

W49 MAGAZINE 2024



FICTION ∞ NON-FICTION ∞ POETRY ∞ POSTCARD

2024 EDITORIAL

Welcome to the 2024 edition of Langara College's W49, a magazine of award-winning poetry, fiction, creative non-fiction, and postcard stories written by current and former Langara students. I would like to express my gratitude to all the authors of the submissions for their enthusiasm and patience. As always, W49's judges had difficult decisions to make in selecting the winning entries – proof again of the quality of literary talent that exists at Langara College!

Much appreciation to all who have assisted in the creation of this year's edition, including Josue Menjivar of Langara's Department of Publishing for helping locate and promote graphic designers, Langara librarian Allison Sullivan for placing W49 in the institutional repository, Coriana Constanda for advertising assistance, Jonathan Howard in Print Services, and Langara English department's esteemed panel of judges: Peter Babiak, Karen Budra, Sandra Friesen, Caroline Harvey, Sean McAlister, Trevor Newland, Thor Polukoshko, Daniel Poirier, Sarah Richards, and Erin Robb. A special thanks to Khadijah Suleiman for her dedication and excellent work in the design and layout of this year's edition.

Warm thanks to the authors of the published selections and to all contestants– we hope that you will continue to write and submit in the future. And thanks, finally, to all readers and supporters of W49!

Guy Wilkinson



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Fiction



FIRST PLACE FICTION

Fate

Alix Kent



The soft pattering of rain filtered in through the open window of Eliza's bedroom. Gently opening her eyes, she took a moment, staring at the open window and the grey sky beyond. Rain.

Rain on the one day where everything was supposed to be perfect.

She frowned, tossing the sheets off her, and slipped out of bed, sliding her feet into the white fuzzy slippers that Harry left for her when she went to bed last night. Wriggling her toes, she sighed deeply.

Rain would ruin everything.

Eliza glanced at the clock on her bedside table. 8:13am. Not too early, not too late. Perhaps there was still time for the rain to quell, and the sun to shine. Reaching for her phone, she unlocked the screen and called him.

"Good morning, El," His husky voice told her he had just woken up too, and Eliza pressed the phone tighter to her ear. His morning voice, it scratched an itch she didn't know she had.

"It's raining. It's going to ruin everything," She replied with a frown, huffing. She knew she was making a bigger deal about it than she needed to, but she also knew the man on the other end of the phone. She knew he would move mountains to make her happy; he'd find a way to make the rain stop. It was exactly why she agreed to marry him all those months ago.

"Rain, snow, hurricane, who cares. It's our wedding day, nothing can ruin this," he replied, and she could hear the smile in his voice, and imagined him rolling his eyes at her dramatics. "Just think of it being the tears of men who realize you're no longer available, since you're going to be mine now."

El smiled and stood up to walk to the window and stare out at the gloomy landscape. She took a deep breath, inhaling the smell of the rain, the ocean, and the faint smell of pine from the forest beyond.

"I barely slept last night; I don't like sleeping without you." Another pout as she fumbled with the curtain with her free hand, admiring the deep red she had painted her nails last night.

A low chuckle rolled through the phone line, and Eliza found a grin danced on her face despite the weather and lack of sleep. Rustling in the background told her he was making his morning coffee, and she wished more than anything to be there with him, hugging him from behind, wrapping her arms around his waist and pulling him tight against her.

"I'll see you soon, my love. And then we won't ever be apart again." The unmistakable sound of coffee being poured into a mug told her he was going to be starting his own day in a matter of minutes.

Eliza closed her eyes, and nodded, "See you soon, I can't wait."

Hanging up, Eliza tossed her phone onto her unmade bed, and headed towards the bathroom. Harry was right; no matter the weather, it was still their wedding day, nothing could change that. He might not have been able to make the rain stop, but he made it better. Eliza knew he would; he always had.

Excitement flooded through her as people began to stream in and out of her suite. The makeup artist and hairstylist, preening over her like she was a doll. Her parents, sisters, friends came and fawned over her beauty; How lucky Harry was to be with a woman like her. She just nodded and grinned, waving her hands to shoo away their remarks, and compliments.

But Eliza loved every moment of it.

"Are you excited to see Fate?"

Her mum asked, a quick glance at Eliza's wrist, where a miniscule scar glittered in the light on her skin. Where a nano-sized microchip was embedded into her skin. They all had one. Eliza had gotten hers when she was just a baby;;most people her age had. It was an incentive by the government; it helped keep them safe. Or something. Eliza didn't really care about the why; it was so accepted in society that she had never given it a second thought.

Until she learned about the Fate Study. Where, on your wedding day, if you chose, you could receive a video of all the times you and your partner had crossed paths in life, how many

times were near misses, up until you officially met. Eliza had signed up to receive the video as soon as she had said yes to Harry.

"I can't wait!" She exclaimed excitedly, giddiness in her voice, her brown eyes sparkling. "Did you and Dad see when you got married?"

"It wasn't a thing back then. But I wish we had," Her mum replied, reaching out and gently laying her hand on Eliza's wrist and squeezed. "I hope today is everything you wished for."

Eliza grinned softly at her mother, and half nodded. "It already is."

Harry and Eliza settled into the loveseat that faced the TV that would show their own Fate. The ceremony had gone on without any problems, and she wriggled her ring finger where the new weight of a wedding band sat. They had thirty minutes to themselves to watch the video before they headed to the reception.

Harry placed his hand on her leg and Eliza turned to him, memorizing his face. His thick black hair was brushed to the side, and his usually bushy eyebrows had clearly been manicured. Piercing blue eyes gazed at her, sparkling. She grinned at him before nuzzling into his side, feeling safe and secure.

Harry had never been the most attractive man, and Eliza knew this. She knew people looked at the two of them, wondering how a man like him had gotten a girl like her. She knew she was beautiful; she had known it ever since she could remember. Her thick blonde hair piled atop her head

in intricate braids, her doe-shaped eyes, soft features, tiny body. She was stunning. And he was... well, he was mundane looking.

But that is exactly why she loved him. She knew he would never be able to get another girl like her, and she knew he knew that too. He would give her everything she ever asked for, and she would give him what he needed.

Selfishly, she just hoped that their children got her looks.

The door opened and a short, stocky man walked in.

“Congratulations, you two!” he started, in a higher-pitched voice than Eliza imagined he would. He took a seat at the desk, flipping open a folder that lay on the desk. “I know you both have signed the agreements, and have a reception to get to, so let’s get this going, shall we?”

Eliza nodded eagerly and felt Harry shift against her. His hand squeezed her leg, a little tighter than normal, but she chalked it up to excitement. This was, of course, the beginning of the rest of their lives. The TV against the wall turned on with a buzz, and then their history came to life.

The first memory was of her fifth birthday party, when parents had taken her to a kid’s theme park with her friends. Eliza’s face lit up. She couldn’t believe it; they had been that young when they first crossed paths. She watched as her past self stood in line for one of the scarier rides, and her eyes widened as a familiar dark-haired boy, a couple years older, was behind her in the line.

“Oh my God! Harry! We were so young!” Eliza exclaimed, twisting to look at him. He turned his head towards her and laughed, taking his hand off her leg, and reached around her shoulders, pulling her closer.

Then another memory showed. Her tenth birthday. At Disneyland. Eliza’s brow furrowed slightly. She didn’t recall Harry ever saying he had been there. She watched as her younger self ran through the park with her sisters, and an older boy watched them from a distance. He was alone, Eliza couldn’t recognize his family members anywhere around him.

“Where are your parents?” She asked and felt Harry shrug.

“I’m not sure. They must be in the crowd somewhere.” He replied nonchalantly and Eliza settled into his side once more, his arm around her, holding her tight. The weight of his arm was comfortable; it kept her grounded as excitement that flowed through her veins could have made her float.

Of course, there were so many people in the crowd, they were there somewhere.

Another memory. Another birthday. Though Eliza wasn’t sure which one. She was older, maybe fifteen or sixteen based on how she looked. But she wasn’t anywhere special; she was at the park down the street from her family home, at a picnic table with some of her friends, chatting away.

An older boy swung on the swing-set alone, piercing blue eyes watching her from beneath a mop of thick black hair.

Another memory. She was at a bar with friends. Maybe eighteen now. Eliza

watched as the memory showed her carelessly chatting up some men, who were much too old for her. She watched as, in the darker corner of the bar, sat Harry, staring at her, eyes unblinking.

Eliza tensed against Harry. She felt his arm around her squeeze tighter. She didn't feel safe anymore against him, she felt...

Another memory. Harry following her through a park, her completely unaware.

Another memory. Harry sitting in a car outside her apartment while she headed out to take her dog for a walk.

Another memory. Harry at her work, watching her, Eliza completely unaware.

Another memory. Her sleeping, Harry...

Eliza felt bile rise in her throat. Felt her heart sink into her chest. Felt the squeeze from Harry, constricting her movements as the smile on her face faded as she watched him watch her sleep.

Watched her sleep before she even knew who he was.

The short man glanced at the two of them, clearly confused. Eliza plastered a fake smile to her face; it didn't quite reach her eyes.

Memory after memory flashed on the screen; moments of her intimacy with someone else, the funeral for her grandparents, partying with friends. They came in quick succession now. Too many memories. Too many instances of meeting before they were introduced to each other at her friend's party two years ago.

When the final memory flashed on the screen of their official first meeting, and the T.V. turned off, the silence in the room was choking. Thick silence. Harry was unmoving; Eliza scarcely could breathe. The short man frowned to himself.

"Well, um..." he started, clearly not even sure what he saw himself. What he just witnessed with the newly-married couple.

"Harry?" Eliza's voice cracked through the thick air. It didn't sound like her; it was weak and scared, unconfident. She felt Harry squeeze her shoulder again with his arm, the weight of it now feeling like a snake, waiting to constrict.

A deep rumble from his throat as he turned to her, blue eyes shadowed with something else, a dark emotion. A smile danced on his face, not a kind one. A smile of a predator that had just caught its prey.

"I've always told you I've loved you from the first moment I saw you."





SECOND PLACE FICTION

The nest and the flowers

Yaya Akolo

April began a week ago, and the carnations are molding again.

Nina grimaces at the slimy, slippery touch of the bundle of green stems that have clearly been in their pot for too long. Not to mention the rot-infested water the stems had been slowly cooking in for what seems like forever. She swats incoming fruit flies and curses whoever was on floral clerk duty this past weekend for not changing the water on time. After all, actual work should not be solely relegated to weekday staff. She glances at the skin on her arm, which has been rendered so pale from the previous winter. It is weird to be in a body where the incandescent lights at the ceiling of the store complement her features. But the floral work keeps her brain busy. No intelligence or pretensions needed. Each day can approach as a singular and complete entity.

But this morning already felt like too much. Last night featured a nightmare sequence in Nina's subconscious involving the slowest run away from a serial killer and a terrible cigarette. The alarm rang through the violence, a simple tune that Nina thought peaceful when she selected it in the settings app on her phone. Unfortunately, the alarm now means Nina sees light, static, then dread. The quick wake-up shower, the quick breakfast of eggs, toast, and fruit that Nina tries her best to make aesthetically pleasing so at least something will go right on a workday. Then the sitting and waiting, often unlocking her phone to see the time and some other email about another academic deferral from months ago. Another gap year in bed and amongst the flowers. Waiting until the absolute last minute to leave the house. Then, she is reluctantly out the door into the rain.

So much for the early morning shift on a rainy Monday. A girl wearing a brown suede jacket walks in while Nina is busy examining the orchids. The orchids are meant to live in a tropical environment, and they're so delicate that any cold gust of wind will kill them all. But who is the girl in the brown suede jacket?

Nina hates it when she does not recognize someone at first. She cannot help but stare. Bad habit from elementary school. The grocery store is newly opened, and every now and then, a teacher from high school would visit. So, lots of staring, lots of awkward conversation. Working a menial minimum wage job when it feels like

everyone is getting degrees left and right feels terrible in Nina's mind. Especially right now. Her fixation on this girl who is analyzing the gala apples is making her lose her focus on trying to dump out the old water from the flower bucket and rinse it with fresh water. The mysterious girl's face is a mathematical equation she cannot solve. And she must resolve it soon so she can avoid her.

Too late. She glances up. Nina at once breaks her gaze and looks down. The carnations need to be thrown into compost; the flower food needs to be added to the bottom of the empty bucket. She must move.

Through Nina's periphery, the mysterious girl is clearly walking away, albeit a bit quicker than the average person. Nina slightly grimaces as she carries the heavy bucket, now filled with fresh water, back to its spot in the floral section. Now, who was that girl? Nina thought. She looks outside the front doors of the grocery store. The rain is pounding a little bit harder than usual.

And it's still empty in the grocery store. In a few hours a fresh shipment of flowers will arrive from the conservatory a half-hour drive away. This includes the white lilies, right in time for Easter.

That corporate office lady who trained Nina is still stuck in her head: "So, these ones," she said as she passed the flowers, "Are called Easter lilies."

Right, Easter.

"But they're also called death lilies, since they're usually used for funerals."

Right, death lilies.
Wait, death lilies?

Besides that off-putting interaction, all she knows is that the lilies are in pots of soil, and caring for them involves so much dusting of stray dirt on the sales floor.

Nina is still looking down, still in avoid mode, when a body with a hand holding a pot of Easter lilies suddenly appears in front of her. She looks up to a jigsaw puzzle finally coming into place. "Do you recognize me?"

"I think so..."

"Yeah, hi. I just want these flowers wrapped."

Nina's face and neck grew hot as she awkwardly tried to wrap the lilies. Es. Short for Esmerelda, and it was a name she hated in Grade Four. Hence Es. She's older now, hence the confusion. And she can't avoid her questions. "How's life?" she asks.

"Fine."

"How's work?"

"Good." There's an ant on the counter. Nina swats it away with her hand.

Luckily, Es looks around. "God, it looks really boring here."

She's right. The grocery store is brand new, part of some overarching plan to tear down the abandoned industrial buildings of the past and build new, for-profit condos of the

future. Most of the customers right now are construction workers who ransack the nearby cut fruit cooler of all the watermelon chunks. A few customers who just moved into the neighbourhood do come in, usually in expensive pajamas. Otherwise, the store is just a brightly lit liminal space, waiting to be filled with people and serve its real purpose.

The only gratifying aspect of Nina's work so far is the forest across the street from the store. The forest is part of a park, so no way will that be torn down. The tiny new neighbourhood will grow and change with brand new developments and taller, taller buildings, but that forest will stay the same. Nina smiles. "The forest across the street is nice."

"I hate the woods."

"Oh." Nina tries to pivot. "Well, it's nice, I think. I go there after work all the time."

To be fair, last week Nina declared that she does not want to go through that forest. But the land is nice to look at. Nina could talk more, but her manager could be nearby. She cannot be caught dilly-dallying with a customer. "Anyways, enjoy the lilies; they came in yesterday," Nina says as she awkwardly wraps the pot of lilies in brown parchment paper before securing them in a cardboard box.

"Oh, nice. Well, um, I'll take care of them." And Es is gone, and the conversation ends.

Nina looks at her fingers, which are slightly caked with dirt. She gets back

to replacing the water in the flower buckets again, grimacing at the stench. Footsteps cut through the radio mix playing above.

Es has returned to the floral counter. She leans in a little bit closer, grinning. Her eyes look slightly beadier. "Mind if I get you coffee?"

"For what?"

"Just cause. I'm bored today, too."

"Alright." She leaves, returning later with a Tim Horton's cup labelled DD on the cap. At this point, Nina's already wondering if her manager is on the sales floor during this, or if she can't just rip the Band-Aid of mundanity off her heart. Now, she wants to continue replacing the water in all the buckets before sweeping the floors of any dirt.

They enjoy the ceremonial first sip in silence. Then a pause.

Es chuckles. Nina is confused but nods along.

"What if we got out of here? Right now? Look, it's clearing up."

Huh. This is work, where every two hours is delineated by a back stretch. Every day smiling at customers when they walk in but not making eye contact afterwards. Every end of the day met with returning home to her parents' house, where the blackout curtains are always drawn and where she retreats to the warmth of her bedroom. And the rest of time spent being complacent with the slow ache of back pain, before delineating time again with an added back stretch.

"You did say you like the forest," she clarifies. "I'm just saying. You can pretend you're on a smoke break, and then we make a run for it."

Nina looks outside, expecting the heavy rain to form the perfect excuse for her reluctance. But it's Spring, and the weather is weird, so the rain has subsided.

"It's just so... quiet." Es continues.

"I could get fired."

"How about I see you after work?"

It is Spring, and it is Easter, so the weather is changing, and the bugs have come out. There are so many bugs everywhere. Nina does not want to go to the forest. But she does not say anything.

"It'll be like we're making a run for it, but, you know, you won't get fired."

The worst of the bugs are the wasps. Their yellow and black bodies standing for a flashing hazard warning.

Nina looks down. "There's a wasp nest in the forest."

"So?"

Wasp nests are quite rare. The odds of seeing one in the wild (aka the quiet neighbourhood where Nina lives) are quite low. This makes their presence horrifying. Recently, there is one that fills out a hollow tree next to a steep path in a forest that Nina treks through every day (up until last week) to reach the bus stop.

And Nina obliges. She has nothing else better to do, and sitting in dread might be a bit more interesting than spending the rest of the day washing bucket after bucket.

At the end of the day, Es takes the lead, keeping a steady grip on the other girl's arm as they walk like models to the crosswalk. It is caffeine, but there is a weird sort of frantic energy coursing through Es. The two approach the crosswalk, then the crosswalk is conquered. They have reached the foot of the forest.

"Not gonna lie, I'm really excited for this wasp nest. Are you ready for some exposure therapy?"

The forest gleams under the 3:45 pm sunshine. Nina looks at Es, imagining that the caffeine is coursing through her under-eye circles. That's enough. Nina stops. "Why are you even doing all of this?"

Now Es stops. She looks downward, her eyes searching the gravel ground for meaning. Caffeine coursing through her veins. "I-"

"This whole time, I haven't asked you how you've been," Nina retorts. "So, how have you been?"

A pause. When Es speaks again, her voice is tiny. "Fuck."

"Scared?"

"Yeah. Of everything."

"Oh... I mean, I do wanna say 'you're not alone,' that stuff. But that's obviously stupid. Do you... want to talk about it?" They start walking again, albeit at a slower pace.

"Not really... I'm just really bored today. I thought this might be my chance."

"For what?"

"I don't know, okay? Let's just go see the nest."

And sure enough, there's the hollowed-out tree. And the nest. The nest comes into full sight, and Nina's eyes burn with tears.

Nina fears the fold of the nest. The papery yet thick covering of the inner combs that looks like some decomposed head meshed with something doubly horrifying and rare. And she is so scared to be near it, any of it. And the wasps circling around the dizzying, grey structure. Their yellow and black bodies sounding alarms in her head. The buzz is nightmare-inducing, ready to capture her and make her break down for their consumption.

No, she cannot fall. Es still gripping her arm. The forest is not pretty, and she might pay the price. The wasps may surround her, and who knows what will happen next? Nina and Es teeter around the nest. Both their eyes widen for any signs of danger, an impractical choice given that her earth-shattering fears are making her unsteady. Nina keeps staring until she suggests: "Maybe it looks like an abstract painting?"

"I guess so. You were always the artsy one anyways."

"Who says I was?" But Nina keeps staring. It is greyish-brown, and the fold, when put into close detail, seems to have some sort of intricate pattern. It reads like an abstract sculpture. The wasps leave and perch themselves on nearby flowers. Regardless of this change of mindset, Nina knows the wasp nest will haunt her tonight. So much for exposure therapy. "

"Yeah... Let's go to the bus stop," says Es. And they madly dash out of

the forest, reaching the bus stop and collapsing in the bus shelter.

"It's really stupid being afraid of wasp nests," Nina says.

"Yeah. At least I felt something today."

"Damn." Nina pretends she is not the only one who is not numb by the days feeling so utterly singular. She doesn't miss the pressure to be smart, or the bureaucratic nature of her previous life. She misses the books and the discourse of school. She misses when meaning covered her life, saturating all within it and making her indelibly alive.

But now, the day is a singular day, and it ends. The day's end means Nina might face the wasp nest again tomorrow if she wants. The dirty forest before her dirty tasks at work.

She even tries to forcefully imagine the wasp nest in her bedroom that night. This time, her morbid daydreams feature a hollow, empty shell, watching over her.

The next day, Nina sees another wasp nest, perched high above a tree in her neighbourhood, with leaves surrounding it like a laurel. The nervous tremors in her body still subsist, but she wonders what it would look like surrounded by lilies.

My husband has a sleepwalking problem. Once a month I'll find him shuffling around the kitchen, scrounging through the fridge or foraging the cupboards, and although he seems completely awake, he is not. Whenever I wake him up he's completely shocked. Not shocked at having been eating croissants in the pitch black or tugging his rain boots on over his pyjamas, but instead, surprised to see me. Almost afraid.

FICTION HONORABLE MENTION

Sleepwalker

Delaney Boodoosingh

Last night, I awoke to find him passed out on the dirty living room carpet. I dragged him back to the bedroom, his Listerine breath fogging up my glasses, and dropped him back onto the bed, nearly breaking my back in the process. I pulled the covers up to his shoulders, then around his neck, strangling him with warmth. Then I passed out again next to him, my head pounding. In the morning, he has no memory of it, or so he says.

"You seen my lighter?"

"No. I thought you quit?"

"It's red and scratched up." He searches the living room. "You sure you haven't seen it?"

"I'm sure. You told me last time we were at the gas station, 'this is my last pack,' you said, 'my last pack ever.'"

"Never mind, I'll get a new one. And I never said that, don't put words in my mouth." He kisses me on the head and ruffles my hair, then heads out the door to work.



As you can see, our mornings are very peaceful. Our apartment on the third floor overlooks the small roadside town we call home, but the view from the bay window is very limited: there's the motel with its neon red sign, the diner, the gas station, the truck parking lot and the highway beyond. This is a halfway stop for truckers and bikers and people of the sort. Even at night, the motel keeps its Vegas-esque sign turned on, bleeding red into the black sky, so that truckers and motorcyclists can stop at the ungodly hours for half a night's rest. My husband has gotten used to the red light peeking through the edges of our blackout curtains, but I have not.

I spend most of my days alone, stuffed in this apartment. I'm somewhat claustrophobic, and I hate the idea of being inside a compartment inside of a box, hovering in the sky. Nevertheless, it's cozy, but I wish he would let me get a dog or a bird, or even a fish, but he knows I would forget to feed it and love it. I have art supplies, so I sit and paint our dour view most of the time,

or practice yoga or meditation. I've been experimenting with crayons lately, but with my lack of artistic ability and abundance of expressiveness, it turns out more like a demon child's satanic colouring. Or sometimes, when I've run out of time wasters, I pull out my driving manual and study the signs and rules and scenarios. I want to own a pink Lamborghini and drive circles around the diner. The restaurant-goers would look out the windows and whisper to each other in tones of jealousy. Savannah keeps telling me she'll teach me how to drive, but whenever she's in town all we do is talk and laugh and eat candy. I don't think she wants to teach me. Then when I told my husband I want to join Yuki's Yoga studio – which is about an hour drive down the highway in the downtown area – he rolled his eyes and bought me a yoga mat for apartment use only, so he definitely doesn't want to teach me to drive either. The pounding in my head has turned into a throbbing, like a heartbeat in my brain.

I gaze out the window periodically throughout the day, and right now I'm eyeing the diner. It's a rainy afternoon, and the diner is emptying out from the lunch rush. The windows are drenched with dewy pearls and the highway in the distance glistens and shines. If I squint, I can see the people buzzing about inside, cuddled together in leather booths or loose and wild in the aisles, swerving around servers in search of the bathroom. The diner has plenty of regulars (like me) and even more irregulars, and Savannah is one of them.



I head down to the diner for an early dinner. It's my favourite place to be, even though the waiters ignore me because I go there on a daily basis. But I always go, because I never know when she'll make a random stop by. Her schedule changes month to month, so every visit is a surprise. Today however, I know for sure she's in town. I wait in the booth closest to the door and order a hot chocolate with extra whipped cream in hopes of taming my splitting headache. I feel the wet breeze of the door opening and there she is. We hug hello and she orders a black coffee. We update each other on the past month of our lives since we last saw each other, and she tells me she just arrived this morning, offloaded and parked the truck in the lot, then checked into the motel and came here. We order breakfast for dinner, and I notice the blue bags around her eyes hidden beneath her baseball cap, probably from the fourteen-hour drive, or maybe she's hungover! I want to ask her about it.

"Do you think you'll ever get over your drinking problem?"

She drops her fork and looks up at me.

"Do you think you'll ever get a nose job?" she retorts.

"Don't need one. All the better to smell you, my dear," I make an aggressive sniffing motion.

"You're such a child," she chuckles.

Even though Savannah and I are the same age, she always treats me like a teenager. So does he, but I don't mind it. I have this theory that if everybody believes that I'm more naïve than I really am, then I have this sort of secret, hidden power. There's more behind these curtains than I let on.

We finish our pancakes, and she gets up to go to the bathroom, and I wonder if he'll sleepwalk again tonight. My ears begin to grow red from the pulsating in my head. I have a guttural instinct of knowing which nights I'll hear him shuffling about the living room, rifling through the jackets in the front closet, but those are the nights I always manage to sleep the soundest, so I never hear him get out of bed until it's too late.



"So did he get you those yoga passes with Yuki?" she asks, sliding back into the booth.

"I don't really like her, there's just something about her that irks me," I convince her. "Like she's super judgy with newcomers and I hate that. She's on my hit list."

"Your hit list?"

"Yeah."

"Who else is on your hit list?"

"Lots of people. Well, not so many anymore, I've brought it down from thirty to about twelve now... not cause I murdered those people, I'm just becoming a more forgiving person." I smile, satisfied with her laughter.

It's our tradition to stay and talk for hours at the diner – that's probably why the waiters don't like us – so when we leave it's dark out and pouring down harder than before. The scent of gasoline is strong as more and more trucks and motorcycles pull off the slippery highway. We skip our way through the showers to the humid gas station for chocolate bars and slushies. We browse the aisle of chips, then drinks, then the ice cream fridge, then make our way to the cashier already sipping our slurpees.

"You dropped this when you filled up last night." The gas station worker holds out a red lighter.

"Thanks." Savannah pockets it fast.

I don't look at her, instead I push her messy timeline out of my mind and pay for my Aero bar. My whole body is turning to stone from the hammering.

Savannah is the only friend of mine he doesn't hate, not that there are any others to compare. We step back outside into the cold night.

"So when do you get back on the road?" I shout over the thundering rain.

"Tomorrow." She pouts.

"Then my headache will be gone."

"You're crazy!"

We hop over puddles to get back to the motel. I walk her back to Room 3 and we hug goodbye. She tells me she's leaving at the asscrack of dawn so we probably won't see each other till next month. I nod glumly, but the throbbing in my brain lessens.

I trudge slowly back to the apartment, climb the damp carpeted steps up to the third floor and unlock the door soundlessly. The apartment is dim with only a lamp flickering weakly in the kitchen. I switch it off and slip into the bedroom where he is already fast asleep. I curl up beside him. A couple hours later, I feel his weight lift off the mattress and watch him shuffle out of our bedroom door like a zombie. I hear him in the foyer, zipping up his rain jacket and stepping into his boots. The front door clicks shut. I rise from the bed and go to the living room window that overlooks the town, and there he is, down below. He passes the diner, the gas station and stops at the motel. He enters Room 3. Sleepwalking again, I sigh, and return to my sleep.





NON-FICTION





FIRST PLACE CREATIVE NON-FICTION

All Roads Lead to Rome



Delaney Boodoosingh

"I'm going to keep this feeling folded inside my heart like a promise. And when I feel weak, I will hold onto it with both hands."

-Aliya

ROME

So much life in the city of the dead. Long days of scouring museums and churches and gawking over nude monuments and drooling over authentic pizza that doesn't make you bloated. Taking notes on Romans – of past and present – in our little yellow field notebooks and wandering through haunted brick alleyways, conspiring about our Secret History novels as we stroll past the Colosseum. Old fashioned trolleys. Angelic scenes spray painted on the side of entire buildings – how did they even do that? Pompeii in the rainstorm. Aliya's SPQR baseball hat. Johannes' wooden pipe.

The whole field study group is staying at a convent in the heart of Rome. The place is fairly large, with multiple floors, a breakfast nook, meeting room for class lectures, lounging area, and small chapel. Even though the floors are made of marble

and there's a terrace on the rooftop with a spectacular view of the city, the narrow hallways and secretive crevices give the place a hushed atmosphere, almost like the walls are holding its breath. But every so often, if you sit still enough or turn off the music for just a moment, you can hear it. The quiet hushhhh. This is pretty rare though, considering we've occupied the entirety of the third and fourth floor rooms, so it's basically a college dorm run by nuns.

I make an observation to Johannes one night on the convent's rooftop terrace. We lean over the railing, away from the tobacco and cackling wafting over to us from the other end, and observe the sleeping city for a moment. A singular car stops at a red light below us. There are no pedestrians crossing nor cars passing in the opposite direction, but still it waits, and we wait with it.

I notice aloud that from the rooftop, the view on the right side could be considered the past, with its layers upon layers of stone buildings and statues. And the view in front of us could be the present,

with its streetlights and traffic and bustling Italians.

He tells me he wants to live more in the now. In the moment. That he lives too much through history textbooks and classical lectures.

He thinks this is a bad thing. I think this is a beautiful gift.

A couple of nights later, we sit together on the empty moonlit terrace, scribbling poetry. We do an exercise; he gives me five words and I give him five words – neon, illuminate, electric, boxed wine, goddess – then we incorporate those into our writing. Once we're finished, he reads his aloud as I stare into the dying embers ablaze on the horizon.

His poem looks over the railing into the distance where there stands a statue of a goddess draped in neon light, and a man who is driving on a dark road past her. From afar, the man is entranced by her gilded beauty and sublime stone. He's seduced, and when he finally reaches her, she stands two dimensional on a billboard for wine, beckoning him to buy some. I think he has mastered the art of past and present. He thinks he's a bad writer.

HOME

Sitting on the train, row closest to the back windows, a black hood draped over my eyes. It's a dark blur outside as we hurdle through the tunnel towards downtown. Why does it always feel so apocalyptic? Tunnels and trains and hooded figures. I focus beyond the rumbling of the train on the gentle

buzzing of the fluorescent lights – inhale, exhale, breathe.

I get off at Yaletown Roundhouse, emerge into the morning's fog and begin my trudge up to the top of the hill through the rodent infested streets that lead to my paycheque. The stench of burnt urine fills my sinuses. It grows more prominent as I reach the sleeping bags and abandoned shopping carts outside a Tim Hortons halfway up the hill. I pull a blanket of stoicism over the mixture of pity and fear that gnaws at my stomach and continue past.

A swarm of festering dread and anticipation seeps into my chest as I finally spot the diner up ahead, and I think there are bees living inside me. I hear them hum in my brain, make white hot honey in my lungs and nest solidly in my stomach, rooted to my organs. I don't know exactly when the first bee arrived, buzzed its way into my mouth and down my throat, but they've been building a bigger and bigger hive ever since. Bees have a way of attracting more and more bees, until your whole body and brain are buzzing and bumbling with the boiling odor of bee mania.

As I reach the top of the hill, I feel myself getting sick again. Maybe from not wearing a mask at work anymore and not drinking water all day. Sick of being sick.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Breathe.

After work, I come home, climb the stairs to my bedroom. My knees have begun to crack nowadays when I go up stairs, and I don't know why nor how to fix it. My bedroom door won't open, but I force it. Dirty clothes vomit from my laundry basket, old essays and school notes litter my carpet, my desk covered in layers of books and photographs and other shit, and my bed smells sour, even though I just washed the sheets.

I feel myself fading, like a dwindling candle on a windy night. I collapse in the spare bed that sits in the loft above our staircase. Even this begins to sour.

ROME

I would trace the moon with my fingers if I could. But I don't. I just sit and stare at it from afar. Realizing that it's the same moon my mom will be looking at in nine hours. Full and rosy. An oversized orb embedded in a speckled navy blanket.

Out of nowhere, warm thunder and bullet rain roars down upon us – *the wrath of Jupiter Optimus Maximus*. I'd never felt drops so thick. They splatter on my scalp and I run for cover, lungs already heaving, like I'd been running from the rain for days.

Behind me, Aliya and Johannes stand out on the terrace still. Arms out, soaking up the tears falling from the sky. Like Jesus on the cross.

HOME

The bathroom mirror beckons me and I oblige, dragging my limbs out of the loft bed and into the grubby bathroom. Her eyes are vacant, ghostly. So far beyond the ultraviolet rays. Skin crawling with grime, she moves a damp cloth over her pores and down her neck, melting the thin layer of contentment she mixes into her cosmetics every morning. She needs something to reel her back down to earth and remind her that she's still twenty and alive.

Gold. A flash of it catches my eye as I watch my mascara run down the bathroom sink in black streaks. It belongs to a thin gold chain lined with miniature pearls and an oval gold centerpiece pressed with the image of Mother Mary, probably. It's clasped around my wrist; and from the extra length of chain dangles a small gold cross that I usually let rest on my palm.

I'm not a believer in Jesus. I'm not much of a believer in anything (inhale, exhale...). The bracelet was made in Italy, but I bought it from the Winner's nearest to my house. My friend spotted it first, open-boxed on the jewelry shelf, resting on a burgundy velvet pad. But she didn't buy it, lucky for me.

Sometimes I wake up in darkness, arms sprawled numbly above my head, aching sensation in my sides, in my jaw, and when I look over, there it is, asleep on my wrist beside me.

I creak open the bathroom door, prepared to go back to the loft, but

instead my legs take me to the desk in my bedroom to riffle through for an old leather notebook. In search of a memory.

ROME

Our other two roommates are probably out strolling the bumbling streets or drinking on the terrace, so Aliya and I sprawl on the queen size in our room in the convent. Playing games; poetry games, word association, back and forth speaking stories into existence. It's a fairly dark room, walls the colour of an old book page, burgundy bed coverings and drapes that cover the singular, minuscule window near the ceiling, we leave the overhead lights off. Perfectly dusty and dim.

My knees nearly buckle as we hurry down the endless spiral marble steps, past the alcoves of religious statues, their stony gazes following us to the lounging room. We collapse on large, plushy chairs.

We speak for what feels like hours. About bees and birds and that cowboy film she made with family friends during covid and Emperor Constantine's bedroom eyes.

Would you rather be a ceiling or a floor? I ask.

A floor, she answers, something cool about being beautiful and mosaic, how bout you?

Ceiling. I'd rather see everything from above.

HOME

My Neon Goddess comes alive, her veins flicker and flit and buzz, her beauty flowing outward, glowing in the night, illuminating the pitch of the eve. At the same time, at half past nine, I peer out of my window to bask in my heart's longing. Electric currents flowing awaken the goddess and she once again cries yet unto the night. "Buy my boxed wine," my love calls out. And I do.

I sit on my dusty bedroom carpet and read his poem again and again. It jolts me with nostalgia, as sudden and lifelike as if I were there on the rooftop, staring out into the foreign night again.

I realize how different it sounds compared to the version I've kept stored in my memory. The version I can still conjure now. I think that, while he was reading it on the terrace, I must have imprinted the image he was speaking to life very differently than it was told. Romanticized. Infused with immortality. I added my own little details. Probably all that second hand nicotine.

Staring at the words, I see that this ink on paper is better than the imaginary ink I've bled into my recollection of it. Because this is real. These words, siphoned from the soul of an academic. Or maybe that's the beauty of oral storytelling; it is what you make of it.

More likely, he's just a good writer.

ROME

I walk down a crowded hallway on the upper floor of a museum. I don't know which floor, nor which museum, all I know is that I'm searching. I'm supposed to find a monument to analyze for the history portion of our study, so after our group activities, I break off from my usual crew to wander on my own.

I've been following the ceilings through this time capsule; dripping gold, pearly and intricately carved, holy and chandeliered. They've led me up and down staircases, through rooms and rooms of murals and statues and ancient artifacts to a corridor away from the main rooms, apart from the columns and fruitful moldings that embellish most of the exhibition. I find myself in a long walkway supported by soft white arches and lined with tranquil marble faces.

Less abundant, hence making it more intriguing.

I stalk silently down the aisle; there are less people where there is less glamor, and so the corridor is nearly empty. The stone faces are wise and introspective, quietly aching with the knowledge of a millennium. I feel their gentle, pensive gazes, indifferent to my own observative presence.

Lips slightly parted, vacant stone eyes wide with fear, cracked and gashed and perfectly imperfect, I spot him at the end of the row.

I approach and jot down some notes: Grave Altar of Titus Iunius Atticus

...Titus is toppled over forward onto the floor, upper body twisted around to look upwards... one arm is raised above his head holding a broken sword up in defense and the other arm is on the ground supporting him... there is a shield strapped onto him, but it is broken... the sheath of the sword is on the ground between his knees...

(Here, in this unsuspecting hallway, I didn't expect to find such-)

-relatively defined bones and muscles... several cracks and breaks on the monument, some accidental looking and some not... gash on his left breast, dented more cleanly than the other imperfections, implying the incision was intentional... maybe a fatal wound...

(If it's not immortality he possesses – like the sculpted gods and goddesses – then it's perpetual mortality, it seems...)

...a warrior in battle... collapsed demeanor suggests he has been thrown down by something... perhaps by his opposition... the sheath on the ground and not on his body implies that he has nowhere to put his sword. He is committed to the battle.

An interesting choice, I note to myself, to memorialize someone in the midst of losing a fight. Considering whoever paid to build this monument, family or otherwise, could have instead asked for a handsome bust or epic battle scene in which he dominates his opponent – heroic and powerful, but conquered in the end!

But they chose the opposite: utter defeat. Broken sword, broken shield, wounded and thrown down. Yet, he doesn't cower, even in his vulnerable position; he still raises his severed

sword in defiance. Bearing the burden, rather than running from it.

Perhaps this is almost as fabricated as a heroic slaughter. Or maybe I don't know enough about tombstones and Roman values.

I admire the veins and tendons carved into his feet, see the blood pumping through them. Who wouldn't spend their last moments running from death? Fearful and fast footed, away from the agony and pain of feeling. Or maybe it's an honest depiction. A new version of a person emerges when they're in danger, I learned that in psychology. Fight or flight – now frozen in his primal form. His instincts forever immortalized; maybe it's telling of the man he was. Perhaps that is a much more honorable thing to set in stone.

He dies, obviously, seeing as this is a funerary statue, however, this moment – the deathless moment in front of me – is the colliding worlds of beauty and pain. Concurrent and harmonious.

HOME

Our meditation guide leads us through the steps of the practice, seated on hard plastic chairs all facing inwards toward a central waxy candle. Eyes closed.

And while we are *Recognizing* and *Allowing* the emotions in us at that moment, this heat materializes in my chest, and spreads all over

my body. White hot and steaming. While Investigating the emotion, I try to jump beyond it, to the euphoric feeling that I used to get while in the depths of meditation. Before this heat made a home in my body. But I can't do it. It's too blinding this time, and I can't seem to come up with any answers for it, thus sending another surge of burning to my already honey-stuck chest. I am sizzling; sweating from my pores, seeping through my concealer. The stench of my own burnt flesh fills my nose and I shift uncomfortably in my chair. But I decide to just stick to the unknowing for once, and move blindly into *Nurture*.

If this feeling had a voice, our guide prompted, what would it say?

I don't know.

...what does it need?

Couldn't tell you.

Be the loving presence... or conjure one you love and trust.

A porcelain man stalks silently into my mind, drops his alabaster blade and pliés. He bleeds from the cracks in his marble flesh. I push the image away, trying to quell my delusions. Then the dots connect. This unnamed, unknown, unfamiliar feeling is not one that is new to me.

...and when you're ready, bring yourself back to the room...

ROME

My eyes open onto the evening sky, a reflective blue and grey; similar to a lake, or a mirror. I drift out onto the terrace, earbuds in, a sad 80s tune coaxing the unnamable emotion coursing through my head. My button down and linen pants seem to move before I do, and suddenly I'm swaying around the rooftop, magnetized to the gentle breeze that whispers through my fingers, a part of the Milky Way.

I taste my sweet and sour tears before I know I've shed them, and instead of interrogating them, this time I let them fall. Let everything fall. Back to earth. And allow this white heat in my chest to rise. It followed me to Rome, and I don't know what to do with it. With all this sadness and fear and happiness and anger. Too vulnerable, and nowhere to run. I feel my lips crease into a smile.

Raw. For the first time in so very long, I decide to breathe. Lean over the railing and suck in the air. It's warm, it dries my skin. Inhale... feel the bees crawling in my chest, let them buzz up the tunnel of my esophagus.

Then watch them exhale into the eternal, Roman night . . .





SECOND PLACE NON-FICTION

Everything in its right place

Isaac Malmgren

We leave the party and Jessa takes me back to her parents Volkswagen. The Port Coquitlam street is dark and wet and unfamiliar. Manicured trees line up in unison with new houses, and the dash light obscures this view outside the windshield into hazy low resolution like bad CGI. Jessa's worried I'm too fucked up. She is a grade ahead of me and her family owns a new Volkswagen, and the party is full of kids who seem scared of me or repulsed or both. I'm worried I'm not fucked up enough, and we get high. She asks me if I've heard the new Radiohead album: she loves it, she can't wait for me to hear it. She's a viola player and I wonder if I'm in love with her. I have never heard anything like this, and yet it feels immediately part of me, like I've been waiting for this idea to explain a thing I've been feeling but can't describe. Kid A lives in my discman for the winter.



When I remember music, I'm transported to the places I associate with it. And when I revisit these landscapes and soundscapes, the meaning I attach to them evolves over the passage of time. So, when interpreting meaning in my own life, landscape and music together form something like what Mikhail Bakhtin called a chronotope. Bakhtin writes that, in his attempt to capture "the inseparability of space and time", the concept was borrowed "almost as a metaphor (almost, but not entirely)" from Einstein:



Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope. (84)

The U-Bahn to Prenzlauer Berg is straightforward enough, one transfer, but Cody is nervous about getting the right tram from there to the Velodrom. We have been in Berlin two days, and our travelling temperaments are already showing their incompatibility. I am happy to take the wrong train as a form of adventure, and not shy about practicing my nascent German vocabulary, which usually results in a much more productive exchange in English. Cody does not like the prospect of being lost in a foreign country. This concert is to be a highlight of his time in Europe, and the kids at our squat in Kreuzberg warned us as we were leaving that shows here usually start on time. Fortunately, it seems Berliners don't share our notion that wearing a band's merch to their show is for posers, and we follow the Radiohead t-shirts onto the tram. The Velodrom looks like a concrete warehouse from the outside, and blends in well with the neighbourhood's brutalist DDR-era architecture. Inside, it is a rave. People are dancing, they know all the words, they are ecstatic. Cody and I are hearing music that has lived in us and with us in our headphones and bedroom stereos in South Burnaby for years, now on its own side of the Atlantic in a place where the techno culture that these songs are fused with lived and grew, long before it appeared to us as a spontaneous revelation. We are riveted and undone.



The idea of materializing or “thicken”-ing of time while untethering space from static location to serve new meanings feels particularly apt when music is part of the landscape. Bakhtin used chronotopes to describe the representations of time and space in literature, seeing these as essential to defining and distinguishing genre and depicting human characters, who to him are “always intrinsically chronotopic” (85).



We have just rounded the bend to the Forks when the acid starts to kick in. The fur lining on Jessica's parka has accumulated enough snow to blend in with the banks of the Assiniboine, and my cigarette is a vivid glow of orange against the boundless ice beneath my feet. We had intended to walk from our apartment in the West End and along the frozen river to the market to get a roti and look at tourists, but our hunger has passed. It's my 21st birthday, March 26th, and it's unseasonably warm-probably about 10 below without the windchill, which is still considerable. We keep walking, and after checking our supplies-two packs of cigarettes, a bottle of Wisers, a tape deck and 3 tapes for three possible moods-we follow the convergence of Winnipeg's waterways and continue down the Red River towards the exchange district, where the buildings are old and brick and we can have our pick of dive bars to warm up in. As we pass the oversized red buoy that marks the Provencher Bridge, the signs of the outside world fade back past the

riverbank. I ask Jessica what tape she's put on-is it Sun Ra? It's perfect. But she hasn't put on a tape. The river and the wind are playing for us. We decide to skip the exchange and walk back along the ice. This is all we want there to be. When we get back to our apartment we wrap ourselves in blankets and listen to the Sun Ra tape. It's the same music we've been listening to all day.



Music, like landscape, is a physical process: sound travels in waves through our bodies, and we construct meaning from the variances in sensation this causes. This is also a temporal process, and the two are inseparable. Without our perception of time, these changes in frequency and intensity would fail to become patterns of rhythm, tone and dynamic. An even more subjective perspective is also required to interpret significance in these patterns. Like a landscape, the meaning of a piece of music is formed not only by the person perceiving it but



also through the ever-shifting accumulation of associations and interpretations that person and the music they are hearing has encountered. Like music, landscape is physical, temporal, and subjective. Like landscape, music is both of a body and outside of it. Only through exchange do either exist.



Evan shows me around his new house in St. Jean Baptiste-he's returning to his Franco-Manitoban Catholic farmboy roots. There are train tracks running along the river in the backyard, and he's kept the rosaries and crucifixes the old owner Anne had decorated his attic with before she died. He puts on a Mississippi Fred McDowell record. He is six months clean, so we drink tea and smoke cigarettes and talk about the old bad times in Vancouver. When "Jesus Is On The Mainline" plays, we joke about relapse and lapsed Catholics.



Landscapes are personal and immediate. They are the spaces we interact with most directly with our physicality, our senses and our thoughts. We inhabit landscapes, walk through them, smell them. We inform landscapes by altering them and naming them and mapping them. We are informed by them as we welcome their impressions into our imaginations and memories. They are captured from an individual perspective that imbues them with meaning

and shape. But these are constantly in flux, updated as the spaces themselves change over time along with their interpretations: through interaction with those of us who move through them.



It is a bad winter, my worst. Evan almost made it through the last, but the season lingers long in the prairies. He made it to March 19th, up at his drafting table in the attic of his new home. I spent my birthday the next week in St. Jean saying goodbye, and I have not been sober



many moments since. Back home on Christmas night, after sobbing inappropriately through words from Dylan Thomas to the close and holy darkness, I excuse myself for a walk across the viaduct. There is snow at least, and the removed perspective on the downtown eastside feels more peaceful than tragic—we are the ghosts of Christmas present. When I get to Holy Rosary Cathedral, I am among two others having a drink from a flask before kicking the slush off our boots. Inside, the organ fills every small space and the choir sings *In The Bleak Midwinter*. I cry in a way that I have not cried in months, and I am reminded that god is a feeling.



Bakhtin's concepts have been taken up in landscape studies, where chronotope can describe the location of both landscape and its interpreter as they find meaning in dialogue. Music geography also recognizes this subjectivity in the relationship between listener and landscape. For George Revill, listening is “a process rather than a momentary snapshot, a temporal event in which arrangements in space unfold.”, while landscape forms the “terrain on which musical and extra-musical sounds interact” (2).



It's January and Clem misses Mclean park. The little grass postage stamp two blocks from our house on East Pender is a daily fixture for the two of us in the spring and summer. Before becoming a parent I lived adjacent to it in two previous homes; a broken-down van and a basement apartment that simulated 24-hour night and smelled faintly of gas—the darker of the pair by any appraisal. Now, as my (and Strathcona's) situation has taken a turn towards respectability, Mclean is where I take my kid to the playground. But today it's dark, a new moon, and below freezing. We have both been in a bit of a slump, and at first I resist getting suited

up so soon to bedtime-Bridget is working and we are on our own. But once we get to the swingset, the



rectangular-framed clear night sky is ample reward for our efforts. I point out Venus and ask Clem if they want to listen to a song, expecting resistance, but something about the novelty of our circumstance has them in a receptive mood. We listen to Sun Ra sing “all aboard for Jupiter”, the swing is Rocket Number Nine, we have taken off.



As Bakhtin’s ideas have been adopted by other disciplines there has been some debate about their correct application. A marginal theorist operating under scarcity of employment and recognition in Soviet Russia, Bakhtin’s authorship of some texts as well as the nature of his own political, religious, and intellectual beliefs are also in question. But the resonance and adaptability of his concepts in capturing the making of meaning seems to refute the need for conclusion. A dialogue can be subjective, multiple, and deeply felt all at once, and each new meaning can be its own truth, in its time and place.



I have been learning to play the piano, and to call by name the harmonic languages I’ve been in dialogue with since I was a child. Through Satie, then Debussy and Ravel, I find Messiaen, who speaks to me in a familiar way. His music is far too difficult for me to play, so I just listen. I have a day to myself, the first in a while, and I visit the Iona beach jetty where Evan used to run. This is a perfect place to hear music: four kilometers of straight lines pointing through the widening ocean beyond Vancouver’s southern coast. It is quiet here save for rhythmic punctuations of planes arriving and departing YVR that enhance the air of liminality. The wind is usually strong, and even with my headphones turned up too loud it makes a constant drone. I listen to *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* and arrive at “*Louange à l’éternité de Jésus*” as I’m nearing the end of the jetty where the water from the sewage treatment plant empties into the sea. The movement of the piano, plodding chords that provide a gentle shifting base for the cello’s song to float above, catches my ear. As I reach end of the line, I pull up “*Everything in its Right Place*” and it is not the same key, much faster, but the movement is there, the undulation and swell and surrender.

Peeling Off

Chris Dommer

An announcement blared through the speakers that nobody bothered to listen to. They were too busy. I was too busy. Customers were lined up all the way down the aisle by the lumber door checkouts, Pro Desk was on lunch break, my earpiece was out of juice, and the other cashier was too busy completing a credit card application.

"Hi there, how are you doing today?" I said in the general direction of the next customer to signal them to get off their phone and push their cart up so I can get them out of here.

I don't care what they say back to me. If it's negative, apologise. If it's positive, say thank you, and mention how everyone's been really negative today.

Dancing around the cart I scanned in a quantity of four (4) 2"x4"x8' pieces of lumber, eight (8) 4"x4"x8' pieces of lumber, four (4) sheets of standard plywood (the ones with the orange stripes on the side), some assorted decking screw containers, and a caulking gun (What? Why?). I know that for quantities under ten I'm supposed to scan them individually. But I can't afford to take my time.

It feels like I'm on an island, endlessly scanning assorted hardware tools and hardware items and hardware

hardware until the end of time. But at some point, someone tells me I should go home, no I know I should go home. My shift is over.

I don my jacket which was haphazardly jammed underneath the cashier till. Zipping up the front, I make sure that no customer can see the apron underneath. I used to not cover my apron at the end of my shift and would constantly be stopped by customers. The following is a list of places I have been called over in between lumber tills and the employee lounge: Ladders. Could ya help me lift this one over here? Hardware. You seem very knowledgeable about these little things, anything like this? Power Tools. Anyone around that can open the cage? Paint. You guys have any of that double-sided painter's tape? Plumbing. So, what type of toilet do we need to get? Electrical. Is anyone here able to cut this wire? Kitchen and Bath. I don't want to hear it. All these questions and more can be avoided with this simple trick!

As I stride leisurely without fear of being called by a surprise customer, the background music fades back in. Some 80's something song about being automatic. They say automatic a lot in it. It gets repetitive after a while.

The weather has changed since I came into the warehouse approximately eight and a half hours ago. Torrential downpour, the Vancouver special. Rain has painted the chalkboard of the parking lot slick with oils and cracks from the use throughout the years. The only strokes not showing their age are the newly applied stripes of paint that guide where parked cars are allowed to go. They haven't limited themselves to just the lot as the canvas though. Hitting the side of the capacious building in a rhythmical beat, rain causes bits of paint to peel off. Accompanying the pitters from the walls, come the backing percussion. The roofs of the shopping cart sheds all shout to their own tunes. The asynchronistic rhythm has drowned out the 80's something safe-for-work song that was playing on the outside speakers. This rhythm is sporadic, but it is there. It must be there.

"Your jacket hood isn't enough for rain like this." Echoes a voice in my head, briefly pausing the tempo. The beat carries on.

It is to this beat that I slide my backpack-scrunched raincoat over my jacket and take my first steps out from under the awning. Fast strides, head down, not too far down, keep walking. Walk fast, but not too fast. Raindrops fall, hands in pockets, not too far in, and they keep falling. I fish around for my car keys. Grey 2011 Ford Fusion. Unlock car.

Open door. Get in. Close door. I'm in the clear now.

The rain no longer dictates my tempo, but it still pounds rampantly on the roof of my car. I put my key into the ignition only to notice something pinned underneath the windshield wiper blade. I don't start the car. Instead, I sit there, staring down the mystery package that seems to be in some sort of plastic bag. Maybe if I stare at it long enough, it will disappear.



On another dryer day where the lot rippled when viewed from the right angle, I sauntered towards the Ford. Upon opening the driver-side door, I noticed a card wedged in the window. I picked it out. The color of the card reminded me of a Community Chest card from Monopoly. On the card there was a phone number I would never call, some space graphics that looked like they belonged in a bowling alley, and the promise of "spiritual guidance". It seemed shady.

"They just tell you what you want to hear, or what you already know," echoed Mom's advice. We'd be in line for some lemonade at the fair and a little tent would be pitched right beside the juice stand. I could never look the person in the tent directly in the eyes.

I didn't want to hear someone else's opinion on my life. I didn't need to. The business card belonged to the lot pavement now.

“Hey! You got-” a yellow Jeep shouted at me from two rows of cars over. I got in my car and closed the door before hearing the rest of what he had to say.

I was not about to receive “spiritual guidance” in a Home Depot parking lot.



The no-name brand Ziploc did not disappear in the period of time I tried to vaporize it with my eye lasers. Something about it made me want to look at it. The piece of paper had drops of water on even though it was inside a plastic bag. Whatever this message is, someone cared enough to keep it protected from the unstoppable downpour that now tormented the lot. I looked at the car to the right of me. There was no baggie-wrapped message tucked underneath the windshield wiper for them. This was for me.

I quickly opened the car door and snatched the packet. In the process, I just barely managed to get my arm completely drenched. I cracked it open and looked at the piece of scrap paper inside. What was on there was a hastily written message:

I Seen the guy Who hit your car
and have a Photo of his Plate. My
Number XXXXXXXXXXXX

IL Send you Photo's

What? Huh? My car was completely fine, surely that was a mistake. I was so sure in fact, that I decided to do a quick check of the car. Rear drivers' side was completely fine, albeit a bit wet. Passenger rear side was also

A-OK, no problems just wet as well. Front side passenger, looking good. And the front driver side bumper was completely ripped off. So, the car was completely fine.

Except it wasn't. The internals of the front driver side lights had been exposed. It was like someone tried to peel an orange with too much pith. Then, in a fit of rage, peeled the insides of the orange as well. But there was no orange juice. Just frayed wires, half broken bulbs, and a bumper that looked like the type of smirk that would get you kicked out of a department store. What I saw uncovered befuddled me. As if someone showed me a diagram of my body with all the veins, muscles, and tissues messed up. It makes sense, but something is off-putting. Something was wrong.

Well, uh, what do you do when something is wrong? Pee your pants. Well, they're already soaked. How about call insurance? What'll they do, make me sit in my car for forever and a half? At this point I was soaked, tired, and I just wanted to go home. Home.

Mom always said, “If there's ever anything wrong, you can always call home.”

But I couldn't call Mom, she'd probably just shout at me. I still have flashbacks to the time I left the parking brake on driving home. Dad had to peel away the phone from her with all the yapping she was doing. I could still hear her shouting in the background of the call like she used to at my minor league hockey games. “C'mon Son” and

“Get your butt off the ice” were some of her go-to phrases. I don’t think that giving her a call would be the right thing to do right now.

A very awkward “Hey dad,” came out of my mouth. I was back inside the Ford and the driver’s seat was almost wetter than the outside of the car. “The bumper of the car got ripped off.”

Next thing I knew, I was giving the vehicle a test drive in the lot to make sure it was drivable. The slick roads in combination with the constant scraping of the front bumper provided it to be a little of a challenge, but nothing I wasn’t up for. The tires slipped with each turn I managed to complete. It felt harder and harder to not notice how the bumper was affecting the control of the car. Nothing was right.

What followed was a follow-up call to Dad as confirmation that I had not died in the parking lot and that if I were to die, it would be on the attempt to cross the bridge home. During rush hour. In the pouring rain.

The rain itself had not let up since before my shift had ended several eternities ago. Between the constant pattering on the car roof, I hear a thump beneath the car signaling that I was now on the bridge home. The rampant pattering was growing louder to the point that it has turned into a slamming of rain drops.

It reminded me of customers slamming a little baggy of screws on

the counter. It always managed to wake me up no matter how much of a trance I was in. I am reminded of all the different times I’ve told someone to go back and check for a number on the crate of nails they took from. Sometimes it was easy, the bin was right here, or the number for them was on the screw itself. But other times it was harder. They couldn’t remember where they got them from or better yet, they straight up didn’t understand English at all! Those were the tougher ones. Not only would I have to figure out a way to explain what I was doing on my phone (looking up the screw), but I also had to find a nut or a bolt that looked close enough to what they were getting. And because we have so many screws and nuts and bolts that look similar, I would just choose whatever was the cheapest. Now, thanks to me, our washer inventory is incorrect. But that wasn’t important right now. I was almost halfway over the bridge.

The rain had decided to progress from slamming to screaming. The wipers were on non-stop. Left right left right, sweeping rain on and off. Left right left right, open close open close.

The main entrance door opened with a sliding sound of the rubber weather stripping. It wasn’t time for the store to open yet, but at a bit before 6 AM the door slid open as if to say hello. I wondered how the people working the front desk could deal with having the door opening

and closing all the time. Perhaps after a while you just tune it out. Go to your island. Don't bother with it. As an employee, we were told to enter and exit the building by the lumber doors, the other side of the building. To this day I am still unsure about the unnecessary segregation of staff and customers. But they probably just want to know who to treat nicer. I was almost across the bridge.

Ever-present as always, the bumper continued to scrape itself against the slick asphalt. You could've told me that the asphalt itself was made of metal and I would believe you. The grinding of two pieces of metal echoed through my mind.

Grinding of the metal hoist door tormented my head as I let its chain slip through my fingertips. The garden centre doors were to be closed before dusk and certainly before the store had been closed. On my first day as head cashier, the person who was supposed to tell me that quit. I had to scramble to gather everything by myself using someone else's code to get all the cash in the vault for the night. In the end I forgot two trays in customer service (nobody told me there was cash in there), several out in garden centre (I wasn't aware we put cash out there when it wasn't open), and forgot to close the side garden gates. I was running like a chicken with its head cut off all night, trying to figure out what I needed to do before the end of the night. I think I did well enough with nobody helping me.

I turn the Ford off the bridge. This was the final turn I had to take before arriving home. At that point I had gotten used to the rain. I tuned it out. I had gotten used to the wipers. I tuned those out. I had gotten used to the bumper. I tuned it out. The only thing that was between me and home was a steady stream of traffic. So I sat waiting for the yellow light. I stared down the traffic light. You'll have to change some day. C'mon. We had a test of wills, my will to go home against the will of the traffic light to be a traffic light. So uh, can yo- The light turned yellow, and the cars began to slow down. The light was between yellow and red as I made my turn. I parked the car and headed inside my home.

I didn't get to take one step inside the house before Mom belted out from across the kitchen, "So how is the car?"

"It was good enough to drive back," Dad chimed in, "Besides that, how are you?"

Dad calmly sat in his seat at the dining room table while Mom frantically looked for a bunch of unnecessary documents.

"Um, yeah, I'm fine." I managed to sputter.

"But what about the car? How does it look?" Mom had been in the dark for most of this escapade. I wouldn't blame her for wanting to know more. But I was too tired for that right now.

"You can go outside and check it out if you want, it's in the parking pad." I said completely unaware of how much of a downpour there was occurring outside.

“I’m not going outside in that weather, I’d get soaked!” Mom exclaimed, “Plus, we need to get started on the insurance claim.”

“Alright sure, just lemm—”

“I think he’s had enough to deal with for today. We can deal with all that stuff tomorrow,” interjected Dad.

“Okay, yeah, go take your shower.” She grunted and then shuffled around more papers.



I stared into my reflection in the mirror. I didn’t recognise this face, it was more worn out, more tired, and more stressed out than what I was used to seeing. I needed to shave, I needed to moisturize, and I needed a haircut. These clothes didn’t fit me, my work-jeans were dirtied from being dragged against the wet pavement. This medium sized “Orange Pride” t-shirt was glued to my body. The pair of socks Mom gave me for Christmas last year weren’t thick enough to stop my toes from becoming blistered. I peeled off my clothes and listened to the sound of the pattering showerhead.



I once received a text message that has since been lost to time. I’ve had to reset my phone multiple times since then. But it went something along the lines of this: I went and tried to get a message out on the speaker system. Ended up waiting for half an hour with no response. I guess nobody listens to those anyways.






Poetry



FIRST PLACE POETRY



Mother of the Missing Women

Andrea Rios Torres

I fret your departure every time you leave alone
I track your movements like the phases of the moon
I light a path of votive candles for your safe return
I gave you arms to fight the wolves
But my prayers weren't enough to keep you safe

I asked The Blue Man for help but he branded me an Ananias
so
I recruited a pack of sisters to track your essence and bring it back to me
But no one could sense you anymore
I shouted your name to the wind
Then send it in search of you
I suffer your absence and curse the heavens
But I know the real Curses have always hunted on earth freely

SECOND PLACE POETRY

Membrane of Memory

Stella Rosal

There is a folklore
for the pomelo,
on how it must be served,
the fruit knows
silver from flesh;
it must only be taken apart
by hands,
its sweetness chased away
by the touch of a knife;
its ribbed membrane
blushes and wilts to burst when bitten;
a river streams in mouths,
this fruit remembers to be sweet under tenderness
its memory youthful;
the pomelo is childhood
sweet and shaped and peeled by my elders' hands
a notice of embitterment
when cut
childhood and a pomelo;
i am handed once
in a moment
both are eaten
each slice and each year,
shared under a home
each slice and each turn of conversation,
like seconds
in a clock and in a bowl
in this folklore;
a fruit and a memory must only be passed by hands
there is sweetness
found in the time
taken for an unraveling

POETRY HONORABLE MENTION

Untitled

Andrea Rios Torres

Cobalt blood drained from the veins of minors' labor
Indigenous corpses cobblestone streets

Childhood and grief
Shouldn't go together
But there's not one without the other
when is your mother on the ground
When feeling ribs and rubber skin is the norm
When is your sister dying of exhaustion
When is your brother under the rubble

A man set himself on fire
Scorched skin smoke filling only local lungs
Just another body on a screen

How many more people
(Listen to his screams)
should set themselves on fire
(Listen to their pleas)
for The Land to be freed?
(Open your eyes)

First World Problem
 (is the)

My Forest Place

Abi Heinrichs

Don't worry about me
I'm not panicking
I'm not weighing my options
I'm not scavenging for some trick / some relief
I'm not tricking you / I'm doing well
I'm laughing along with the lightning striking outside my window
along with the waves crashing against my forest window
How did the ocean get in here?
Don't worry about it / Don't worry about me
I'm not panicking
I'm not aimlessly swinging an axe around
looking around
for trees to cut down—
bring crumbling to the ground:
I have hunting experience
Chopping / axe-wielding experience
Don't worry about me
I can wield a proper axe
I know all about weapons
I know how to use them
Don't come looking for me out in the woods:
I built a fence from the stuff between my teeth
and from the pickings of my thumb
I spat—until it piled up strong
I bled—until it stood on its own
Now I laugh along with the whistling wind above me
Don't worry about me
I hum along as well
And I silence it / I silence the wind
Until I cannot anymore / until I can't anymore
The wind is the voice of breaking branches above me stretching to infinity
Before infinity they'll break and fall and flatten me finally
But hey: don't worry
Don't worry about me
I'm not panicking

POETRY HONORABLE MENTION

Growing

Abi Heinrichs

In a town of ghosts and frozen coats,
 hanging in the closet of an unkempt home—
 they froze in the last days of their masters—
 an arm outstretched, and an arm clutching their throats.

In a town of aimless shoes
 lying in a gravitational wound—
 lying on the frozen ground, laces making singing patterns,
 buckles broken, pointing in all directions—
 guiding their ghosts back home.

In a town of scattered signs, battered bridges,
 suffocated singers and glowing embers.
 I dump out the last of my drinking water—
 I snuff out the last little light.
 I feel my throat stiffen.

In a town of broken carousels—
 horses are meant to run,
 and ghosts aren't meant to inhabit,
 and I get angry at the vindictive sun—
 petty, it left, petty, I remember.

I travel from house to house, a new one each day.
 I break the ghostly patterns, I break the hanging coats—
 I snap off their arms, I twist off their buttons,
 I unthread their stitches, I toss them on the embers—
 maybe they'll catch fire— they snuff out the fire.

In a town with a dying girl, I try to remember
 the sound of car engines, names of hotels I've stayed in
 and uses for the word titanium.
 I try to create a landmark in
 a snowbank of fire and ashes.

POETRY HONORABLE MENTION

Intervening

Isaac Malmgren

Years, minutes, eras
Illnesses, regressions, transmutations
illegibly coaxed through a sieve
whipped with butter and
emulsified to a glossy finish,
component parts forever drowned
in a solution of relative ease

What is it I forgot today?
What is the word I want to
(utter, utterance, emission, omit)
From what history did I recall
The scent of my child's warm skin
the first delicious liquid golden summer sun
on curled three month old
fingers and toes or
three months
of endless rain

Is it slippery
to say so much about so little;
such rivulets to be redirected
into currents, currencies,
riverboat cruises,
getting high on the levee
while the ragtime organ on the Natchez
battles the off (hard) time detuned
crooner in front of Café du Monde,
feedback glancing off every rough corner

The River, sliding along,
carries the tunes together,
a torrent of mud and low hum
mixed as if into one supple body
before dissolving down the way
into greater sea

POETRY HONORABLE MENTION

What Major

Isaac Malmgren

What Major is good for
a bit of a fuckup
California sober
ex-drunk-bastard-novelty
seeking
Wants to make the world
but secretly doubts
it's possible



Postcard



FIRST PLACE POSTCARD

“Lobotomy”

Abi Heinrichs

It's like I've only lived a couple of days, the way my memory spins round, till I close my eyes and watch it run away. I'd steal all the pink cherry blossoms I come across and stuff them into my purse if I had any ounce of determination.

Memory is like a bag of trophies or souvenirs. I don't know—you lose some. Pretend they hold infinite value; pretend they make you matter. But if you tossed the bag, and someone came across it, they might think it odd to throw out a bunch of trophies. Maybe they'd recognize the souvenirs for souvenirs; maybe they wouldn't. But eventually, they'd just shrug and move on.

So, memory. I don't know. It doesn't matter when it's gone. I've said it once, but god knows I'll have to keep on saying it. Memories turn to questions. And today I ask if I was always this alien. It doesn't matter if I was or not. If I am or not. But I hope I can implore you to understand the urgency in my getting an answer.

Why is it that old men in public feel the freedom to chew with their mouths wide open. (When I'd be flung into the ocean. Hands tied, feet weighed to the bottom.) I remember turning from that horrible sight, down to the snag on my pink skirt hem.

So am I the alien then? And not him?

I assume so, as he peered at me with as much disdain.

SECOND PLACE POSTCARD

“Midweek Lie-ins”

Christina Nakhla

I wake up to soft nose breaths and grey morning light that's fighting its way through the blinds. Just your breath, mine, and the cars outside. We are in the midst of a fight, paused by sleep—but this moment is luxurious. The bed is warm, the air is cool, and my mouth is dry. It is dark and quiet, and time is unimportant. The car noises are just a hum, not real people going to real places. Just a hum to accompany the ins and outs through our noses.

I know that once we are both awake, we will hold on to civility for a fleeting moment, then descend back into our crusade. I will stare past you and you will bore through me. As my words slow, yours will hasten, and I will ache for an ending. Then, after some time, we will grow sceptical of our own righteousness and begin the slow surrender to hearing one another.

I feel all that on its way. I feel the end. And I'm grateful to not be there yet, to be here instead, in a quiet lull of morning. Such peaceful company sleeping next to me. No space for anger, only for rest.

THIRD PLACE POSTCARD

“[sic]”

C. St-Laurent

Thirteen years ago I'm twelve and I'm sitting on my bed with my mom and she's telling me all about my father, who I already know. I don't let my bruised lip tremble because it doesn't need to. She says it's hard being a single mother, which it is. I tell her I don't miss my dad, I say, "I hate him [sic]," and she hugs me and tells me she knows.

It's last year and a friend-of-a-friend is, for the fourth time that night, asking me to go home with him. "Yes [sic]," I say, and again say, "Yes [sic]," when he asks if I want to be under him. He knows I'm drunk and don't mean it, but, like everything, we recognize that it doesn't matter too much.

Three years ago it's the day my Aunt becomes dead. My roommate's on my bed telling me about the quirks of her boyfriend and I'm laughing, saying, "This is just what I needed [sic]."

On the phone with my crying mom last night, I'm telling her she never hit me [sic]. It's how I tell her not to worry. After an hour she says thank you and hangs up, which she hopes I know is a foreshadowing, and I do.

I'm not so much a liar, how I see it, but someone who knows there's not much consequence in anything, really. People will do what they do. The rest—things like yes and no—is just semantics.



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