in the back of the kitchen cabinet, behind the jars of oregano and parsley. I find it when I am sixteen. I just wanted to make him dinner for his birthday.

Her hair is not blindingly white, nor her face an example of callousness. She doesn't beg for my forgiveness or mock me in my abandon. She wears my father's shirt. She's holding me, newborn and glowing under the light of her face.

It is the only picture I have ever seen of us together.

It is the only one that exists.

...

I never lost her. I never did.

The fact is, I never had her.

Some things—I realize—I want more than hate.

...

It's winter now, and the snow makes my bare feet numb and red. My father told me when she went, every single pair of her shoes were left neat and tidy in the closet. I think she wanted to start completely anew.

So do I.

The sun goes down at six. I put my boots back on one by one at the frozen shore of the beach where I decide to forgive my mother.



Errands

Josiah Scott

To you as well, sir!” God, I hate them. Walking around, smiling, hands clasped together as though that simple act made them inseparable, invincible against the world and all it has to offer. I was on the beaches, damn it! I know better: your fellow man’s screams can pierce your ears just as easily as a bullet can pierce a skull—silence, deafening—then they start right back up again. But I can’t let them stop me, so I press on, the sand hardened now into slabs of rock, uneven, shifting about my feet—“FORWARD!”—into Greene’s, leaving the Percivals behind, like Tony and the rest. Ground beef, red like the ocean that day, the same texture as Rodney’s—“FORWARD!”—potatoes, earthy, firm, these will do nicely, yes. Mustn’t disappoint her, no. Unclench my fist, smooth the paper ... what’s next? Bread for dipping, cream for coffee, don’t think about it, it’ll only make it worse. Aisle two: dairy, pick up some cheese, too, we were running low, weren’t we?—there they are, clasping hands still, the bastards—“FORWARD!”—Tip my hat (don’t touch the medals!), next aisle.

* * *

The paper bag rattles in the icy wind, pushing against my chest, making mountains of the cobblestones. A gust takes my hat and I reach but it’s gone, another theft on nature’s extensive record. I sigh, but the wind now has my breath. I cough and cough, handkerchief to my lips, drops of red join pink stains. Cursing the wind, the world, I’m on my knees, but I’ve taken it back, with a gasp I’m up and into Bruce’s barbershop.

“What happened to your hat?”

“Wind got it.”

“Damn. Nice hat, too.”

“Mmhmm.”

“Same as last time?”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

I sit down. He smiles and gets to work.

The wind’s even colder against my damp hair—why, oh, why didn’t I hold onto my hat?—another item on the list, but first, Doc’s. Limping my way down the block, until a woman enters Doc’s. She holds the door for me, looks into my face, and smiles, but it doesn’t reach her eyes. I was on the beaches, damn it, I don’t need this. I growl and ring Doc’s bell, a coughing fit taking me just as he arrives.

* * *

“We’ll get you sorted. Keep taking this with your meals, and this should help the cough. Tastes like hell, but it’s necessary.”

“Thanks, Doc.”

“No, thank you.”

I wave a hand, grabbing the bag on my way out, putting it into the large paper one—that should stop the rattling, right?—and make my way to Tom’s.

* * *

“I need a new hat. Wind took my last one.”

“Damn. Nice hat, too. I can’t replace the medals, but I can—”

“That’ll do.” It’s not like they matter anyway, won’t bring back Johnny and the rest.

“Should be finished Tuesday.”

“Good enough.” The little bell jangles on my way out, clear against the wind, rebelling against its wails.

* * *

I close the heavy door behind me, finally home. The groceries go in the fridge, the medicine goes into the cabinet, the pot onto the stove—it’s Suzie’s stew night, and I mustn’t disappoint her, no, no. I was on the beaches, damn it, and she was in the factory. Should have been safe, but the only survivor was me.



Bite-sized

Sophia Cajon

Conversations always feel disconnected.

Everyone is on the same wavelength, the ease of a thrum coursing through their veins, one you can't quite tune in on. You don't feel part of the conversation, zoning out at gatherings. This restaurant, the varnish of its tables peeling off, packed with the morose faces of my relatives, feels distant. I'm having a hard time processing I'm here. Just me, bony hands adorned with the silver ring, tearing at varnish. Sticky. Gelatinous. Jelly isn't as firm. Well, depends on the amount of gelatine you—

A deep murmur. The edge of concern. I don't quite catch that, but I get the gist of it. Well, it's just difficult to come to terms with. A nod. What's their name again? Aren't they a cousin? Something about their face, the crease in their eyebrow. I can't even tell what they're saying, their voice is so dull and monotonous. The sounds that come out of people's mouths don't sound right, anyway. They ring wrong, like a bell falling down, the sharp shock of the floor distorting its notes. Even here, their voices sound hollow. They don't believe in what they're saying. It's just being put out there for effect, for impact, for show. An exchange of pleasantries, a masquerade of rehearsed dialogue. So sad ... No one could've guessed ... Can't believe it ... Who actually believes those words? Actually puts thought into them? We're all just gathered here for show, to bathe in misery as we stare at the other, tears threatening to spill, waiting for them to crack. Who here actually means any of it? This pain, this hurt, it's all just being paraded around for us to gawk at. That's the

thing, though. People like being seen. They need it. They crave it. We cannot spend a single minute without the spotlight on us. What? No, I'm not destroying the table—crap, I'm covered in varnish—is this even varnish? It's thick, plasticky—hell, I bet they coated this thing in honey.

Look, I'm sorry.

I'm anxious.

I'm trying.

No, I'm not trying to bring attention to myself. The corners of my mouth twitch as I fight the grimace. Her voice is strident, invasive—it's hard to not wince at it. My hand is grabbed, her touch akin to ants crawling under my skin. Look at that. Look at that mess. Can't you just sit still? Why did you have to make it about you?

The burn of my tongue as I bite down on it. Sharp copper, my jaw tightens. Ego. It's just ego. Deep breaths. We like being the smartest in the room. Slow breaths. We like being right. I snatch my hand away, the sharp burn of a nail scratching me. We like being the centre of attention. It strokes our ego. Just let it go. What does being seen even do? No, I'm not angry. Look, I'm not trying to start a fight, please just—I'll pay. Not good enough. She didn't like that. Is she trying to start a fight? I need space.

Great, they're calling after me. Where's the bathroom? Bored waiter. Excuse me, where's—Ah, thanks!

Fuck, this is not going to end well. This bathroom stall is cramped. I can hear my heartbeat grow louder, trying to fill out the little amount of empty space left. Ugh. Breathing. Slowing down. Focus on something. The crack through the door. Christ, why is there a crack? How many have peered through this thing and realised they were being watched? How many watched others through this tiny sliver? I guess it all boils down to this: we're all just watching and being watched, constricted by small imperfections.

My name. Always my name. It's echoing throughout the bathroom. Please don't look through the crack. I need a drink. Why did I agree to come? It's always like this! My phone's buzzing. Switch it off. It's full of—I don't want to read them. Everyone's different! Everyone processes differently. I knew this was going to happen, them preaching about existence!

It's always a tricky thought. We always talk about it because otherwise we're confronted with the unknown. And they're not comfortable with that. I'm not either. The unknown, that dark void full of faceless beings with harmful intentions. Maybe that's just our survival instinct—my name again. Can they stop? I just need a minute. A minute. And another

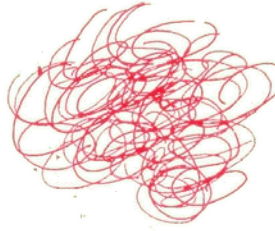
and another. I can't deal with this. Them. Lying. The stars outside, upside-down sails of the undead sailors. What bullshit. How can you say that to a kid and take yourself seriously?

Christ, I shouldn't have come. Letting go is hard. I could've done it in my own time, not get pushed to cry by watchful relatives. I still don't feel anything. That's normal. Right? The pain of grief is so crippling that our own brain has to block it out. We process it, piece by piece. I can't remember where I learnt that. A video online? Something along the lines of we chunk it. Chop it up. Bite-sized. Digestible. That's the only way we can do things or we'll choke on them. The world is too overwhelming otherwise. Fuck, why else would I be hiding in this bathroom stall? Pathetic.

Don't talk about death, they kept saying. Keep it light. Don't tell the kids. But sure, cry in front of them. Let them be confused. Death is controversial, taboo. What are they worried about? It's not like it's going to hear you talking about it and stalk you. I guess it's just easier to imagine it as a sentient being. A thinking, calculating thing that's escapable. We attach images to abstract things to understand them better. Easier to process? For kids, maybe. I don't know, it's fucked up. Is it easier for them to understand a crazed skeleton hurt their uncle than to know that his body is just...

Empty.

Maybe it's emptiness we evade with this masquerade. Am I avoiding it? What even is it? It's a pretty self-explanatory word, the absence of all things. But what are things? Do I even want them? I don't know what I want. To leave. Yes. Leave. They've stopped calling out for me. They've given up.



Rebecca Was a Liar

Karly Larson

Rebecca was a liar. She always had been. She said things that worked in her favour, and that was that.

Sitting at her dining room table, she stared blankly out the fogged-up window. The coffee was stale. The taste stayed in her mouth long after she had sipped the last cold dregs. The mug was left on the counter as she banged the heavy wooden door behind her and stepped into the frosty air of a mid-November morning. She wasn't mad, but the old door wouldn't close properly unless there was a good slam involved.

The walk to work was a quick one, though rather lonely. The people of Mallowbrooke were tucked away from the cold within the warm confines of their little brick homes. Rebecca sped to the hospital, using the weak glow of the streetlamps as a guide. The air was grey with a dawning morning, and the fresh snow on the sidewalk and the perfect yards were pristine white.

Clouds of mist issued from the mouths of the shovelling crew just down the street. Rebecca pulled her jacket around her more snugly. Her car was still in the shop and would be for a couple more days. For now, it was just her and the icy feeling in her toes.

A buzzing in her pocket drew her attention. The bright screen of her phone came alive as she read the name of who was calling. Rebecca sighed and put her phone back into her pocket. She would just call her mother back some other time, say that she had been busy the last few times she had called.

As always, the smell of chemical cleanliness met her as the automatic doors granted her entry. The usual symphony of beeps, the echo of hushed conversation, and the occasional announcement over the P.A. system sounded throughout the building as she went through the routine of

starting her shift in the short-stay unit. This was minute one. She had seven hundred and nineteen left.

Ms. Nelson rang for painkillers.

Six hundred and ninety.

Mr. Hammond was on the floor again. "Sir, you need to remember to use your walker."

Six hundred and thirty-four.

The clock mocked her. Minutes seemed to pass by slower and slower with every glance at the clock. Her eyes stung with weariness.

Five hundred and seven.

There was a small crowd of nurses outside of Ms. Wickes's room. The doctor was speaking as Rebecca joined the group.

"—minutes left," she was saying, "there's nothing we can do."

"And her daughter?" a nurse asked.

Another answered. "Not a word from her. It was all just a typical dementia drop-off."

Rebecca pushed her way through. The old lady didn't remember anything, but oh how she asked for her daughter. Rebecca hadn't worked with the old woman, but she had heard the pleas for a daughter who wouldn't show.

She stepped into Ms. Wickes's room. The woman's milky eyes stared blankly at the opposite wall. Rebecca knew she could not see a thing, yet she wondered if the old woman was picturing better times.

Maybe she was young and lithe and draped in sunflower fabric, dancing around a lakeside fire. Maybe she was lying on pinstriped cushions, running a hand over the roundness of her pregnant belly. Maybe she saw the light of an early morning seeping through mist-covered trees, or trails of water dropping down chilly windows.

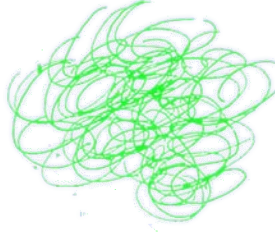
Rebecca pulled up a chair and settled at the dying woman's bedside. A hand with skin of tissue paper reached desperately for one plump with youthful muscle. The hungry grasp of Ms. Wickes's frail hand held Rebecca's hand to the old woman's heart. The little heart, holding onto life just long enough to reunite with the child it had cared for, protected, loved fiercely.

Ms. Wickes's voice was a whisper.

"Tess?" was all she said. The other tissue paper hand joined its match over her heart. Her faltering heart. A tear caressed the sunken cheek of the woman.

Rebecca forced down the lump in her throat. She squeezed Ms. Wickes's hand gently.

"Hello... Mom," Rebecca lied.



Carousels

Rachel Iserhoff

Evelyn leaned against the fence, closed her eyes and allowed the high-pitched giggles coming from the carousel to dissolve into the noise of the street beyond the park's gate. There were moments between her shaky breaths when Evelyn almost felt settled, the way she used to feel when she came to this park. The carousel continued to spin, and even with her eyes closed, it made her feel dizzy. She gripped the stroller in front of her to steady herself.

This was her first trip home since her wedding. She had gotten married in the town's church that she had attended since she was a child. Evelyn remembered the games she played with her best friend in the church basement more clearly than anything she actually learned there. Everyone got married in that church, so she did too.

She sighed and opened her eyes again, just in time to see her husband and son go by on the carousel. Lucas' toothy smile and all-consuming giggles made his entire body shake. Her husband had his arm firmly wrapped around Lucas' waist, which was good. He was far too excited to be able to sit still enough to keep his small body perched on the plastic horse. Her husband smiled down at Lucas as he watched him. His smile came so easily, unlike hers.

Her son, like the rest of the town, was infatuated with the carousel. The town was too small to have a proper mall, but it did have an antique carousel. It was the only thing that gave the town a sense of legitimacy beyond just a bunch of houses with white picket fences in the same area code. She used to love the carousel the way Lucas did. But today, all she

saw was the faded, peeling paint, the too-bright lights and the music, whose twang frequently skipped and stuck.

When Evelyn remembered the allure of the carousel, she mostly thought about the people she'd be here with. She and her best friend, Anna, would run from entrance to exit, seeing how many rides they could get in before their parents said it was time to go. When she got older, the carousel remained a place she frequented. She and all of her friends stood on one side of the park while the boys stood on the other. They would whisper to each other, hoping one of the boys would break formation and ask one of the girls to ride the carousel with him. Sometimes they did. Evelyn had always been afraid that someday one of them would ask her.

She reached down into the bottom compartment of the stroller and pulled out her phone. When she stood up to take a picture of Lucas on the carousel, she noticed someone standing near the entrance of the park.

"Evie?" the woman called. She was dressed in fancy jogging clothes and excitedly ran up to Evelyn. Before Evelyn could place who she was, the woman hugged her. It was a quick and rigid hug, completely empty of real affection. When she pulled away, the woman's tight-lipped smile finally made her remember who she was. She was one of the mothers who used to stand at the carousel's fence, switching between gossiping and bragging.

"Your mom didn't tell me you were coming for a visit. But I suppose I haven't seen her for a while." She never stopped jogging on the spot the whole time she spoke.

"Hi, Mrs. Kingston," Evelyn said, through gritted teeth. "I'll have to tell her I ran into you."

"We still talk all the time. I'm so glad that you and Anna were best friends, it worked out so nicely for your mom and I."

"I suppose it did."

Mrs. Kingston turned towards the carousel and her whole face lit up.

"That must be your son. He's just precious!" Mrs. Kingston cooed. "He looks exactly like you when you were little. You and Anna were always inseparable, even at that age. Have you talked to Anna recently?"

"No, not since the wedding."

"Well, she's been pretty busy. She just moved to New York with her friend from grad school. They're sharing an apartment, isn't that sweet?"

Evelyn forced a smile and put her attention back on the carousel. Mrs. Kingston was staring at her, waiting for a reaction. She could see it

out of the corner of her eye, but Evelyn didn't indulge her. She ignored the pang of hurt that rose in her chest every time she thought about Anna and watched the horses bob up and down, going around and around the carousel.

The ride slowed to a stop, marked by the slowing of the music, and Evelyn turned to watch Lucas come bounding off the ride. Mrs. Kingston cooed again, but this time Evelyn didn't listen. She watched as Lucas ran up to her, yelling excitedly and waving his arms until he stumbled over his feet and went crashing to the ground. His tiny features crumpled, and he started wailing.

"Oh no, poor dear! You should go get him. I better go anyway, but it's been so nice to see you. You seem happy," Mrs. Kingston said. Then, she jogged back to the park's entrance.

Evelyn urged her body to go pick up Lucas, but she was frozen, staring at the retreating figure of Mrs. Kingston. Her husband appeared beside her, holding a whimpering Lucas and placing his arm around her waist. His hands were always so sweaty, but still, she stayed in his grip.

"Who was that?" he asked.

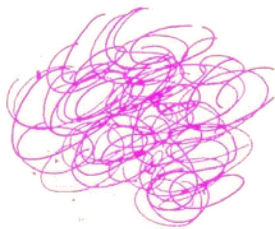
"No one. Just a friend of my mom's." She turned to her son, and said, "That was a big fall! We should get you home."

As they were leaving, Evelyn noticed the rotting shed standing in the corner of the park. It was in worse shape than the last time she saw it. She never knew what was kept in there, but she and every other teenager who grew up in this town were very familiar with what went on behind it. They had talked about it at length while leaning against the carousel fence. It had never seemed to matter what they said, until the stories were about her and Anna.

"Which way is it to get back to your parents?" her husband asked.

"Left."

She lied. Turning left took them the long way home, but she wouldn't have to pass Mrs. Kingston's house. One conversation with her had been enough for one day. She had long since stopped feeling bad about lying to her husband, especially about this secret. This secret was too big and too painful to speak of. The town seemed to have finally moved on from what had happened behind the shed, and she wasn't going to make the mistake of reminding them. She was far too familiar with this town to make another mistake. She would never let them know her secrets again.



B

Ximena Gordillo Cruz

Darkness reigns and fills the whole environment. The sun has not risen yet. But Baba wakes me up, he tells me it is time. We prepare fast, we must take advantage of the darkness. We take our bows and arrows then leave the protection of our shelter made of branches and dried grass. In less than five minutes we make our way to the vegetation, with the rest of the men of our tribe. We advance through the arid hills slowly, as cautious as darkness allows us.

This is my first time hunting and I don't want to screw it up. Stealthy, attentive. My senses are at their maximum, preparing me for the hunt. My skin bristles and it is not because of the cold. Little by little, the sun begins to appear on the horizon. We are running out of time. If we don't hunt anything today, we will only eat Baobabs, those big fruits full of acidic seeds.

Baba will be disappointed if his only son, and future leader of the tribe, is not able to hunt anything. However, what concerns me the most is that Mama and my sister deserve more than Baobabs with its tough skin. They deserve meat, with which they can cook a tasty meal for everyone.

The thorns scratch various parts of my body. I cannot stop, I must follow the rest of the men. They move fast, trying to take advantage of the last bit of darkness. Everyone with the bow ready to fire, sometimes one stops suddenly, looks around, and shoots at something that looks alive. Every man of the tribe becomes one man and we all stop. Time stops.

We are out of luck. The animals are smarter than we are today. Even the little birds seem to have disappeared. Baobab will be, then. The

sun claims its kingdom, its light illuminates the desert. Looking around, nature is awake, but inert. The others are ahead of me. I try to reach them, when suddenly I see it.

Inert, camouflaged in the undergrowth. His firm stance declares greatness, respect. He has not seen me yet and none of the others seem to have noticed him either. The Baboon walks slow, majestic. I follow him.

I prepare the bow. I take one of my arrows, and point it towards him. Lethal. My breath hitches, my heart races. A noise to my right brings me out of my reverie. I glance sideways and recognize the familiar figure next to me. It is Baba. He puts his hand on my shoulder for a moment. He perfects my posture with the bow. He looks at me straight in the eye and he tells me through them to do it. Then he leaves me alone.

It is just me and the Baboon.

I hold my breath, my entire body tense, I set the bow ready to fire... and his piercing eyes stare back at me. Challenging, he doesn't move a muscle. I feel his soul in my soul, we are facing each other for seconds that stretch like centuries and... I cannot do it, because I am able to recognize my existence reflected in him. I lower the bow slowly, relaxing my posture, and let him go. He just stares at me before quietly escaping. He hides in the undergrowth, disappearing forever.

I have failed the tribe. I have failed Baba. However, none of that matters to me anymore. Today, I have discovered another world. A world where I am able to recognize my existence in other living beings. I raise my eyes to the sky. I look directly at the sun, the only witness to what has happened. And I am sure he will be the only one that understood and will understand forever.



Summer Crush

Shawn Smith

I sat on the desk and let my legs dangle as dust swam around the floor, snapping at my shoes. The shoe prints of my classmates littered the floor, selfishly covering every inch. I poked the floor with the tip of my right sneaker, a light tap to remind it that I was there.

“What’s the hesitation for? Take a step!” said a voice from behind me.

I turned around, and the creases of my shirt pulled against me as I searched for the voice. I saw a slender boy with an undone tie. He waved. The air teemed with laughter, but I heard a beautiful silence as my eyes met his. The room dimmed and he shone.

“Were you watching the dust?” he asked, wiping his lips to hide a chuckle.

I appraised him for a second, then shrugged. “It’s cool how it settles so easily,” I said.

He broke into a smile. “That’s the path of least resistance,” he said. “Try dancing like the dust instead. It’s way more fun!”

I dramatically slumped and sighed.

“Okay, no dancing. Got it.” He rubbed his hands together, as if he expected sparks to burst forth. “How about soda pop?”

I turned to him with tired eyes. I clearly needed a refresher. So, meeting his eyes, I nodded.

“Let’s get back before recess is over.”

A wordless five-minute walk later, we arrived at a vending machine nearby, and he fished a few coins out of his pocket. I heard them clatter to

the bottom as he fed the machine. Clearly, those coins were not for one person, but I couldn't protest a free drink. Seconds later, I heard a distant rumbling. I looked at my stomach bashfully, reminded that I skipped breakfast. He noticed this, and he pointed at the pickup box with a smile. The rumbling grew louder and closer until the soda rolled down into view. I hugged myself slowly, embarrassed. He refused to meet my eyes, as if doing so would pop him like a bubble and send a wave of laughter into the dry summer air. He motioned to a bench, and I nodded. Luckily, the bench wasn't a frying pan unlike nearly everything else that the sun touched. I leaned into the backrest, my eyes darting from cloud to cloud in the sky before scanning the floor to steer clear of worms. I then spotted a lone puddle next to my feet; it held a piece of the blue sky. Noticing my gaze, he joined me in my reflection, laughing.

"We look so cute, wavering in the water."

His words sunk into my mind like rain into parched soil.

I turned to face him. "That's how reflections work, genius."

I'm sure he knew, but my mind helplessly lingered on the bit about us being cute.

"Gee, you're as cold as this can," he said, before pressing it to my cheek.

I gasped, the sudden chill melting into my warm skin. I leaned back and saw the shadows that hugged the creases of the can. Then, I looked at him. Sunlight perched on his hair, like white foam on black waves. Slivers of light were thrown onto his shirt and they raced down its folds.

"But that can be refreshing," he said.

I smiled sheepishly. The light looked comfortable in his eyes, and it tempted me to trust him. He seemed to bubble with the same energy as the soda. He was unfairly bright. At that moment, I wondered if my cheeks had a history of turning red in the summer due to the wicked, scorching sun. However, I had a hunch that the sun wasn't even in the equation today.

"We need a mark of our friendship."

"We do?" I asked.

"Yeah! It'll remind you to stop watching dust and hang out with me instead."

I dissolved into giggles, my face spiralling out of the proportions that I decided were pretty. I gave him a weak thumbs-up. He plucked the pull tab off his can with a twist.

"It's nothing fancy. But could this work for the interim?"

At that moment, I was afraid that my black pupils bloomed into fountains of colour. A warmth, unlike the ugly heat of the sun, surged

through me. My heart shivered. I was afraid that tears would spill, but laughter poured out from me instead. Crazy.

“Sure, whatever,” I said, in a quick decrescendo.

Fortunately, my hair was draped over my ruby ears. There he was with his makeshift ring, promising me its ever-recognizable implication: friendship. Then, he dangled the ring in front of me like car keys. Sighing, I snatched it out of his hands and went back to downing the cold soda. The lemon tickled my throat, leaving a cold trail down the back of my tongue, and the chill sunk to an unknown depth in my chest.

“What do you feel?” he asked.

“A summer crush.”

He raised his brow. “Is that what your can says? That’s so cool. Here’s mine,” he said as he shoved his can into my view. Breezy Watermelon, it read.

I barely noticed him. Lost in the flavour of the soda, I squinted at the sun, which seemed dedicated to baking my face like mud.

“It must be the heat,” I said, trying to justify my newfound emotions.

He looked perplexed. “Huh? Do you not like this flavour?”

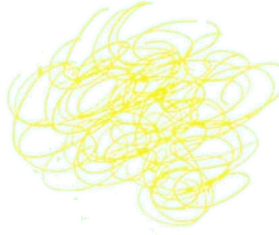
This flavour? What is he talking about? A silent moment later, the heat that doused me dissipated and I broke out of my daze. Oh. I looked at him, an anthurium pink smearing my cheeks like lipstick that missed its mark. Oh no. I had voiced out what was meant to be self-talk. Embarrassing. I waved my hands back and forth in front of me, each crossing the other in a blur.

“No, that’s not what I meant!” I said. “I-I just meant that the heat really brings out the flavour!”

He crossed his arms and leaned right, his chin resting on his hand. “That it does,” he said. He considered his can, then me. “You were like soda pop for a second. I’ve never seen you so fizzy!”

In my defence, I had never been in love either. Yet, it felt like how things should be.

Pop goes the soda, and badump goes the heart.



Bluebells, Cockle Shells

Mackenzie Blackwood

I hate these shorts,” Olive said, tugging at the denim. “They ride up so bad.”

The girls walked side-by-side down to the Baby Beach on their way from the corner store, loose change jingling in their pockets. They ran their hands along the shallow brick wall, as always, and helped each other climb up on top of it. It was called the Baby Beach because it wasn’t as good as the main beach, but it worked just fine as a secret hideout spot.

“Just stop wearing ‘em, then?” Bonnie licked a drip of ice cream from her wrist.

“They’re my best ones,” said Olive. The shorts were the perfect shade of blue. “I can only wear ‘em on Saturdays, anyhow.” It was the only day Sister Mary Augustine wouldn’t chase after her with a ruler and tell her to cover up. “Gimme a lick.”

Reluctantly, Bonnie passed the cone. Olive had refused to get her own from the cooler in the corner store—as tempting as the shiny wrappers were—because she insisted that she was gaining too much weight.

“Thought you didn’t want any.” Bonnie adjusted her candy-red sunglasses.

“Only one lick. My thighs rub together.” She stood up carefully and modelled a walking motion, showing off her legs.

Bonnie gave Olive’s shin a playful smack. “Everyone’s thighs rub together.”

Atop the remnants of the old brick wall, they had a clear view of

the ocean, near the docks and near the port adorned with fishing boats. Their bare ankles dangled a few feet above the ground. It was a sweltering summer day; even the gulls were sluggish. A welcome breeze brought with it the ripe stench of fish and Olive's nose wrinkled.

"Oh my goodness, there he is." The words came through Bonnie's clenched teeth. She was an angel and always said oh my goodness, even on Saturdays. She felt for Olive's arm and squeezed. They set their sights on a tall, gangly boy, the one who'd come from overseas to help his uncle for the summer.

Olive rolled her eyes but kept a keen watch on him as he traversed the dock.

"Look, he's smoking," Bonnie hissed.

None of the kids smoked in town. There were far too many opportunities for a neighbour to catch the scent and send you home with a smack on the back of the head. It was no secret, though, that the older teens liked to hang out behind the co-op, and what went on there, well, nobody knew. They'd seen Dock-Boy up close only once, at the charity fundraiser a week before. Under the pop-up canopy where the moms sold jewelry and crocheted bookmarks, he'd trailed after his uncle. The patchy stubble, crooked teeth, and sinewy arms had become, in Bonnie's imagination, something mature and handsome. And Olive hadn't heard much else from her since.

"I bet he's at least eighteen."

"Just go talk to him, weirdo."

"No!" Bonnie chucked the tip of the cone out onto the sand and a gull swooped down. She hugged her knees up to her chest. "Oh, should I?"

"Yeah, so you'll stop talking about him."

"You have to come with me."

"I'll watch you from here."

"Stop it, stupid. Look, I'm already shaking, you have to come with me."

Olive stared at her hopeless, trembling friend, that brow that couldn't get much more furrowed, and laughed. She reached out and caught Bonnie under the arms, tickling her. They screeched and kicked, falling off the wall. The brick grazed the back of Olive's thigh and she hissed through the sting. "Owww."

"Serves you right, big baby."

When they looked up again, there was no mistaking Dock-Boy's dark expression, locked on the pair of them.

"You'll get your wish."

“Stand up! Stand up!”

They hurried to their feet and Olive tugged at the crotch of her shorts, earning a glare from Bonnie.

“You alright?” Dock-Boy spoke, in a voice as distinctly Irish as his old uncle’s.

“Yeah,” said Olive. The drive to appear clever melted away.

“Thanks,” said Bonnie, cocking her barely-there hip. “Can we have a cigarette?”

Dock-Boy chuckled. “Cigarettes aren’t for kids.”

“We’re not kids, we’re thirteen,” said Olive, feeling more like a kid than she ever had. She bit her tongue before letting him know that Bonnie was technically a woman since she got her period in March.

“What’s your name?” Bonnie asked. Her cheeks had turned the colour of a boiled lobster.

“Joel,” he said. He flicked the cigarette into the ocean and Olive felt Bonnie shaking like a newborn chick beside her. He inched closer.

“I’m Bonnie.” She blurted it out, then nudged Olive. “This is my friend Olive.” They stood rooted to the spot.

“Glad to know you.” Joel smelled gross, like cigarettes and old halibut. “Not much to do in this fucking town, is there?” he asked as he kicked a rock.

The girls straightened up. Visions of Sister Mary Augustine rippled through their minds.

“Nooo, it’s pretty boring,” said Bonnie. Her drawn-out vowels made her sound dumb.

Olive stepped back. “We should probably go—”

“Are you staying here long... Joel?” His name may as well have been a curse word.

He laughed and bared his crooked teeth. His t-shirt was stained yellow around the collar, under the pits. “I hope not. I’m only here ‘cause of my cunt mother.”

Olive knew she would have choked if she had something to choke on. She’d only heard the word once, and her Dad had leapt up from his seat and lunged to turn off the TV that time, muttering his disapproval. Her ears burned. But Bonnie, Bonnie the Angel swallowed her shock and giggled.

“Yeah, cool,” she said.

Olive rolled her eyes and breathed out through her nose.

“Well, see ya, girls, I guess.” Joel winked at Bonnie and wandered off.

The girls stood quietly in his wake. Bonnie shifted in her shoes and fought

her growing smile.

Olive gave her friend a smack on the back of the head. "I'm telling your granny."

"Olive!!" She growled. "Don't be such a baby."

"You're the one making doll-eyes at smelly Joel!"

"He's not smelly, he's manly!" The cathedral bell in town rang and rumbled over the banks in time with the last word out of her mouth. Bonnie huffed.

Olive stuck her tongue out. "I'll beat you there."

"Whatever."

"Myyyy Bonnie lies over the ocean..."

"Oh, shut up!" Bonnie yielded and the girls took off running, their shoes smacking against the ground. Olive cursed her thighs for rubbing together as she made her way homeward.



poetry



Metaphors

Maren MacIntosh

In a world full of similes,

be a metaphor.

You are not like magic—

you *are* magic.

You gild the keys of your piano with fairy dust,
blending and weaving them into a winged song.

Like me, you cannot sing,
but somehow you find it within yourself to give that wizened box
of wood, wires, and witchcraft
the strength to do what we cannot:
to make butterflies waltz on sound waves.

My little one, you are not like a butterfly—

you *are* a butterfly.

Your arms are wings escaping your adolescent chrysalis,
discovering the rhythm of a dance I waited too long to teach you
but which you are quickly learning to love.

Balance his calloused fingertips in your satin palms
and spin beneath them.

Weave from the strobe-lit air a new universe,
just for the two of you.

For one moment, I promise you will feel perfect.

My love, you are not like perfection—

you *are* perfection.

And everyone,
even me,

is always telling you perfection does not exist,
but maybe that is why you think no one notices
that *you* really exist.

And the fairy-dust hairs tracing love notes down your spine,
they are perfection.

The stretch marks fluttering on your thighs,
they are perfection.

The rebellious angles your hair pirouettes into every morning,
they are perfection.

And don't you ever stop loving that hair, my Rapunzel,
even when your father's words

"Kid, you look like a haystack,"

make it seem like a
mangled, dust-tortured,
curse.

My darling child, you are not like a haystack—

you *are* a haystack.
I made you like that,
like me,
so:
trust me when I tell you
to run your fingers through yourself,
search for the needle,
and when you find it,
it will prick your finger, leave a little spot of blood,
proof that the pain is real.
That when it hurts, you are not imagining it.
And the red rivulet running down your skin
is not ketchup, not movie makeup,
it is your life:

Full of *magic*.

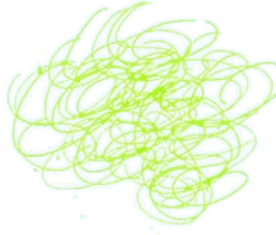
Full of *butterflies*.

Full of *perfection*.

All buried deep in the great, messy haystack
of your soul.

Daughter, this is not like living—

this is *life*.



tell me how it feels to dream

Samantha Hodge

I. You can't remember from where you came.

(grow up at 8 or 80 scouring Pinterest for snippets of poems steeped in red and gold. claim you wolf, divine, disaster, poet lying dormant ready to unfurl. claim power of words. claim magic. feed dreamers with meaning that beats against us like butterfly wings but our net has a hole. remember that feeling in age. oh darling, oh sweetheart, oh child, growing up with your pain and star wishes reflected back at you.)

II. You are given a world large with impossible colours and infinite choices.

(select from clippings of metaphors and similes and images from the finest flower bushes that burst like berries on your tongue. sentences run and meander like travellers chasing views over the next hill crest; one foot, one word, in front of the other. let them not be short. let them repeat again and again to some unseen rhythm, pattern, dance. do not box up your words in ribbons of rules and correctness. sense is optional.)

III. You possess an escape, discard it, and make one better.

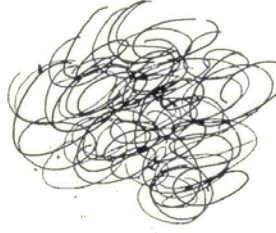
(you were more once, and you will be more yet. shards of innocence sucked from the cold, aching thing called heart. it's a festering wound of people screaming, dying, suffering. you made yourself atlas and you must learn to set the world down. pull out infected flesh and twist shadows into something sweeter. fill the page with all the magic, warmth, and love you craved and be filled in turn. it's a funhouse mirror but press your hand to a more beautiful reflection and step through.)

V. You never hurt the same, always overwhelming, always nothing at all.

(it's not just about the glints of shattered glass or vibrantly shredded wings. beauty in destruction is painted on after the fact by those who never saw the bleeding. pain is easy. tragedies are dandelions rooted in our world, making more the work of a breath. you may rip a gaping hole in the network's foundations only if you build something stronger in its place.)

VIII. You build the path others will walk.

(you've stood on the backs of all who pressed words into your hands. their names are empty. your shoulders sit heavy. say icarus, say death, say names that are symbols, images that are words on a page, no image to them at all. say nothing at all. leave meaning pressed under tongues so it may grow into knowing. seeping onto the page. explain, explain, explain. you are prophet and friend and the gold spilling from your hands smears when brushing away the tears.)



The Optometrist

Lois L. K Chan

Sit down. Get comfortable. Whenever you're ready, tell me if

Lovers Quarrel means Valley or Pond to you. If

Pit of Desire means Seed or Divot. If

Mother means Milk or Fire. If

the touch of my hand means Something, Anything.

Does your heart not tremble? Does it not want in the face of gods or prophets?

Tell what is true. Tell me what hides under your waterline.

Let me switch the lenses so you can see better—if you would only turn to me.



My Kitchen Sink

Juliet McGauchie

P

I

L

E

D

like children's trophies in a hidden cupboard,
reeking of insignificant disarray.

It's not that I forgot, no.
I didn't forget.

I drink my morning coffee the same way every morning.
No sugar, a dabble of cream,
now staining my porcelain.

H with immaculate architectural design,

G a flourishing ecosystem B

I

E

Towered

H

L

O

W

It's not that I *forgot*, I didn't *forget*.

A drought envelops the stainless steel,
leaving dried crumbs and matter untouched.
Now I am no weatherman,
but I know the rain will not fall for a few more days.
,

The larger the city grows, the heavier and heavier the clouds
become.

Dark, almost black.

The rain is begging to fall, but I do not let it.

It's not that I forgot, no.

It's because I couldn't be bothered.



“How would you like your steak?”

Renee Albreanna Garcia

You dropped the steak knife
that cut into my delicate heart,
tough and cooked to your preference,
seasoned with the residue of last night's tears.

“Well done.”



Life

Ally Alfano

Life is so dull
you wake up to an empty bed,
make a half pot of coffee
because the guy you loved
no longer cares about you.

You stare out the window
and imagine all the couples
sharing the newspaper
and a morning cigarette.

You walk to your mundane job
that you wish wouldn't kill you,
come home to a messy flat,
go to the bathroom mirror to look at your city-filled pores.

You eat bland rice and chicken for dinner,
you go to an unmade bed
that has more pillows than you need
just so it seems like someone is sleeping beside you,

and then,
out of nowhere,
you're asleep,
dreaming of a better life.



Kalamalka Eyes

Kyla Rohatynsky

You had the most beautiful eyes,
deep like the waters of Kalamalka.

Eyes I could drown in if I let myself.
Maybe it was the protective glimmer every time our eyes caught each
other's
you made me feel safe, like I was untouchable,
yet somehow you scared me.

You reminded me of a summer's day,
like emerald and turquoise ripples staring back at me
so beautiful on the surface,

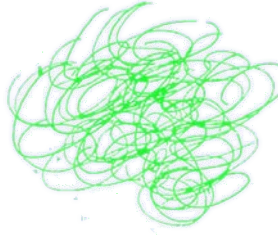
sun shining—
water sparkling—
warming my soul like a cat in a windowpane.
I couldn't get enough.

Until that night, the night you hit me for the first
time, the only time. The eyes that I have grown to love
transported me into the middle of the Atlantic Ocean.

Suddenly the crowd surrounding us felt like waves trying to suffocate us.
Seaweed wrapped around my ankles
and dragged me down into the darkness with you.
I no longer recognize the emotionless pools in front of me.

They scream loneliness, look through me with
coldness in their shades of blues.
The initial shock left me chilled to the bone.
Danger flooded through my veins,
all the hidden monsters have risen to the surface.

Then a wave of pain crashed into me,
breaking more than just my heart.



Words Alone

Angela Chan

IFourteen-thousand words,
Standing alone in a thousand rows.
Each has a mission, a message to deliver.
Every one of them is unique with a different character.
Some are gentle and mellow.
Others are bold and strong.
Ready to pull your heartstrings like a fiddler with his fiddle.
Words march across a page as a story unravels before your eyes,
Weaving a tale of the unknown, pictures of far-away lands.
Words ready for duty,
To make you laugh, cry, smile, and to feel an unchained fury.
As your eyes gaze to the bottom right corner of the page,
Your fingers are ready to flip to the next page.
Here they are again,
Words.



The Tears We Shed

Brianna Rayne Wallace

It was raining the day we laid you in the ground,
That cold, drizzling rain that starts and stops like turning on a faucet.
It sprayed down from the sleet grey sky as tears
And splashed on my nice black shoes.

I stood hearing everything around me:
The patter of the raindrops beating off my umbrella,
The reverend's service,
My mother's sobs,
My brother's words of comfort.
I stood hearing, but not listening.

I looked down at the mahogany box at the bottom of the hole,
And imagined I could see you in the polished lid.
Not how you'd looked at the service,
Pale and posed as though you were asleep,
Wearing your best suit (you'd never sleep in your best suit)
But as I remembered you.

Your tall, broad frame made you a giant towering over me.
Your heavy-set brow, deepened from a lifetime of disapproving looks.
Your mouth—at the service you were smiling, but that was another lie.
In life, you never smiled, certainly never at me.
And your eyes, I may live fifty years and never forget the steel in those
storm-grey eyes.

At the service, they had been closed, but now I saw them staring at me
through the lid of your casket.
One final reprimand.

I always knew that you could never love me,
Because I am a girl, and in your eyes that made me weak.

Still, you did your best to care for me.
You raised me up from my failing with your sharp criticism.
You soothed my tears with the back of your hand.
You calmed my fears with your hateful, steel eyes.

Do your eyes watch me from whatever heaven or hell you find yourself in,
Father?
Do you still think me weak?
What about the last time we spoke?
The last time you hit me.
The last time you called me a failure.
The time I pushed you down the stairs.
Did you think me weak then, Father?

It doesn't matter what you think.
The dead can't talk.
The dead can't do anything at all.

The rain on my face fell like tears,
But they were not mine.



Triangle Slave Trade

Emma Schwartz

North America is not the only place it occurred.
Thousands imprisoned and brutalized
On one of the smallest islands in the world,
Where African warriors were dehumanized.

A small stone town in Zanzibar
Was where the slaves were taken.
Families with children, shut behind cold bars,
Crammed in morose darkness, one on top of the other.

Seated on the bottom deck,
Thousands faced forward in a row.
Chains around their ankles, wrists, and neck,
Dragged from their homes, bound for a new world.

Malnourished and dehydrated,
This was not the plan.
Most of them faded,
Travelling to a strange land.

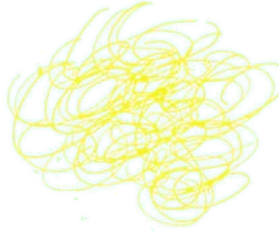
If you drained the ocean,
I guarantee you'd find
The remains of millions
That were left behind.

The ones that reached the shore
Were forcefully brought to the store
Where they were carefully placed in rows
And stripped of their clothes.

They were stripped of their culture, language, and identity,
As they were bruised, beaten, and mentally shattered
For 400 years.
Slavery continued across the great sea
Until 1873.

History was written,
Mistakes were made.
But were lessons learned?
Horrific actions we thought were buried in the past
Resurface with the racism and hatred that were not meant to endure.

Systems remain in place to silence the few.
Injustice, inequities, prejudice, and racism prevail.
Cries for help, met with a proud boy's middle finger.



Motion Sickness

Trinity-Dawn Schiazza

Awoken
By sharp convulsions,
In a parallel vicinity
That isn't a home.

Voices corrupt my mind,
Multiple at times,
Telling me where I have gone
Wrong.

Abandoned on the battlefield
When I revealed a positive sign.
Hopeless and hormonal,
Encaged between two straight lines.

My body thinks it's Halloween
Carving a pumpkin inside,
Hollowing it out
Creating space for a flickering flame to subside.

My mirror shows a reflection
But it's more than just me.
Four frightened eyes stare back –
Helplessly.

I feel the sheets of the bed
Grasp my sweaty neck,
I cannot move, I am pained
And out of breath.

I run to the bathroom,
Pull back my hair,
Puke out my fears,
Diseases that infest.

The unknown taunts me,
And fatigue imbeds my bones.
How will I engender life,
All on my own?

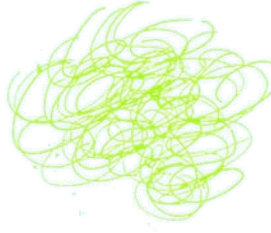


Hands

Anna Ruckstuhl

my chest feels heavy
and my hands
feel stiff like a burnt sienna brick
is this what a panic attack feels like?
as if I have grown too old for comfort
as if the weight of what I am carrying is
simply too much
I feel as though these juvenile hands are not fit for a life where the bad
outweighs the good
I am panicking, and they are failing
why can I not take off this tight, itchy, wool, sweater
my hands are letting me write but what does writing do
I need to reach out for
help
why can't my hands do that?
reach out for
help
as if it is not their job to love and nurture and hold me
hands are made for this
they tell stories of our pasts
hands hold on to our futures,
look at my hands
these are the hands of an artist
cracked, and smooth, covered in ink, and paint, brittle and strong

hands are supposed to be our guides, with us wherever we go, they're
always by our sides
but mine are giving up on me like a crumbling brick
not willing to help or hold or reach and
help
take off this sweater
and let me breathe



Disorientation

Jahnvi Sachdeva

How often have you othered yourself?
Unbothered, unengaged, untouched,
I bandage my wounds into darkness,

I cry, the kind that is blue, a mild,
yet painful blue, which reminds me of the night,
the night of July, the two.

I sense your shaft in between my two sets of lips,
but before I can open my mouth,
I'm shunned by the affliction of my fanny.

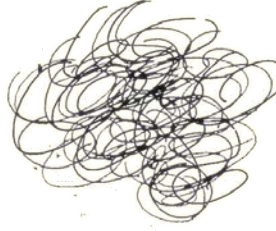
I find myself in a room with a mediocre man,
the one-eyed wonder weasel,
the eye that only sees a hole.

And while I disorient, I wonder,
do the binaries of this world maintain this understanding?
Of a very pushy, painful incongruence, like searing pain.

Marijuana weathers me down,
I fall back into the sounds of the bed,
the sounds of the strokes, heavy and loud.

Is this abduction or endearment?
The spasms, one after the other,
I scream in pain, but make it sound like pleasure.

The chest sighs, the head aches,
so I go back to marijuana, smoking in gaze.
How often have you othered yourself?



All of the Stars, The Sun and The Moon

Kyla Rohatynsky

The doctors say he's sick, it's his heart, damaged and weak.
How can a boy with such fire in his soul be weak?
A boy whose walk screams strength in the saunter of his shoulders,
he glides through a room like planets in orbit.

He's wild. You can see it in the sparkle
of his Neptune blue eyes. You can feel it
in his callused and scabbed palms,
clutching your fingers—

radiating warmth into you,
your own personal sun.
But just like the sun,
he's burning out—slowly.

He has an expiration date,
his own 2012.
The only difference is 2,000 years.
At least that's what they told him.

12 years
is what's written in the stars.
But just like the sun, he's still here—
for now.



Falling

Natasha Elliott

some of us
aren't capable
of falling gently
or slowly
defying gravity
we fall hard
and quick
en route to pavement hoping the someone we are
falling toward
will be there
to catch us

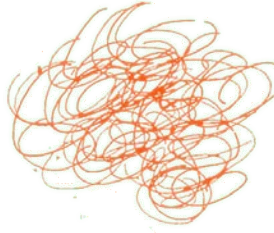
before

we collide

with solid ground

painfully

alone



My Island

Ainslie Spence

How ethereal it would feel
To leisure in the privacy of my beach in a bikini
Instead of wrapped protectively in a blanket
Slowly sinking into my shrinking sands

You are a bronzed, curly-haired hurricane
Ravaging my divine island of femininity
And staking violent claim to the shores of my body
As an uninvited colonizer forcing your manhood into my berth

In the so-called safety of my bed, you pelt me like hail
Your ghostly grey eyes are frozen glacier fields
And as you clench my wrists in your cloud-parting orgasm
I only pray the sun will return to your demonic face

In your thrashings
You've poisoned my island
And when my tears come
So do you

Your tsunamic waves retreat
As your grip loosens
With whisperings of "I love you.
I've marked you because I love you."

I know I'm running out of sand beneath me
Soon, I will not be able to escape
From the rage of your monstrous fits
Because I will have nothing left on which to stand

But you know I will always keep drowning in you
In the honeyed words dripping
From your lightning-bolt tongue
When you are done

I've thirsted for so long
That your false promises of ambrosia
Still make me salivate
In anticipation

Again and again, you make me choke
On your hurricane's ocean salt
And leave your handprints
Circling my arms like blackened bangles

Your hurricane strips away the title to my beach
And with it, my body's sovereignty



crystal rabbit

Cassidy Schneider

delicate hopping
spangles of lush blades brush by
shimmering sun refracting
through diamond surface—
reflecting rainbows
across the field
bringing beauty to broken souls.

*I live for the moment
to fix, heal, or help.*

sweet serenity, peaceful thoughts
through catching a glimpse
those lucky enough to be damaged,
have the chance to trap it.
extort the beauty, and naivety
this unique creature carries within,
just wanting to relieve pain,
spare of sorrow,
protect from trauma.

*catch me,
my love can help you.*

false light
forces crystallized eyes open—
caged in an unwanted place.
a troubled human circles,
tapping on the bars,
shining direct light
and momentarily
the rabbit shines,
doing its best to help.
but no longer does it shimmer
no longer does it roam free.

*how long will I be forced
to treat this single being?*

watchful, hungry eyes crave solace
demanding the fading creature to give...
something it no longer has.
hands reaching frantically,
the stench of desperate rage
leaving the rabbit to cower,
anxious to escape enclosed empathy.

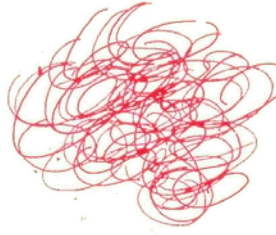
*I was such a fool
to think I could ever be
selflessly shared.*

small, dreary eyes squint
as flickering lights assault,
exposing the dullness procured
all through human fault.

*how broken you must be
to feel like the only one in need...*

cage picked up,
clinking of crystal on metal
singing potential freedom.

tiny eyes shine for a second more—
hopeful.
until shaken,
jostled,
manhandled.
leaving the poor thing
shattered on the floor.
beyond repair.



History

Rhea Kjargaard

In the early days of the history of our love
there was me, and there was you, your head on my chest
my heart within, hammering,
and our bodies tangled in my bedsheets when day was done.

Two years past, I find myself thinking again
of the cost of loving you, the silver tears, the weight of gold
hammering down on my shoulders, sucking the air from my lungs.

Was this really love?
Was love the dull ache in my chest upon receiving a text
from you, saying that we are over, that we are done,
only for you to show later,
begging for my forgiveness, saying you love me,
fist on the door, hammering?
Was love that feeling of fear, the tightening of my chest
when you grabbed my wrist, the screaming never done?
Because this is what it was to love you.

The hardest thing I've ever done was letting you
go, but knowing what I know now, I'd do it again
because the ache in my chest has finally gone.

The best thing I've ever done was leaving you behind, and learning to live again,
to feel my heart hammering with excitement instead of fear,
and after all that you have done to me,
to know what it is to experience **real** love.



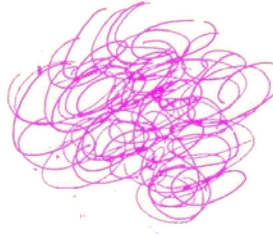
Concupiscence

Madeline Grove

He kisses me with a sharp tone,
his lips a puzzle to my own.
My fingers tangle in his spiky hair,
my eyes meeting his blue moonstones.

He reaches my collarbone,
as I let out a forceful moan.
Undressed, I lie bare.
He kisses me.

Lower and lower he goes,
wet stains upon protruding bones.
My bodily essence leaves me there,
succumbing to his ecstatic air.
He takes hold of my soaring soul.
He kisses me.



Ssh!

Juhi Sarvaiya

Ssh, don't say it out loud.
Quiet, they may hear you.
To say that one word, only some can do.

What is the word you ask?
I'll whisper it.
Sex.
Ssh! Not so loud!

You need to understand, it's a topic of taboo,
Like picking out the petals of a flower,
Should she do it or should she not?
Will society judge her or will they not?

Everyone loves doing it,
Especially women
So how come no one talks about it then?
A woman does it countless times and it's a sin.
A man does it many times and it's a win.

One word that can open a can of worms,
One word that can make society squirm.
One word that can mend relationships or destroy them.
One word that can condemn.

Why is it treated as such a forbidden word?
Why is it treated as a concept too absurd?
Why don't institutions properly educate their children about it?
Why is the entire process treated like it is shit?

Why can't people say it loudly?
Why can't people talk about it openly?
Why is this word being treated like something so damn freaky?

It's okay to say it.
It may make you feel uncomfortable at first,
But once you do, it's like quenching an exhausting thirst.
It is not only a function of reproduction,
It's a reason for pleasure and seduction.

No, don't go about ssh-ing it,
Why don't you instead
Silence the conservative thinking in your head?
It's okay to do it and to talk about it.
So, say it loudly,
Proudly,
Stoutly,
With no boundary,
Scream it from the impatient tunnels of your throat,
SEX!



Divine and Complete

Ruby Hart

If the love is not entirety, is the love complete?

My hands feel permanently cold,
if to love the amorous being with half a heart, will they reach
contentment?

Soft and subtle yet frigid,
the subject in question is the light into a life,
my eyes however have seen kindness and warmth,
it's not the idea that the being is undeserving of even a fraction of the love:
I met him at school.
the question is, can the amorous being receive this love?

We first touched on a field trip,
if the love is not wholehearted and pure,
we exchanged short words, gazes, and smiles;
deriving the love and the meeting,

I found the answer to my question,
are they both deserving of being each other's amorous beings?

He's the light with the most amazing smile,
love is neither seen nor heard,

left speechless from a simple note, a light seen for hundreds of miles.
I have never loved with half a heart,
my love is simply wholehearted,
never had a subject,
never had a start.

He took my hand in his,
his hands were warm,

tracing my knuckles with his delicate fingers,
the colour of my nail polish
which he picked,
chipped but lingers.

This love is my entirety,
an entirely simple and unconscious decision,
an entirely life-altering decision,
Cupid's skillful precision—
the colliding of two amorous beings happened
on an unplanned day—
a day to sit down and pray,
to this love,
to this religion.

I met him with open arms,
the halls of a small school,
I met him with an open heart,
closed to everyone else,
he stood far,
now miles apart.

My amorous subject,
his amorous being,
a love filled
the air
sweet and still,
a love shared,
a love so wholehearted—
never to be divided
nor parted.

A man with four walls,
a roof and a floor to sleep,
a chest that rises,
and a heart that beats,
a roof made of love that battles the storms,
a heart to which he lived with—
a heart ever so torn.

In awe of this being,
filled with divinity and meaning,
feeling
a hand that grips,
a hand that holds,
a love that grows.

He is the complete being,
the amorous in question,
a question never sat reflecting,
this love is connecting now two hands,
a hand,
a man,
a feeling—just right.

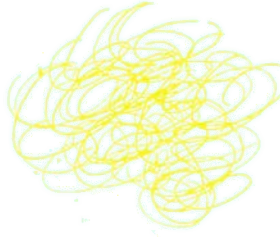
I am his answer,
provided by this man,
a tune to plan
a future,
dancing, chasing,
my heart in a casing,
never fearing,
it will one day be shattered,
mending a soul once tattered,
never felt like I mattered.

An existence never questioned,
never pondered,
building a life in his arms,
goosebumps on my forearms,
from words and
every so often occurs
hearing his heartbeat,
I lay my head on his chest,
finally able to rest,
knowing that when I exhale,
knowing that I can breathe,
this man
will never leave.

I felt that one day we'd meet,
a day where our hearts beat
in synchronised rhythm,
time standing still,
a gift given like
the rest of my life till

there is no time to give,
this entity and I
will live
relishing in each day
as it flies by,
kneeling on the ground to
pray to our creation
and
time after time,
our eyes meet every morning,
he's my person,
feeling his
love—
so adoring.

Now incapable
of imagining
a time where
he wasn't mine,
a man ever so gentle,
a love ever so gentle—
a time where
I wasn't thine.



Little Death

Ally Alfano

I often reminisce about the first time I saw him,
knee-shaking, slight smirk, sitting in the lavender field beside the grocery
store.

As I was walking toward him, my future flashed before my eyes,
diminishing my past of toxic relationships.
This is the life I have always dreamed about.

“Come back to me,” he said, tracing my face with his rough hands.
I lay in his arms naked, studying his hazel eyes.
“I can’t help but think about my future with you,” I said.
I was never present in the presence of this man.
He took my breath away as I died a million little deaths that night.



Where The Sweetgrass Grows

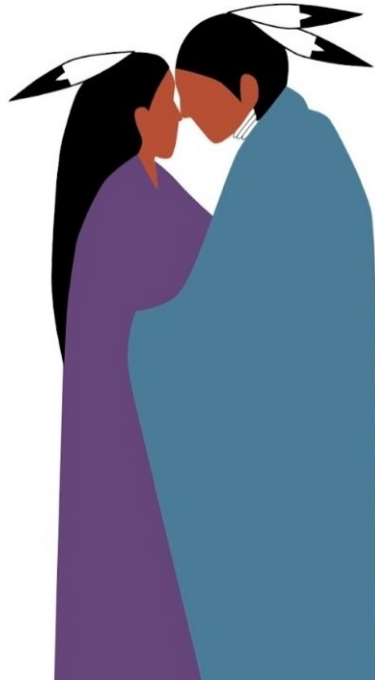
Shayla Raine

Let's learn our languages
And share our beliefs
I will teach you about my people
So you can better understand me

Show me the way
The water cleanses
And I'll bring you to
Where the sweetgrass grows
Deep dive in phenomenality
That only the Creator knows

Let's meet somewhere between
Who our ancestors were
And who our grandchildren will be

No greater intimacy
Than the intertwined prayers
In this abalone





Since they say language doesn't allow us
to speak everything

Lois L. K. Chan

I will confess in motions:

the chin crooked to a fault

trembling coal of mouth

rock of knee in supplication

boiling body & beating sole

wrist, wrist

setting down the nail beds

& thinking with eyes

I call out to you—

my ribcage, a pyre existing only to be crumbled.

I love you, I'm saying,

I'm so very sorry. Bodies are meant to be used.

But despite the nets of impossibility,

the elbows drop &

even dancing gets hard sometimes.



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](https://en.wikipedia.org) in March of 2021.

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