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Denielle Hill  
Lucas Nogueira  
Sonja Andjelic  
Wolfgang Deranleau  
Chance Plomp-Schweitzer

Kit Pacilla  
Ivy Charles  
Kody Marks  
Nathan Ness  
Olivia Sharpe  
Sydney Marino  
Avery Allan-Mckay

w49

2018

writing  
contest  
winners

# EDITORIAL

Welcome to the twentieth edition of W49, a journal of creative writing produced by the Langara English department and enabled by the contributions of Langara student writers. W49 publishes winning entries, as well as honourable mentions, from the annual Langara Writing Contest and Langara Postcard Story Contest.

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## **The Langara Writing Contest**

The contest is open to all Langara students, past and present. Students may submit entries in any or all of the following genres: poetry / short fiction / creative nonfiction / monologue or one-act play. Two prizes (\$100 for 1st place and \$50 for 2nd place) will be awarded for each genre.

## **Submission Guidelines:**

1. A single entry may include up to 5 poems or one short story, creative non-fiction, or dramatic work not longer than 3,000 words.
2. Entries must be type-written and double spaced (do not staple or put name on the pages of the manuscript—they are blindly vetted).
3. Entries must be accompanied by a cover sheet identifying your name, Langara student number, phone numbers, mailing address, email, and the genre of work you submitted
4. Each single entry must be accompanied by a \$5.00 entry fee (cash or cheque, made payable to "Langara College")
5. Deadline for submission is April 20, 2019.

Please direct all submissions and/or enquiries to:

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## ANCHORITE

Denielle Hill

She has been in there always. From the time I was a child, the outcropping on the city wall has been there. There has always been someone to bring food to the small hole in the chamber. The hole in the wall like the inside of a mouth. I wondered often, but unlike other children who were more adventurous in their play, I made sure never to run too close to where the grass grew longer.

We never spoke much of her. It was a silent burden that shifted from family to family until it was my sister's first turn. She didn't seem nervous in the way I imagined I would; she just looked bothered. One night, everyone was quiet throughout dinner and my sister's face was unreadable to me as it always was. My mother scooped what was left into a large wooden bowl and wrapped the bread in a cloth. My sister took both under her arms with a long serving spoon and left. When my sister came back with the bowl was empty. I was supposed to be asleep but I peeked out from the edge of my blanket.

"Why would someone do that to themselves?" my sister asked. Her voice sounded different.

"She's a holy woman. In there she can think about those things un-distracted," my mother said. She was spinning on a drop spindle, and the thread never seemed to move while she held it.

My sister was watching the thread too, "But she said she sees angels in there. I didn't see nothing, with it so dark in there. She was talking to them."

My mother chewed her lip. "She's in there all alone." She never looked up from her working fingers.

There was quiet between them for a while. She opened her mouth a few times and closed it, searching for words. "But it's mad. All of us feeding her. She never does a thing, except whisper and talk."

Finally, my mother's eyes flickered up. "Shush, what if someone heard that? It's bad enough God heard it."

My sister sat with her hands in her lap, and it seemed for a moment there was something to say as she looked out the black window, but when her eyes came back to my mother, it was gone. She picked up the raw wool from mother's feet and began to pluck.

It was a few years until my sister was married and left home. The baby fat had drawn from my face and I began to tie my hair up off my shoulders like the older girls when it became my friends who were to carry food to the wall. It was almost my turn once, but both my father and I had been ill, so we were passed over temporarily. I remember lying on my back drenched in sweat, and even through the fever I was relieved.

Eventually, one harvest season when the wheat fields were golden, my turn finally came again. Dinner passed slowly and each mouthful of stew was tasteless. I spent time after fiddling with my mother's weaving not being much help. Finally, she set the bowl beside me.

"You've wasted enough time, get to it."

I glanced at the bowl, and I felt sick.

"You're old enough. This is something you can do," my mother said.

She stood up and left, taking her weaving.

It was porridge in the bowl. I didn't want to touch it, but I wanted the look from mother even less.

There was little to see in the night, so I followed the path with my feet towards the outer wall. I edged further down the path until the earth turned gravelly and grasses reached my knees. The wind was still warm from the last breaths of

summer, but as I felt a flow of cool air, I shivered. I put my hand up and touched the stone of the wall. "Hello?" I called. My voice came out as a whisper. A dry shuffle and someone was swallowing.

"You've brought me my meal."

The voice was soft. I gripped the bowl tightly in my arm. "Yes. Yes, I have." I fumbled for the spoon.

"Take this first," she said.

The smell of piss hit me. She passed the chamber pot through the hole. Overcome by the smell I forgot my fear and let her hand graze mine in the dark. It was as dry and sandy as her voice. My hands shook terribly as I fed her. Every time I put my arm through the hole, I couldn't help but feel it could be snatched away. Once the bowl was empty, I set the spoon down. I wanted to rush away from her, but a hand grabbed me. I clawed at her, trying to find somewhere soft. Her boney grip didn't flinch.

"Let me go."

She said nothing but I felt her drawing nearer as she pulled me closer. Her breath was hot and rank in my hair as her lips found my ear. Panic washed over me. I had froze.

"Have you seen the face of God?" she asked.

I could say nothing and began to cry.

"Have you seen the face of God?" She wetted her lips and like an animal. "I have seen it. I see it. Every night like this I see it and remember. I didn't know when I was a girl like you. I was soft. My head was soft. I laugh at girls like you."

I tried to squirm away, but my arm was locked I felt as if it would break; her fingertips pressed in. I could feel her sniff my hair.

"You're new."

I said nothing.

"Then you haven't heard it before." Her voice was smiling.

"My Richard has been gone nearly two ten years now. He loved flowers; he grew them in the parish garden. All over in rows on rows of roses and such. Flowers don't feel much. When



I say he loved them, it's not as if we kiss flowers and whisper to them like children. It's a distant love because people are more passionate and detailed than plants. God is like that: to him we are superficial and cold."

A second hand took hold of my upper arm and squeezed tightly. I could barely breathe. The bowl dropped to the ground, the spoon clattering inside.

"But my Richard still had them see, I don't believe he knew this about flowers. He kept them while I was just still a sister and I told him I was going to devote it all. He followed me to this place. He was there when they walled me up. He was there when they performed the last rights. I had these fits. I could never sleep unless he was here. He would fall asleep outside this cell."

She paused, and it seemed she was looking away into the sky.

"He said once, after an awful fit, that he would have held me even if I had been the Devil. The folk here said they didn't need two priests and moved him to another parish even though he'd done everything for you. After he left, I had terrible times, I could never sleep, always biting my tongue. Everything tasted like blood. But one day they stopped. I slept for days until a young man came to the wall and told me Richard had died. I've never had a fit since."

I wanted to see her face, but I was too frozen to try. Her thin hands still had me. My arm had gone numb, and my toes had gone cold. My thoughts flickered to the fireplace at home.

"Please," I said, "I don't understand. I want to go home."

With force, she shook me. "Home? To what? To your family? Your hearth?"

It felt as if she had stolen the thought.

"All of you are terrified of me. All you young little girls with your fleshy arms. Sick, the lot of you. I can see all your pity, feel you shove it down my throat with your spoons."

One hand stayed fastened, but her other groped upwards to my face. She was overly warm and smelled of sour milk. Her fingers pinched my nose and compressed my cheeks. She hissed and let go.

"I chose this. But I never wanted to hate you. But I do. I hate them. All of them, all of you. Do you want the word of God? Do you want his face? I can't tell you. Keep asking. Go ahead."

Silence, and I heard her breathing as she waited. In what little light there was, I turned to her. It looked as if her eyes had no centre but were entirely black as if they were looking everywhere. I had a chance to run now, but I had always wondered. "Do you really see them? The angels?" I asked.

"I did." She remained unmoving.

"What did they say?"

Those dark eyes turned on me. "I won't tell you."

"You can't?" I said.

There was silence again for a moment. "I used to see them more during my fits. They talk to me less now that they are angry."

Why would they be angry, I thought.

"You don't deserve to hear what they say, and they do know about you. See your nice hair from Heaven. If you want to hear them, build yourself a cell the dark, and maybe they will talk to you too. See their faces spin like wheels, with eyes of wheels spinning and turning to the beating of wings. But you won't hear it from me; I'm no god's tongue, stop asking me. Stop asking, stop; I can't help you. No help."

She began to rock back and forth, her spare hand against her face as she made a miserable sound.

"I thought I'd teach all of you. Teach you what my Richard couldn't. You all just come here all quiet and pass the bowls back and forth. For what?"

Her rocking stopped

"But I can make you wonder."

She clambered back to the hole, her hands smacking the stone. She took hold of my arm again and I didn't cry out this time.

"Look there to the field."

She twisted my arm until I turned around. In the night the wheat looked black and the sky bluer.

"Ever seen the sea?"

"Once." It had only been when I had followed my father outside the village and down close to the mines.

"Do you see it now?"

I looked back at her, and she shoved me forward. So I stared into the black fields and the way they moved as waves with the wind. A gust blew past us, and the stalks of wheat churned together washing back and forth.

"The moon, do you see it?"

It was a quarter moon turned on its side. It reminded me of the walnut ships I used to sail in the wash basin. A white walnut ship on a sea of black wheat.

"That's what it's like in here, with them."

"What do you mean?" I looked at her, but she slunk back, letting go of my arm. Where her face had been, was again an empty hole. For a moment, I couldn't look away. There was something else inside shifting in the dark. For a moment, the wind picked up and the rolling of the wheat together sounded like the beating of wings. I tucked my arm away and scuttled backwards. The question stayed on my tongue, but I was free now. I quickly grabbed the empty bowl while trying not to look inside the hole again. She was done with me but couldn't leave me, so I left for her. I fumbled back down the path, the same as it always was but I held my arms around myself. I was still sore where she held me. I was colder than I had been before.



# THE PURITY RING

Ivy Charles

Josephine, 17, sits at a pew in the back row of her church.

Sexuality is a spectrum they say. Issue number one, who the fuck are "they"? "They're" always saying shit on everybody's behalf. Example: You know what they say about guys with big feet... Right. Exactly, every man with size 12's has a 12 inch cock to match. Oh my god, another one: You know what they say about girls with bruised knees! PRECISELY. Every woman ever with a bruise on her knees has been sucking dick for like 8 hours straight. Seems about right.

Sexuality is a spectrum. There are so many different types of "sexual" that I didn't even know existed. Hetero, bi, homo, poly, demi, SAPIO. Me? Just your old run of the mill lesbian. And I am okay with that! I wish I could say that everyone is okay with that. But it's a sin to lie.

Sunday morning mass. I accompany my brother, father and mother. We sit in the front row. My father sits with his hands clasped tight, ironclad. Ankles together, knees as wide as the fucking Jordan River as if he needs the space of three men. He has three types of outfits. Sunday mass suit, weekday suit and Saturday jeans and polo. He's a lawyer.

Johnny sits beside my dad. Twelve, just hit puberty. He's at the stage where his teachers have given his class the list of things to

do to take care of your body odour, but he still thinks that sweaty, tangy ripe smell isn't him. Such a little shit. He sits in the white and red plaid button up my mom got him for Christmas, pre-growth spurt. It's much too tight for him, but he rocks it shamelessly. I kind of envy him.

And beside him is my mother. Theresa. Pale pink tweed skirt with a matching blazer. In the middle of her sternum lays a crucifix with way too much detail. I mean not only the actual cross itself, but home boy is outstretched on it with copper nails and everything. Her lips are in a tight seemingly permanent straight line smile. She doesn't really dance to the hymns. She moves the upper half of her body almost to the beat. I don't blame her, I can get down with the hymns. This Little Light is fuckin lit.

What I can't get down with is post mass brunch with Father Henry. Every. Fucking. Sunday. It's the time when Mom is in her zone. Like more than when Father Henry asks if anyone has any prayer intentions. As soon as those words leave his mouth she opens her small red leather-bound prayer book.

"I'd like to pray for my loving hubby and two little cherubs" my mother says. "I'd also like to pray for Judith, our neighbour. She goes in for knee surgery tomorrow. I'd also like to pray for little Timothy. Our cat. I hope he's having as wonderful a Sunday as I am. And Finally I'd like to pray for the lady bug I accidentally stepped on during my speed walk this morning. I feel absolutely terrible, and I love all of God's creatures. Blessings be upon you all!"

Seriously! She does not mess around when it comes to praying and brunch. As soon as eleven o'clock hits after mass is over: "Thank you for the wonderful service Father Henry. We will see you soon, but not a minute past noon!"

(Josephine hates the phrase)

Mom is definitely not the best at dealing with things that do not adhere to her plan. Two brunches ago Johnny told my parents that he has a crush on a girl at school. Okay, when I say "Johnny told my parents" what I really mean is:

(As herself:) HEY MOM, DIDJA HEAR THAT JOHNNY HAS A GIRLFRIEND.

She turns slowly and steadily like a lioness hunting prey.

(As Mother:) Johnathan Joseph Alexander Lawrence.

My brother kicks me in the shin.

(As herself:) OW. You little shit! Don't fuckin do that again!

Oops! I forget Mom hates "unbecoming" language, but especially loathes it when we embarrass her in front of Father H.

(As Mother:) Josephine Margaret-Anne Madeleine Lawrence! Straight to your room! And you, finish your eggs and we will talk about this in private! I'm sorry Father Henry, where were we?

And just like that I do the walk of shame up the winding stairs. I plop myself down on my bed. Dad is so lucky. He somehow gets by every Sunday hardly saying a word and my Mom still loves him to bits. Shit. Maybe I need to learn from him! Just stop talking. Like all together. No "Good morning"s, no "See you later"s, no "Hey, by the way Mom I'm a lesbian and I really want to introduce my girlfriend to you at brunch..."s. If only hindsight were foresight.

I needed Johnny to test the waters for me. Genevieve is getting pretty suspicious about why I've never introduced her to my family. We've only been dating for like four weeks, but she

is super persistent about meeting the fam. The ol' "Aw shit, you just missed them" is getting pretty unconvincing when I tell her she can only come over between the hours of three and five on Saturdays.

I invite her to brunch this Sunday. Brunch is seeming pretty normal at this point. Silenced dad, stinky little brother pushing around cold scrambled eggs on his plate, Father Henry and Mom engaged in a lively conversation about... something. Except my mother has a little bit bigger of a tight line smile now.

"I am very excited that you brought your friend to brunch, Josephine! This is the perfect Sunday to bring your gal pal." Mom says.

Uh oh.

(As Mother:) Father Henry and I have been talking, and I've decided to get you a little gift.

She reaches under her chair and pulls out a small white box that is enveloped in thin pink ribbon.

(As Mother:) Open it!

I take a strand of ribbon between my index finger and thumb and gently tug. To my surprise the ribbon falls away extremely neat. A little too neat if you ask me. I open the lid of the box.

(As herself:) Oh! Mom. Wow! You shouldn't have!

A ring.

(As Mother:) Look on the inside!

The small simple silver ring is smooth and plain on the outside,



but on the inside in cursive is engraved: 1 Corinthians 6:18-20.

A purity ring.

"Now Jo", my mother says. "I want you to wear this ring until you find a man when you are good and ready. Even though you are a single lady now, it is important that you keep yourself pure until marriage just like the verse says. When you put this ring on your finger, you are not only making a promise with me, but more importantly, with GOD."

Shit. Genny looks at me like a deer in headlights. She realizes that not only have I not told Mom that I'm dating, I haven't told her that I'm gay.

(As Father Henry:) Sweet Saint Josephine... do you understand what your mother is saying?

I am shocked at the unfamiliar thunderous voice that claps at me from across the table.

Father Henry? Holy shit. I don't think he's ever actually spoken directly to me.

(As herself:) Uh, yeah, I mean... I think so? Mom wants me to use the most effective form of birth control, Advil! You know, place the pill between my knees?

My incredibly appropriate and well timed joke does not impress anyone at the table.

Especially not Genny.

(As Father Henry:) Here. Let me put it into words that the youth will understand. See your mimosa there? Take a sip.

I grab the glass in front of me and take a sip. And sip it again

just to make sure.

(As Father Henry:) Notice how the taste is so pure? It is because it is a virgin mimosa. How would you like it if you handed the glass to me to take a sip and I did so, but then your father grabs it. He then takes a sip and gives it to your brother. And finally, little Johnny takes a huge gulp. How much do you think I'd like to have another sip out of the same glass? Not very much. No man wants to taste the same juice that another man has already tasted.

Hold up. Did Father Henry really just paint a word picture of my virginity being taken by him, my father AND brother?! Metaphor or not that is FUCKED UP, DUDE.

Mom is looking at me with a smile that shows all of her teeth. She reaches under her chair again and pulls out a piece of paper and a fine black fountain pen. She slides them over to me.

(As Mother:) This is a little tradition your Grandma Gertrude had with me. She asked me to sign a Purity Pledge, just as her mother had her do too! Now Jo, I'd like you to go ahead and sign on the dotted line.

(Josephine reads the pledge aloud): I promise to God, my future husband and myself, to keep my mind and body morally clean and pure so that when I enter the marriage covenant, I will be able to give myself with a completely clean conscience to my husband.

Shit. I did not expect this to happen. I have never heard Mom talk about her "Purity Pledge" before. I wouldn't be surprised if Genny stormed out of here right now. God knows I would. I glance her way and she's not even looking at me. Fuck, why do I always pull this kind of shit? Why can't I just be upfront and direct and say what I really want... but I can't hurt Mom like that.



Talk about embarrassment in front of Father Henry. If I come out right now in front of him at brunch, I don't think she would ever talk to me again.

(As Father Henry:) Well Josephine? What are you waiting for?

Before I build up the gall to open my mouth, Genny looks up at me. She has this look on her face. I have never seen it before. Contorted? No. Mischievous if you will. Without saying a word she leans forward, reaches across the table and grabs my virgin mimosa.

My heart stops.

As she recoils she looks me dead in the eyes. She takes the virgin mimosa and puts it up to her lips.

I look around the table. Dad, still stoic as usual. Johnny sits with his head in one hand and pushes his eggs around with the other. Completely uninvolved. Father Henry and Mom have their eyes glued on Genny as she guzzles down the rest of my virgin mimosa.

I can literally feel the sweat accumulating under my armpits and down the crack of my ass.

Did really that just-?! Did anyone else-?! Genevieve Lynne Gerald, you sly minx you.

(As Mother:) Oh Genny! You're a thirsty girl, aren't you? Let me get the rest of the virgin mimosas from the refrigerator.

Mom retrieves the pitcher of virgin mimosa and fills my glass back up.

(As Father Henry:) Jo, you better guard your new virgin

mimosa before Genny goes and steals it again!

(As herself:) Well, Father Henry she didn't really steal it. I wanted her to have my virgin mimosa. In fact, she's the only one at this table who I really want to have a drink! And I'm I am ecstatic that she drank my virgin mimosa right here in front of my entire family. And you!

Johnny shoots a glance my way with his beady little eyes. My dad? Well, honestly, I'm not sure if he is hearing anything that's going on. Mom and Father H stare with blank expressions.

I grab the inscribed purity ring from the box and take Genny's hand. I place the ring on the middle finger of her left hand. Not a proposal, more of a "fuck you" to any person or religion that tries to tell us that how we feel about each other is wrong.

(As Mother:) Oh Josephine, isn't that nice! You're encouraging your soul sister to take part in the pledge too, aren't you!

(As herself:) Yep. You got it, Mom. Me and my soul sister are taking a pledge...

## THE ASTOUNDING ASH

Lucas Noguera

The floor was strewn with cheap cloth and plastic flowers of assorted colours; each stroke on the canvas of my rug painted a mosaic picture of passion. Getting to my feet, I noticed my brilliance leaking and I wiped my forehead with the sparkling handkerchief, making sure to add a flick of the wrist and draw it with a flourish. I looked up to see my golden audience gap-mouthed and wide eyed at my astounding showmanship. I spat the bullet from my teeth. The audience began to clap, and I bowed deeply. Once I was sure I could end the performance there, I looked quickly to Marcus. "So, did you like it?!" I asked. My goldfish and most loyal audience member, Marcus the eleventh, was still stunned and trying to catch his breath at the miraculous show he had witnessed. Perfect, a couple more months and I'll be a master of magicianary! I thought, taking a sip from a flat orange Fanta. But I knew that for people to actually see my mastery, I needed money. I would get the money and I would put on the show. I would not be like her. I walked two steps from the living room, past the empty Chinese food cartons and wafting odours of stale pizza, to my kitchen table. I picked up the Model 29 Smith and Wesson revolver in my right hand, headed for the door, and stopped after realizing my glaring mistake. I retraced my steps to Marcus, bagged him gently in my other hand, and left the apartment.

Wind through a moving car window always relaxed me. I savoured the refreshing coolness painted on my face, and the singing whoosh as the salty ocean air sailed past my ears. I was reminded of the many afternoon drives I would take with my mother when I was a boy. My mother was a beautiful woman with a petite frame and flawless complexion, her soft cheeks and lips that would turn rosy on a warm day. I remember watching the shoulder length auburn curls dance in the cool wind and warm light that stretched on into those isolated afternoons. I remember the hungry eyes of men and their devouring stares. I shivered, no, I would not be like her.

The 1978 Kingswood crawled over increasing pot holes, past women on corners, and came to rest in front of a worn cigar shop. I glanced at the model 29, then to Marcus. I knew I couldn't do it alone, but I also knew that Marcus wasn't the most intimidating fish in the world. It was a simple solution. I had done the trick a few times, though Marcus was never a fan. Still, there was no other option. With a bit of selfish protest from Marcus, I swallowed him down along with a large gulp of water. With a belly full of friendship, I strode into the shop and through the light curtain of dust as the bell on the door played me in. My audience was a middle-aged cashier with 'Ron' on his nametag. As I approached the man, I set the flash paper. In a puff of smoke from my hand, the Model 29 was fumbled confidently to point in the direction of the cashier.

"P-Put the money in the b-bag," I said, making sure not to break my suave demeanor.

The man stared back, eyes half-closed in unbelieving awe.

Shit! It's worked too well! He's in a state of shock! Need to tone things down. "Just s-show me where the money is," I leaned forward, "I know it can't all be...back here" I said, pulling a dollar bill from behind the man's ear.

The man's expression remained unchanged and I was beginning to think he was unimpressed. He mumbled something. It was either "here," or "pier." I wasn't sure which, but



the pier sounded like fun. The man walked calmly through a door behind the counter, and anticipation carried my feet behind him.

"Eh, we got our own Jesse James here," the man said.

I should have known. He was a heckler, my first.

Ah, what did he know anyways? He wouldn't know talent if it hit him right in the face!

I realized we had entered a dark room stained in smoke. My eyes were seduced by the green stacks on the table and for a moment, I felt free. Then, the Model 29 was wrestled from me by a thick hand that belonged to a disgruntled audience member. I looked up to see a stiff audience, mean faces with big bodies framed in designer suits and gun holsters. I was wondering what I should do for my next trick. It would have to be something to blow them away. Then it hit me.

My mother only ever hit me once. I'd been sitting on some steps out front instead of waiting in the Kingswood. I wanted to show her my Harry Houdini bullet catch. I had practiced my staggering to perfection and my finger gun was almost the real thing. I remember my mother coming out the door and her rosy cheeks drained. There was a hard smack to the side of my head. Half my world started to ring, and my eyes stung. The pebble I had used as the bullet chipped a tooth on its way from my mouth to the pink tulips beside me.

"Shi-... I-I'm so sorry, Ash. But you know it's dangerous to leave the car!"

She wiped my tears and I tried to explain my trick to her between sobs. She looked at me and smiled. She said she was sure it was a spectacular trick and loved the idea. "Biting the bullet is a skill more important than you realize." She looked down. "I shouldn't have hit you, I'm sorry. But, Ash sweetie, you have to understand that you cannot do that again."

I nodded.

"And for the love of God, please stop putting rocks in your mouth."

The next morning, I found a magician's kit in the back-

seat along with my first friend. I named him Marcus. I can't remember how many times I performed in that backseat stage. Countless acts in front of my golden audience of one, over-looking eyes, and an empty driver seat. I would not be like her.

The butterflies in my stomach woke me. Marcus! Shit, how long had I been out? I needed to get Marcus back up, and quick. My hands were bound behind me. My left eye was swollen. The metal seat was very uncomfortable. The room was worn and barren with a few papers and chairs scattered around and a medium shipping crate. Shit!... Shit, shit, shit! Don't worry Marcus, I won't let me eat you. The smell of tobacco was gone and replaced with concrete and a salty staleness in the air. I looked up to meet a wide, round face, the shape of a tomato.

"Hey, Magic Mike! You're awake, thought you'd be out longer honestly," said the lumbering tomato-head man. "Les has got one hell of a punch. Rob said you went two feet in the air!"

"M-My name is Ash, and I-I don't dance. Can I have a g-glass of water, please?"

"Ha! You're a comedian too!"

I wanted to tell him that my friend was dying. That I didn't want to eat my only friend. "P-Please untie me. I just want some water," I said. Tears blurred my eyes.

"Hey, hey don't worry, Mikey. You'll be gettin' plenty of water soon enough."

"Please..."

Tomato-head walked off chuckling. I wanted to scream at his stupid tomato face. I needed the water now. I wanted to yell into his stubby ears. Make him understand that I needed Marcus. I needed my friend. If I could have shown him a trick, something to make him understand my talent, maybe everything would be ok. Tomato-head walked back. At the sight of his gun, I began to feel sick. I knew every performer had their own harsh critics, but I had never heard anyone being shot by one. His stupid tomato-head angered me. I wanted to explain. To shout till he understood. The man raised the gun. I couldn't hold it any longer.



"Jesus fuck!" the man said as Marcus flew into his forehead.

Marcus hit the ground with a light splat. He wasn't moving.

"He might be dead! Call 911! Get some water! A bucket! Anything!!" I never learned mouth to mouth, but I was willing to try. I couldn't just sit there. "Please, I need to help him! I need t-"

"What the actual fuck is wrong with you?! Spitting fish in people's faces?! Fuck this!"

The foot came down hard, smearing my friend on the concrete floor. I don't remember how long I sat staring at the mass of red and gold. There was no point in looking away. The image stained my thoughts. I was a prisoner to this man. As helpless as Marcus was. I couldn't do anything; escape acts were never my strong suit. I just wanted to get out. I wanted my friend. I wanted my mother. Even though I would not be like her. I wanted to go home.

"We can't go home just yet, Ash sweetie, just one more stop, a quick one. You can nap in the car while I'm inside."

But I didn't want to nap. I wanted to go home. I'd forgotten to feed Marcus the third that morning and I didn't want another one to starve, I'd even gotten actual fish food this time! I was helpless, for a bit. But I suddenly decided I needed to pee, knowing the only option of relief was either the car seat, or home. I should have been a lawyer. I left the car and went to plead my case of necessity, but a shout from the house interjected my thoughts. The door was open a crack. The wind, along with the help of an innocent finger or two, pushed the door open enough to make out two figures. I don't remember her eyes, just the smell of tobacco, the tears, and the fresh bruises that framed them.

"Why even waste my time? Just one job, there's no way around that! You work for me. So drop the attitude, and do what needs to be done. It's nothing personal, just get my money... Now fuck off before I decide to get my money's worth outta you."

If she was crying before, it didn't compare to when she saw my eyes through the door. I pretended to nap most of the way home. I just needed to keep my eyes closed. I was convinced if she would see my eyes, she would see my thoughts, and she would cry harder. I think she knew I was faking, but she didn't say anything about it. Between the stuttered gasps of breath, she would try and explain, mainly to herself. I heard words like "money," "you," "necessary" and "food," but I didn't care about these things. Only when I heard "love," did my chest sting. I know I opened my eyes at some point. I remember the blurred streetlights. I promised myself I would not be like her. I would not degrade myself for money. I would not let anyone control me. My mother stopped talking after a little while, when we were close to home. Then there was the moment she put her head down and I thought she was going to crash the car, and I didn't care.

I blamed her, it was her fault. At least, I thought it was. Really, I blamed myself. For so many years I blamed myself. So, I wanted to make things right. I wanted to have money so that nothing would be necessary. I would practice. I would earn my audience. I would make the money so I would not be like her, and neither would my mother. My mother would be free to do what she wanted, and I would get the audience I always wanted. The one whose clap would be heard the loudest. But my mother was stuck. Bound by cruel men. The kind of men with heads like tomatoes. The kind that hit mothers and step on friends. The same kind that drag magicians out of rooms and on to port docks in the dead of night above black waves. The cold ocean breeze dried my face. I listened to the wind's singing whoosh and thought of my mother, a strong woman. Stronger than I knew.

"Keeping your mouth shut now? You aren't hiding a salmon in there, are ya?"

I wouldn't give him the satisfaction. He dragged me to the edge of the docks, above the waves. He walked back, cocking his gun.

"Face the facts, Fish Boy. You fucked up, messed with the wrong people. There's no way around that. Really, it's nothing personal."

I felt strangely calm as I planned the performance of my life. For my final act I would catch the bullet. I would show that I was not powerless. That I was in control. Not like she was. With the bullet in my teeth I would fall into that black. I would hear the claps all around and the applause would carry me. As I sank into a bow, the clear curtain would close around me. And once I was sure I could end the performance there, I would look up, and see my mother.

# SMASHED GLASS

Kody Marks

I had a great idea, but I needed to write it down.

"Are you still doing that feminist one?" Jessica pauses and stirs her drink. The ice clinks and the whiskey is oil mixed with the ginger ale. "Or was that only to get laid?"

"It's just not working."

"Are you even writing it?"

"In my head. I need to start. I have the beginning and end."

She looks at her drink with cocaine-sunken eyes. It is nice being shorter than her: I can always tell where she is looking. The Whip is noisy with conversation and laughter and whatever hip band graced the local music rag's cover. The tables are nice. They don't wobble. I always notice chairs but this place is different; I can't tell that I'm sitting on anything. It's the perfect blend: not so comfortable that I want to sleep and not so uncomfortable that I have to adjust my crotch every twenty seconds. The nachos are good as well, I usually hate nachos but these ones are good. Jessica and I agree they are worth the twelve dollars and that kalamata olives are a pleasant surprise.

"Do you want another?" I love leaning back on two legs of chairs in bars.

"Are you going to?"

"If you are."

"You want to go back to my place." I catch her eyes and they scurry toward the bartenders milling about and chatting while periodically peering at the black and white movie playing on the single TV. "I want another."



I'm always writing stories in bars while I drink but it's so hard to remember them. The characters all seem so vivid.

The server is attractive. She has tattoos and large breasts and her voice is the right balance of annoying and innocent. I almost wish I didn't bring women here so that I might have a chance with her some day. Jessica orders a double rye and ginger and I get a beer. I like hard liquor when I am alone but never in public.

The server turns quickly and bumps into one of her coworkers who is carrying a tray. Beer glasses smash on the hardwood and break the conversation of the room. The echo of the sound is the ripple of the silence. Someone says something about someone else drinking it off the floor, laughter ensues and speech returns like the hum of an old air conditioner: persistent and then, all of a sudden, silent. I want to know where this crossroads of silence and noise is. Where the parallel tracks converge and then noise turns to silence and vice-versa. I want to stand on the threshold and hear everything and nothing at the same time. What did it sound like? Perpetual glass smashing while one person shouts one long, drawn-out syllable while you squeeze your ears shut and hear nothing but that ringing that keeps teenagers away from Seven-Eleven? It was wanting to get caught and wanting to escape. Or maybe that was bullshit. I hope it isn't.

The server apologizes and bends down to pick up the larger pieces of glass. A kitchen worker who breathes out long and slow and has eyes that are unfocused and obedient appears with a dustpan, a broom and a mop. The server thanks him and rushes to the bar to grab our drinks. The beer on her shoes squeaks on the hardwood.

"That was quite the display." Jessica loves excitement. Any type.

"Yes. Did you see her face?"

"I imagine not as much as you did." She spoke into the ice cubes and the sad looking short straw, her next one would be tall. It is always good to go from short to tall. "You couldn't keep your eyes off her."

"I was taking in the spectacle."

"Don't feed me your bullshit."

"Do you think I'm going to fuck the waitress?"

"No. But I know you want to."

"Who cares if the desire isn't acted on?"

"Buddhists." She pauses and eats a nacho laden with guacamole. "Why are you here, Isaac?"

"To be with you."

The waitress interrupts us, apologizes for the disturbance and laughs when Jessica tells her how much she enjoyed it.

Jessica is looking at the server while she grabs our empty glasses and replaces them with new, full ones. I see her squint in annoyance at the size of the breasts looming over the table. I don't think that anyone actually likes large breasts if they aren't concealed by a shirt. The potential of the breast is always greater than the reality. I'm not even sure if I like breasts at all. The server leaves and stops by another table to clear it; the men look at her with drunk smiles and they laugh together. How much of a life is a life being paid to laugh?

"Me? Not because you don't want to be at home?" She can always dip straight back into conversations regardless of interruption.

"Does it matter?"

"Not to me, but it matters to you."

"How can you drink Canadian Club?"

"Whatever. Just don't avoid confronting your own shit."

"Don't give me advice I gave you." I ponder the jab for a moment before throwing it. "Addiction is a little different."

"You're addicted to whatever this is."

"I hope the server comes back soon so you can stare at her tits."

"Oh, fuck you."

When we pay our bill the server asks us if we have any plans for the rest of the evening and we tell her no, we're just going home. Jessica tells the server how much she likes the bar and the server smiles and says she hopes she sees us again.

The night is wet. God damn Vancouver. Main Street is busy with traffic. People going to see other people at midnight



or people driving to get fast food or maybe drug dealers or probably just people who work late. So boring but so probable. I wish life was more exciting but it just isn't.

"Should we take a cab?" Jessica huddles beneath the hood of her jacket. We didn't bring an umbrella.

"There's a Car2Go around the corner."

"Are you sleeping at my place tonight?"

"It's just over on fifth."

We walk along sixth until we reach a side-street. I worm my hand into her pocket and hold her hand. Her fingers are slender and cold with long, fake nails and her hands are soft giving the presumption of lotion. She looks away from me and into the street but squeezes my hand.

The sidewalk is shit. It's cracked and broken and looks like the earth has shifted. Puddles collect in pools that force us to walk around on the grass. The waterlogged earth forfeits beneath our weight and the shape of our footprints remain for a few minutes after we leave. We pass an alley that usually smells like piss but doesn't tonight. That's one good thing about the rain: things don't always smell like piss.

I scan my card on the Car2Go windshield and Jessica waits with her hand on the door for the sound of the lock releasing.

The car's interior smells like a room after it has been vacuumed. A mix of new dust and recycled air. The car welcomes us in a pleasant, robotic voice; I reverse and make my way toward Main.

"Should I take second?"

"Sure."

"Well is there construction? Anything like that?"

"I don't know. I don't drive."

"Yes but you should still know these things."

"Why? I take the train everywhere."

"There's no construction."

"So why did you ask?"

The rain picks up and the drops on the windshield become thunder in our small echo chamber. I glance and catch her

reflection in the passenger side window. Her eyes are back in her head and the way she leans on her hand makes her hair look lopsided. I notice for the first time she is wearing lipstick. Red. Not overdrawn like the teenagers I saw on the train. God, they terrified me. Those creatures. Those annoyances with an underdeveloped sense of power.

At Main and Second Avenue we hit a red light. Red lights in one direction are purgatory, but red lights in both directions are bliss. There is a small period of time when no one is sure if everyone is finished turning or if someone will run the red. The reveal of the green light thrills half the drivers and annoys the other half.

A motorcycle pulls up beside us with two passengers: a man and a woman. Over the rain and through the car their muffled voices travel to us. Jessica stares at them, they do not return the look. I find it interesting that despite the distance and separate worlds we occupy I still can't hear their conversation over the noise of the damn bike. What is the purpose of speaking louder?

What a goddamn structured haven we live in.

The turn signal sounds out its purpose until the advanced green tells me to turn left. Jessica is always nervous about turning left and this time is no different: she gently places her hand on my thigh. I hate turning left as well. I mostly fear being t-boned by an ambulance.

"Do you ever think about being hit by emergency vehicles?"

"Isaac, are you sleeping in my bed tonight?"

"I mean, I guess they're already there to help you. I dunno, it terrifies me."

"I think we should stop-."

It happens like a muscle spasm. I make eye contact with her briefly and see the tears welling up, threatening to ravage her mascara. Maybe her haircut is uneven. Was that a fashion at any point? I try to speak but the windshield explodes and metal screeches. Maybe all the windows explode. The server drops the drinks. The silence track kicks back through the

noise and I feel myself floating, ears ringing. The conversation picks back up. This is the moment. I feel it in my testicles: the tiny moment where the tracks overlap. A rollercoaster that dips and leaves you feeling like the tip of your penis has been electrocuted by a small charge. I can't let it get away, I close my eyes and grab the moment by the throat and wring its neck. The car implodes and is reborn a perfect wreck but I don't hear it. It smells like nothing I've ever experienced. I wish I could describe the smell of sucking on a penny. Was that iron? I guess it would have to be copper. It smells like copper. But if it came out of your veins.

Jessica's blood is all over me. Is that the copper scent? There are so many lights spewing recollection and panic. I try to look at Jessica but that side of the car has been taken from my view. Was this moment better alone or did I need her? I wish I didn't have to blink so much so I could watch the paramedics better. They ran like geese who see children in parks; chaos with a purpose.

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The TV dinners at the hospital are stale. The room smelled of impermanence and past trauma that had been sterilized in haste. The reruns of Seinfeld had grown old a week ago and the nurse who changes my IV smells like cheap cigarettes and one of her eyes lollygags to the right. It was never the hot ones from the films. It was never the way I imagined it.

Lynn sits in a chair by the window and stares at the parking lot. A miserable grey mess filled with bikes and cars that were probably eco-friendly or electric. She has to crane her neck to see above the sill from her seat. Early in our marriage I thought it adorable how her height made her appear a child in chairs.

"Congratulations." Her eyes do not move from the window.

"On pissing in a toilet today instead of a bottle?"

"You always wanted to be miserable. Now, you might actually be it."



# RESTAURANT INFINITY

Nathan Ness

4:15

I'm sitting at the staff table waiting for my shift to start. It's raining outside and it feels like I've never left this restaurant. I'm surrounded by a collection of angelic twenty-somethings, my fellow servers, who love their jobs and it makes me feel weird. How did I get here? A question I often ask myself, but today it's taken on a more literal meaning. How did I get here? Did I walk? Did I drive? Do I even own a car? All of my memories before this moment seem to have vanished, as if I only exist in this restaurant, in some endless loop.

My thoughts are interrupted by Chef, who's walked in from the rain with the cadaver of a baby lamb slung over his shoulder.

"How's that for fresh?" he grunts before heaving it across the room. A cook catches the carcass and dances it to the back. It's time for the pre-shift pep rally. Today, Chef is drunk and he's wearing yellow camouflage.

He stumbles through the features: hand rolled agnolotti stuffed with squab and celeriac, spit roast duck with confit'd rutabaga, porchetta with crackling, bagna cauda... I look outside. I can see the guests lining up, sharpening their teeth... I look back toward Chef, but he's gone. In his place is Anthony, our Maitre'D, with his team of sycophants, waving their pom-poms and licking flies off the ceiling. He claps his hands and starts to read the list of soigné guests for the evening.

"Jeff Wall and family at 6:30, Mr. Coupland at 8:00, Chip Wilson is coming in late. He likes the Nebbiolo, so lets try and



get him on an off-list Barolo.”

Everyone’s excited except for me.

When he’s done with the list, Anthony begins his customary inspirations, reading excerpts from Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. It’s the only book he’s ever read. Anthony. He’s as big as a house, and always looks like he just finished masturbating.

After that I dash to the bathroom and lock the door behind me. I’m the oldest one here, but I pretend that I’m not. I keep a compact in my left pocket to assess all angles of my hairline, a neurosis I developed in my early twenties. I’m Sampson, the Nazarite. Baldness could come at any time. I splash my face with cold water to tighten my skin.

“Tonight will be different,” I say to the mirror. It’s my mantra.

Someone’s turned on the music now, I can hear it through the door. Phil Collins. A delightfully ironic 90’s soft rock song, right on brand. “Tonight will be different,” I say again. It’s time. The curtain lifts. A timpani roll.

5:15

The first seating is smooth sailing. The room is full of eager guests, biting their fingernails and wagging their tails. They’ve had reservations for months, so the air is wet with anticipation. And here I come, your ambassador this evening. Still or sparkling water? Your first visit? Allow me, sir. I tap dance through tiny passage ways with trays full of cocktails, parading and announcing. Venison with huckleberry. Faro with garbanzo. I swirl and I twirl on the top of my tippy-toes, laughing at jokes, and sharing my own. I use antique words like otiose and gumption, and when the guests are sufficiently stunned, I plié and drop desert menus. He must be an actor. No, he’s probably working on his masters. Older women tell me about their granddaughters that I just have to meet, and I listen, staring at them with the understanding and attentive face of God while calculating every upcoming movement to the millisecond.

It's smooth sailing, indeed, until I notice Anthony lumbering into my section. This can't be good. I survey the room. Ah, table fifty seven has an empty water glass. Quick fix. I grab a water jug, sashay through the aisle, top the water up and voila. I wink at Anthony, who's left stranded in the middle of my section looking like a big dumb giant, and I know I'll pay for that later. No matter. I have two new tables, a check to drop, and I need to run to the bathroom to check on my hair.

7:00

The second seating is a little bit slippery. A table doesn't want to leave in the allotted dining time and has to be cajoled to the bar with free desserts. The hostess sends me a dagger stare, but I don't care because I love her and any eye contact fills me with immense happiness. A slip of paper is then passed into my hand that indicates my next table is just a little more important than the others. I read it: Larry—friends of Chef—send bubbles upon arrival. This loosely translates to “this guy is rich” because Chef is an asshole who doesn't have any friends and I understand. I start in Larry's direction, ignoring a credit card and a plate change. Priorities.

“May I hang your jacket?” I ask. Larry looks me up and down, up and down, and then grins the world's biggest grin. “Honey,” he purrs, “you can have the jacket.” He hands it to me and lustily flicks imaginary hair off his shoulder before sitting down. He likes me.

“Right, sir.” I say prancing off to the coat room, a little more jazz in my step. I smell the jacket before I hang it, a habit of mine. Neroli, bergamot, cigar, money.

Out of the closet, I survey the room: a credit card; a plate change; a new table; an empty wine glass; cutlery; a small mistake; and I need to get back to Larry's table to flirt with him for a while. I take a deep breath and wonder how my hair is holding up.

9:00

The hostess put a baby in my section. I'm pretty sure she hates me. When I brought the parents a high chair, the father flipped it upside down and placed a carseat containing the

child on top of it. The whole apparatus is questionable, and it's in a high volume aisle that has forced me to detour or risk crushing the infant creature. Anthony is also lurching about in my section, looking for mistakes and shooting me looks for every water glass he fills.

I knew he'd come for me.

Then there's the business of Larry's table. The energy shifted when his boyfriend showed up, a short, muscular bald man, who hasn't looked at me once. Every time he orders a drink he spits the words at my feet like he's allergic to me. Maybe I was paying too much attention to Larry, maybe I was a little too witty, or not witty enough, or didn't give appropriate wait time between courses. I want him to like me, the boyfriend, I want to tell him that I didn't mean to show off, or flirt with Larry, and that it's just my job. I'm not even gay, I just play gay at work. I want to tell him that it doesn't matter that he's bald, that there are plenty of bald men in the world and if it makes him feel any better I'm probably going to be bald one day too, but the thought sends a cold shiver down my spine and I feel around for my compact mirror and decide to check on my hair instead.

On my way there Anthony pulls me to the side.

"Listen, we're going to give you a really important table. A last minute reservation. Elijah Wood, and company..."

Elijah Wood? No! As if I need any more reminders about the lack of success in my life than to serve that cute bundle of joy and his cheerleader friends, all drinking Amaro and telling vacation stories about places I didn't even know existed.

"No problem Anthony!"

"Great... and Nathan..." He leans down and whispers in my ear: "Don't fuck up."

10:30

Chef is grinning at me like a maniac, gnashing his teeth, and I'm afraid that he can read my thoughts. I asked him to cut a veal chop for the couple at fifty-eight and he told me I should tell them to fuck themselves. He yelled the last part



loud enough to wake the baby in that awkward seat thing and now there's a wailing siren added to the frantic soundtrack of the night. What's worse, is when Chef made the comment, I threw my head back and laughed like an arrogant snob. Then I pointed my thumb at the couple in a 'these guys' sort of way and they saw me do it. Fuck. They were a safe spot in my night. Deborah and Charles, an elderly couple from Winnipeg. Every time I went to their table she would place a soft hand on my wrist and say, "Honey, you're working too hard," and she was right, but I said "No, this is fun," instead. What I really wanted to say was, "This job hurts my soul and I'm afraid to leave and I've had to pee for thirty five minutes and you remind me of my Grandma and maybe you are in some meta sort of way and if that's the case then I want to hide in your basement and live off of scotch mints for the winter and we could knit and purl and watch reruns of The Golden Girls and everything would be good again," but it's no use now. They're sitting across the room, still as statues, the veal chop getting cold, their feelings hurt.

"Elijah's here!" Its Anthony. His breath smells like ground beef. How long was I standing here for?

"How long have you been standing here for?" He repeats my question. "I need you to get table fifty-one out of here now!" He's talking about Larry's table. They've been arguing in front of a melting sundae for thirty minutes and I've abandoned them.

"The next seating is waiting in the vestibule and we're feeding them free drinks until those guys leave. You've got a new table at sixty as well, and we're expanding your section..."

I see Elijah walk in. Confident. Thick hair. Everyone's watching him, directing their love. He looks so happy. So calm. He's wearing gumboots because he's Elijah Wood and who needs fashion when you're Elijah Wood and everyone in this room is probably going to go out and buy gumboots afterwards...

"Are you even listening to me?"

"Yes."

"Then why hasn't the couple at fifty-eight touched their



veal chop? ” “I don’t know.”

“Get your shit together and go greet Elijah. I’ll go talk to the old couple.” He lurches off in their direction and I print Larry’s bill, accidentally flinging it into their sundae while rushing past.

I walk up to the table, “Hey Elijah Wood!”

I was trying to be cute. It didn’t work. The whole table looks up at me, all thirteen of them, curious and puzzled. I have their attention, but I don’t know what to do with it. I freeze. Shit. Say something. Anything. Where’d the words go? I feel like a carnival monkey just standing there with no cymbals. I look up, above the tension. Anthony is hulking over Deborah and Charles, cutting their meat like an ogre, Larry’s hurt I dropped the bill like that, the baby’s crying, Chef is drinking cooking wine from the bottle and reading my thoughts. I look back down. I’m desperate. They all know what’s happening and they love it. Choke, choke, choke, they’re chanting. The vultures, fucking Hollywood vampires. They drink the sweat of anxious servers from restaurants all around the globe. They didn’t come here for food, they want blood. Fuck. Fuck Elijah Wood. I could push him off his chair right now and have him on the ground like a little rat and cut his precious hair off and then we’d see how cute he is. A stupid bald rat from Los Angeles. Fuck him...

Wait. Did I just stay that out loud? “Say what out loud,” says Elijah.

12:30

I’m upstairs, sitting at Anthony’s desk and staring at the upcoming schedule that says I work for infinity. I’m not sure how long I’ve been up here for, but I just sit, staring at the wall. I notice I’ve been drooling, and so I wipe off my face and set to leave. I grab my pack and walk down the steps. Chef is passed out on a freezer, snoring, and I gently slip past him and into the kitchen where George, our dishwasher, is scrubbing away. The dishes are piled up like the walled city of Kowloon and he knows he’ll be here for a long time. He’s smiling anyways. He’s

the best guy in here, that George. I give him a hug that lasts for too long, but he doesn't say anything because he's nice like that.

I walk to the front of the restaurant and towards the door. On my way I notice the hostess sitting at the staff table by the window and I sit down with her.

"How was your night?" I ask. She looks like a tropical vacation.

"Great, yours?"

"Oh, yeah... great"

We sit there in silence until Alex, a fellow server and the most beautiful man I've seen in person, walks by and invites us for drinks. I don't drink anymore and they know that, so I tell them I'm alright and to go without me.

I watch them cross the street and disappear into the night. It's still raining and I'm happy to be here, in the warmth, in the restaurant. I lean my head against the window, close my eyes and picture Chef tossing little baby lambs through the restaurant. It's a silly thought, but it makes me feel nice. One baby lamb, two baby lambs, three baby lambs, four...

## TO FEEL SO VERY TINY

Olivia Sharpe

My middle name is Ruth. Its meaning: pity, distress or grief. It belongs to me, my mother, my grandmother. It's a thread that runs through us, albeit weak. We are not named after any one in particular. The name holds biblical connotations, which makes sense in the context of my family's heritage, but it acts not as some sort of spiritual connection to a beloved ancestor or matriarch. My family is a peculiar kind of close. It's comical actually, that this thing that connects us was pulled out of thin air. In some ways, it is an illustration of us: trying to be connected, trying to find meaning. Trying to make and keep traditions and points of connection despite failed efforts.

For as long as I can remember we've had family meetings. After conflicts, usually between my older brother and me, we would file into the living room silently, slouched, rolling our eyes. Butter yellow walls, floral curtains, suede sofas. He would sit on one side of the couch, I on the other; my parents completed the rectangle by sitting in the two chairs on opposite sides of the room. The rules were simple: the holder of the wooden spoon was the only person allowed to talk—the others were to actively listen. Once the spoon was handed over, "what I'm hearing you say is...", and then we would reverse it. Though I can attribute my capabilities in managing conflict to these early experiences in my life, I've learned that some things just work themselves out without being coerced. Not all information can be mastered. Not everything can be dissected, broken apart, fractured and then put back together

again. Sometimes we just keep walking. Sometimes our minor afflictions don't deserve the attention we give them.

In my adolescence, my mother and I would often have conversations while one of us was in the bath, the other sitting on the counter. No stone is left unturned with us. I tell her its disturbing that she reposts far right-wing news articles on the internet. She tells me she's worried about me because I'm aligning myself with progressive immorality.

- Honey, white supremacists are only a sliver of the population. You're overreacting.

- Birth control isn't that expensive. People on food stamps have big screen TVs in their houses anyway. They should be able to afford it.

- It's not Islamophobia if they're really trying to kill us.

I hear stories about passive aggressive families and think, that sounds nice.

My mom and I have the same broad chest, collar bones like bridges shoulder to shoulder, the same dimply knees. We share the same wide cheeks, smooth like stones. Small, almond eyes. We have the same toes, the same deep crease between our eyebrows when we frown. These are my inheritances that I'm proud of.

We share fears. We fixate. My family has a special super-power in that we are certain that worst case scenarios will hunt us down. My dad once told me that anxiety keeps him in bed until noon some days. He says that I used to sit on his lap, smoothing his furrowed brow with my little soft thumb. His mother died believing that she and my grandfather were destitute: the six o'clock news channel would find them and expose their financial failures to all of North Delta. Every day for a few months before her death, my dad would go to their house that they had lived in for fifty years, pull out the bank statements and attempt to console her. They had a million dollars in their checking account because of investments they forgot they had made. We were all surprised.

Some of my most vivid childhood memories are of my



mom getting my dad to check her neck for tick bites. He never found one. Being paranoid and engaging in obsessive-compulsive behaviours is dressed in a particular kind of shame; it is the shame of being traumatized by something that never really happened.

I moved to Vancouver's Downtown Eastside a month shy of my seventeenth birthday because I wanted to save the world. I spent most of my time with a faith community wherein folks with addictions could receive support in their recovery journey. We were encouraged to visit people in their SROs, the way one would visit a friend in their home. One evening I walked Leeann home; she was a woman I had often run into since moving into the neighbourhood. She was often incoherent, unable to control her muscle movement due to a brain disorder. Her cold, 320 square-foot apartment was made entirely of cement; bloody needles had been discarded around the perimeter of her room. After I said goodnight and walked out on to the street, everything became blurry. The cool air stung my face. The regular hum of traffic sounded like a thunderstorm. Had I been poked? What if I just didn't feel it? I get cuts and scrapes all the time without feeling it. Despite knowing cognitively that it is highly unlikely that I would contract any serious communicable blood-borne diseases from being poked, I could not convince myself of anything that would console me in the days following my visit to Leeann's room. My mind was a stubborn child having a silent, solitary tantrum.

For a couple years, everyone and everything invaded my personal space. If someone stood too close behind me in the line at the bank I would get dizzy. Riding the bus was an unsurmountable task; bags bashing against my legs, arms brushing up against mine. When I ate at restaurants I was certain that the person sitting there before me had taped a needle to the bottom of my chair. I began checking underneath every chair I sat in. After classes I would wait until everyone had left and look underneath the chairs and tables. I was afraid and I

couldn't master the fear. My mind had turned on me. I had been betrayed by my own body.

Fear of blood, even my own. Fear of needles, fear of ticks, fear of blood clots dislodging and hurrying to my lung. Fear of saying the wrong thing, fear of being a disappointment. I'm not disappointed in you, honey, I'm just disappointed in the way some things have turned out. Fear of having kids. Fear of my husband dying, fear of my dad dying, fear that after people die, time still passes. Fear that the world is a dangerous place. I was once asked by my spiritual director how it made me feel to know that nothing is guaranteed. In that moment, I became acutely aware of why I was seeing him: to be given assurance that cannot be given, to be promised I would be safe.

Contemplative sects of the Christian church can be quite good at being present with and making space for mental illness. This is probably because most anyone who is alone with themselves long enough is bound to find a part of them that is sick or hurting. Evangelical charismatics, on the other hand, often approach mental illness as if it is evidence of lack of faith—a barrier that keeps you from living an abundant life. Pray it out. Those in my family would fall into the latter category. I once had a conversation with my mom about how my dad was seeing a counsellor in order to work through the emotional issues that were keeping him from being successful in his career. She asked me if I had observed his interior life affecting his ability to interact with his family and those around him. I said that we all have stuff to work through. Not everyone, she said.

On the drives home from church on Sundays, my family would discuss all the things that were wrong with the sermon. As a teenager, I thought nothing of this. I was convinced that everything my parents said was infallible. Even though we were supposedly interacting with the most mysterious Being known to human kind, my family managed to suck all of the wonder out of it. We managed to exhaust the riches of knowledge found in God. We managed to dissect and master God. We managed to make sense of the entirety of the unseen world.

I like to imagine God as an old woman in a sweater vest, moving slowly and thoughtfully. Her hands are wrinkly and soft and veiny. I like to imagine that I follow her through the town she grew up in, and that she shows me around.

I have this memory that visits me like a recurring dream. It is Saturday, it has just snowed. My mom is out for the day running errands. My dad and I have a plan to walk to McDonalds to get Mcflurries. I walk down our mile-long stair case and my dad holds out my snow pants. I step in one foot at a time. He holds my jacket behind me. I slither in one arm at a time. He kneels down, puts a toque on my head and wraps a scarf around my neck so tight I have to turn my whole body to look to the side. I am bundled, I am safe, I am surrounded.

To be woken by love. To walk under cherry blossoms on the 20th of March. To sing and to feel the sounds reverberate in my chest. To be sung "Happy Birthday" by just one person. To pull up to where my nieces and nephews live and see their faces pressed up against the window glass, condensation forming around their noses. To have arms around my waist. To lie under a grand piano being played. To dance, to move. To say something I've never said out loud before; to be understood. To think of how vast the ocean is; the size of the blue whale. To feel so very tiny. I take comfort in knowing that love is being bundled up on a cold day; it is being led through this life by a kind elderly woman who sits to tell you stories of when she was a young girl.

I feel fearless, not necessarily when I feel free from danger, but when I engage with the mystery of love; when I let go of the need to master the things I cannot control; when I am present enough to receive a kiss from the exquisiteness of this life.



# THALAMUS

Wolfgang Deranleau

I visited my grandfather three times before he died. This would be happier if I had more positive memories of him from childhood; you're supposed to remember people as they were, not as they ended. Those memories are tinged with my mother's bitterness, her sense of injustice over his absence in her childhood and his subsequent attempt to be involved in his grandchildren's lives. He let me draw on his bald head once, butterflies and twisting spirals in marker. I don't remember if it was permanent or not, but I don't think he cared either way; he was convinced I was going to do something great, either with art or with writing, and paid for my first year of college. When he heard I was majoring in creative writing, he asked to read what I was working on; I sent him a draft of the book I had written that fall, some tripe about magic teenagers that I put too much of my heart into. As far as I know, he never finished it.

He moved back to Seattle after being diagnosed with stage four brain cancer. He'd been living in Elk, a tiny town in eastern Washington, on a house perched stubbornly overlooking a forest of leafless trees and deer-eaten underbrush. When you get over the Cascades, the land turns from pine and water to dirt and stubborn juniper, so fast that if you're looking out the passenger window you can see the shift before you. My mother said that he wanted to leave the house to her when he died; she said this like it was something ridiculous, like, what was she going to do with real estate



in Fuck Nowhere, Washington, nine hours' drive away in another country.

He liked to build furniture, and bought the house for its barn, where he mounted a deer head that watched his power tools with dead black eyes. I don't know what he was going to do with all that furniture. There are still pieces of nightstands that he made in our storage unit, and he built the bookshelves that sit, varnish long since dented and scratched off, in my room.

He kept driving after being diagnosed, and kept building furniture, and he did both of these things until his reflexes started to go and my mother convinced him to sell the house and move to Seattle. She was flying back and forth between Vancouver and Elk multiple times a month at this point, cooking him food so that he remembered to eat and sitting in on his doctors' appointments where they tried to impress the finality on him. There was no point in chemo after a while. Between these visits, my mother wrote a paper for her sociology class about Agent Orange and cancer in veterans.

I visited him once in Seattle, in a condo building catered explicitly to disabled seniors. I took the bus north from the train station, and walked the rest of the way in ninety-degree sun to get to his building. The management let me in and directed me to the seventh floor, a clean black hallway with shiny walls and apartment doors set back into the slick tile. I set my bag and cane down before I knocked on his door. The shuffling behind it lasted nearly a full minute, and I heard his fingers fumbling at the door handle.

He was rail-thin under his clothes when he hugged me, arms skinny enough that I could have touched thumb to middle finger around them. I was supposed to be helping him cook a frozen lasagna in the microwave, but quickly figured out that he was barely strong enough to sit at the kitchen island, and took over preparations instead. I don't remember what we talked about. I think it was schoolwork, and what shows he was watching. I do remember worrying that I was

treating him oddly, that I was making him uncomfortable, that he would think I was tiptoeing around him. I remember that he ate half the lasagna so fast it practically disappeared, and I pictured the cancer sitting in his brain like a hungry, demanding child with its fingers in his thalamus.

I had worried about a time limit on the visit, not knowing when I would get back into the city but consumed with guilt over the thought of leaving him. This wasn't necessary; merely sitting upright exhausted him, and he needed to sleep. I hugged him goodbye again, ready for the fragility this time, and thought in a detached way about how this would serve as a final visit if he died before I ever saw him again. I categorized positive parts of the past twenty minutes in my mind and affixed them with thumbtacks to a behind-the-eyes corkboard that I can't access anymore. Then I went back down the hallway, out into the sun, and caught the bus south in silence.

He moved to hospice barely a month later, and my mother's visits got more frequent. She drove across the border to a small town near Bellingham multiple times a week. He didn't have other family—most of them were long-dead, save for a sister who showed up just in time for the revision of his will. During this, there was a lot of talk that I didn't understand about legality, and the threat of an elder abuse report, and my brother returning from a visit with a stony face and taciturn refusal to talk. My parents talked about how to divide his assets behind a closed door. I thought, guiltily, about that stag head, and I excoriated myself over it all in private.

The last time I saw him, he couldn't move, and could barely open his eyes. A Navy officer was there to give him some kind of honour, with a certificate that they placed next to his bed thanking him for his service. His gaze flickered sideways to it, and he opened his mouth like he wanted to speak, but he couldn't. My mom had us wait in the hall while she got him more Jell-O. The solemnity of the ceremony seemed absurd—there wasn't anything dignified in this. My

grandfather had wanted to die on his own terms months ago, but never got the paperwork sorted, and by the time its necessity loomed he was unfit to decide.

A month earlier, I'd gone to see him, driving down with my mother and taking the day off from a class my grandfather had paid the tuition for. This is the time I remember, and the one that I count as the last time when I recount it. He could still speak then, and he wanted to watch an old musical on TV. We sat in the room with him while it was on. My eyes flicked between him and my mom, the floor and the ceiling, the features of the room: the flowers on the side desk, the blinds drawn against midday light, the quiet sterility of it all. Occasionally, down the hall, a woman let out something between a moan and a shout. A nurse's bell pinged repeatedly in the distance—the same person calling, over and over. The building smelled like hand sanitizer, rafflesia, and what I can only describe as the color mint green. I filed it all into neat mental cabinets, distant and already picturing what would come next. I had gone through the five stages long ago. We all knew it was coming, but nobody wanted to acknowledge that, and I was determined to show him only calm and caring.

My mom stepped out to talk to a nurse, and my grandfather turned to me, his head rustling the thin pillowcase. When he spoke, his voice was barely a whisper, each word laboured: "I want to die. I'm waiting for it."

"Soon," I said back, without thinking. "And, hopefully, gentle."

He rasped something that sounded like yeah, and turned his head back to the TV.

I relayed this to my mom when we were back in the car. She looked at me for a second; I saw it in the corner of my eye, but determined not to make full eye contact, unwilling to face the weight of whatever her gaze would hold. Then she looked back at the road, gripping the wheel a little tighter: "He won't say things like that to me." Late August sun, and heat shimmer behind distant cars, with yellow-green grass choked by exhaust fumes still eking out existence at the side of the road.



# CHILD'S PLAY

Sydney Marino

As a child, the best thing in the world was pretending. I spent hours every day lining up my stuffed animals on the carpet of my sister's bedroom and telling stories. They usually involved some sort of natural disaster that forced all of the stuffed animals to evacuate and survive on a deserted island, which was underneath the dining room table. Really, it was some heavy stuff for a six year old. But the hours spent creating these grand expeditions for my teddy bears, while my parents clanked around in the kitchen, are some of my warmest memories.

Six years old is the ideal age for pretending. You don't know anything about the real world yet, so you just make everything up, the way you think it's supposed to be. You have complete freedom to be as ridiculous as you want, and everyone will accept it. I think there's a little part of everyone that just wants to play. It's a little flame burning deep in your core that sparks up when you walk by an empty swing set that dares you to take a seat, or serves up your killer dance moves when you're alone and your song comes on. It's that fiery urge that wants to be allowed to pretend again. It never goes away; we just get better at suppressing it with shame, maturity, and other Important Adult Things as we get older. Why do we decide that at a certain age, everything that used to be fun is now shameful? What's the point of smothering that spark inside of us? Where's the fun in that?

Stuffed animals weren't the only subject of my pretending; I loved to dress up and perform. Every time we had a family dinner, my cousins and I would round up the whole family in



the living room to watch our latest show. The parents would clink quarters into our “by donation” admission jar and sink themselves into the couches, ready for whatever absurd performance was coming their way. I realize now that they encouraged us because we were young and cute, and they’d all had a few glasses of wine by then, but we appreciated the attention nonetheless. We performed everything from questionable magic shows to clumsy dance routines, complete with costumes and props. When I was ten, I even wrote a Halloween-themed musical that we learned in one night. (Our hit song was “You’re in hot water with Witchypoo” about a witch boiling a prince alive in her cauldron.) It was always wacky, and always disorganized, but that didn’t matter to us. The shows were the best part of the night, with all of the cousins coming together to cultivate our weird little talents. I would have continued those performances forever if everyone was on board. But, inevitably, they fizzled out as we all got older, each cousin jumping ship one by one as they reached the Shameful Ages.

The Shameful Ages begin at around twelve or thirteen. It’s that awkward transition when you’re still kind of a kid but you’re trying your hardest not to be. Everyone becomes hyper-aware of their peers as they struggle to be first to shake off the childhood that still hangs around their neck. Once the popular girls start wearing lip gloss and blue eye shadow, and begin plastering their walls with glossy posters of the latest “Hollywood hotties,” or “handsome hunks,” or “heavenly heartthrobs,” or some other variation of that horrendous horseshit, it’s all over. The act of “playing” or “pretending” vaporizes and is replaced by the vague term: “hanging out”. What does hanging out even mean? For me, it involved hours of wandering through malls with no money and talking about boys, neither of which I had much interest in. I was pretending again, but not the way I wanted to. Participating in anything that our younger siblings were interested in was now shrouded in a layer of shame. The type of pretending I liked, the playful kind, wasn’t allowed anymore.

Unfortunately, I realized this a little late. On Halloween of seventh grade, I decided to go all out with my costume. I was going to be an evil clown. My mom painted my face white with dramatic black arching eyebrows, a scar, and a wide crimson smile. A sponge nose, which trapped in the scent of the cheap drugstore face paint, completed the look. From the top of my scratchy red clown wig, to the tip of my Scooby Doo toe socks, I was a full on clown. I strutted into school, ready to compare my masterpiece with all of my friends' costumes. I then realized that I had made a grave mistake. Everyone, except for a couple of boys in halfhearted costumes, sat at their desks in regular clothes. My cheeks burned red under the white face paint. I was, in every sense of the word, a fool! It was too late to do anything; everyone had already seen me.

I remember sitting in class later that day. I hunched in my hard metal chair and scratched away at a math worksheet, like it was a normal day—except of course, for the fact I was dressed in full clown attire. To top it all off, the principal took me out into the hall and snapped a picture of my “amazing costume” to put in the school newsletter, just in case enough people hadn't already seen my humiliating moment. The innocent childhood playfulness I had loved so much was now replaced by a layer of embarrassment. The shame clung to me like a thin film, barely noticeable but uncomfortably present. I knew it was time for me to start locking the playful part of myself up. I was too old for this.

As I entered high school, I noticed everyone else locking that part of themselves up too. We told ourselves we were Mature Adults, too busy to act like kids anymore. The layers of shame grew thicker until the playfulness that we basked in a few years before was tucked into the dark. Sure, that flame sparked up in moments where I was joking around with my friends, but there was nothing lasting—for good reason, too. If a high school student acts too much like a kid, they're automatically the School Weirdo. No one wants to be that. The social rules are different from childhood, and they're upheld so

strongly that there's nothing anyone can do to change it. The best you can do is find a loophole.

The one avenue whereby adolescents and adults are allowed, even encouraged, to kindle that playful spark is through acting. The difference is that we don't call it playing, we call it art. I joined the school play in tenth grade, and became enormously involved in writing, directing, and acting in theatre for the rest of high school. It was just like being a kid again, only the terminology was different. I could revert back to my six year old state of goofiness and the director would just tell me I had "good comedic timing." Inside the theatre, the idea of shame didn't exist. Everyone supported each others' pretending. Even the most self-conscious people's playfulness started to creep out of the shadows. It was freeing.

As soon as I was allowed to pretend again, I went all out. In twelfth grade, I played Puck in a modern adaptation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. On the stage, all of my usual self-conscious worries vanished. With a bit of green face paint, glitter, and an ill-fitting fur vest, I transformed from a polite, reserved student into a wretched goblin hopping around the stage without the slightest twinge of embarrassment. Every night, I would cackle and prance under the beaming stage lights, letting my playful flame grow into an inferno. Then, I would douse the fire and package myself back up into a perfect parcel, wrapped in respect and stuffed with shame, just in time for class the next morning. Teachers who saw the play would come up to me to exclaim some variation of, "Oh my gosh, I never expected that of you! You're usually so quiet!" All I could do was laugh and shrug. By now, I had years of practice shielding that part of me from the non-theatrical world, and only letting it out onstage. I guess it was working.

As wonderful a loophole as acting is, there comes a point where it is no longer a viable option. High school ends, and with it ends the cheesy, casual type of theatre. For those of us who don't want to pursue a career in acting, our outlet for playfulness is snatched away from us, just when we've started



to peel back our layers of shame. At this point, what are we supposed to do? I had no idea. I could go back to smothering. I could focus on the Important Adult Things, and try to live in the real world, forgetting that the spark even existed. Maybe I was supposed to just leave it all behind me and grow up. I still couldn't help but wonder if everyone else around me had the same little flame flickering within them, begging to be set free, with no way out. I told myself to push it down and move on. I was acting like a child.

But was there anything wrong with that? I never cared about any of this stuff when I was a kid. I just let myself have fun. Maybe I had it right back then.

I started working with kids. I now assist music and theatre classes for two to six year olds. They keep my playful spark burning. The room fills with tiny voices and the sound of shaker eggs as we sing and dance together. They include me in their six year old shenanigans like I'm one of them. They don't know about the Shameful Ages yet, so of course I'd be a part of their fun. In their minds, everyone should want to play as much as they do. My favourite moments are when they pretend to be witches. One girl is always the evil witch who turns me into some absurd monster like an "angry piano" or an "evil dinosaur" with the swish of her wand. I transform into whatever they command in its full wackiness, sound effects and all, and chase them around the room. They squeal and giggle, light up sneakers slapping against the floor until one of them, the good witch, screeches to a halt and turns me back into myself. Then, it starts all over again. I guess Witchypoo lives on in the hearts of six year old girls.

As I watch them create their own games and stories, using the musical instruments as props, I can see the playful spark in its full, untamed glory. It flickers in their eyes and shines out through their laughter. I don't want them to ever have to lose it.

I don't want to hide the playful part of me away under layers of maturity and professionalism. I want to show those girls it's okay to keep being goofy, and to keep having fun.



What could happen if we encouraged that spark inside us to dance instead of hosing it down with disapproving looks and judgmental glares? We must stop digging our fingernails into maturity and wrapping ourselves so tightly in these layers of adult shame that our playfulness suffocates. I want to breathe. It's time we let each other play.

# LIKE FALLING

Kit Pacilla

## Chapter One: Possession

The Dead Girl was never made to dance.  
Toes tip through the floorboard,  
and the straw falls past her lips.  
This does not stop her from looking.  
Eyes parting the room,  
watching the breathing, the sweat,  
the basslines mingling,  
keeping time with arterial flow.

She looks for a girl;  
alive as she's ever been.

Finds her in the bathroom,  
bad decisions in tow,  
tries to force opacity back into her smile.  
The Alive Girl grins,  
offers a hand, suggestion.  
The Dead Girl was never made to dance,  
she was never made  
to smile at a girl in a bathroom  
making bad decisions.

alive as she's ever been.

## Chapter Two: The Places You Go

There is no way to love a Dead Girl  
without consenting to possession.  
With her inside, you see glimpses of heaven.  
Or hell.  
Depends on what kind of girl she was.

The Alive Girl learns quickly to focus on the angels.

See the secret places only when they're happy.

In return, the Dead Girl brings her ice,  
soothes the flames with her feather fingers,  
and a laugh that sounds like falling.  
And falling.

They sleep, and Alive Girl's head  
sinks into the Dead Girl's chest.  
They fuck, and her fingers sink deeper, too.

There is no standard of intimacy anymore.  
Not when she's found the cold.

### Chapter Three: Glow

It turns out the Dead Girl sleeps.  
The Alive Girl laughs the first time it happens,  
waking her.  
"I thought there was no rest for the wicked"  
"Who told you I was wicked?"  
Then silence.  
Then laughter like falling, and laughter,  
alive as she's ever been.

### Chapter Four: Knock Me Down

She's on the roof again,  
and she can feel the cold,  
and that means this is bad.

She doesn't feel alcohol like encouragement  
it was there,  
but not like she wanted.  
Out of every bad decision it helped her make,  
it denies responsibility for this one.  
And then she's crying,  
hot salt hitting shingles,  
Looking down,  
first at her feet, then at the ground  
rising to the heavens.

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The Alive Girl catches her,  
the Dead Girl  
re-lives her death post-traumatic  
cocooned by living arms.  
Slowly, learning to survive  
the unsurvivable

### **Chapter Five: Stars Away**

The duvet becomes a landing pad  
for the Dead Girl's falling dreams.  
Now that death is routine,  
it becomes less scary,  
but the dying is still there.

The Alive Girl sleeps with warm arms  
around corpse cold waist,  
hopes her heartbeat is heard  
over the wind on that roof,  
and they can sleep through the night.

### **Chapter Six: Young**

Despite our attempts to mutilate them, the dead stay perfect.  
Look at her go. Look at that ass.  
C Bain

The Alive Girl wants to celebrate  
The Dead Girl's birthday.  
Says  
"Let's take the focus off the bad.  
You're still here,  
(kind of)  
and that's worth celebrating."

They do, the first year.  
The second, they stop  
after cake and presents;  
a ring and a polaroid,  
showing a face that hasn't changed  
since 1995.



Death ages like molasses,  
 slow and sweet and laughing  
 every time they pass a forever twenty one.  
 The Alive Girl promises  
 she can love an ageless face,  
 so long as her laugh lines are still appreciated  
 when they come.

The Dead Girl agrees and kisses her.

### **Chapter Seven: Running For Blood**

Nothing divides  
 like pain and time.

Waiting for the end.

While one can live forever,  
 the other ends up dead.

And love, it cannot save her,  
 it didn't save her then.

Nothing divides  
 like pain and time

While waiting for the end.

### **Chapter Eight: The Body**

Remember when I had the kind of body you wanted?  
 The kind of body that rotted?  
 A body to get lost in?  
 They don't touch anymore  
 and the Dead Girl is mad about it.  
 Her skin, icy-translucent,  
 which used to invite exploration,  
 now guides warm hands back to their own.  
 She's forgotten what a pulse  
 feels like.  
 This is her punishment for being  
 unable to change.

The Alive Girl still claims love  
but sleeps solely in her own bed.  
Says the cold keeps her up,  
says she needs to learn how  
to be warm again.  
She tries with white hot words,  
tries to burn the Dead Girl's skin opaque  
with words that scorch like she feels the  
hot in her cheeks when she's mad.

They are too different.  
Their bodies betray it.  
The living were never meant to lie  
With the dead.

### **Chapter Nine: Ribbon Skin**

It is not the Dead Girl's fault she is dead,  
as it is not the Alive Girl's fault she still lives.  
There is no fault in this.  
Only death, only life,  
and the difficulty in reconciling the two.

### **Chapter Ten: In Her Arms**

The Dead Girl feels this worse than her funeral.  
There is a difference between people  
crying because you are gone,  
and crying because they asked you to leave.

She wishes for rooftops again,  
without intention.  
Maladaptive coping.  
an ending within her control

Still, she daydreams.  
Sees the Alive Girl in the grocery store,  
as if a Dead Girl needs to eat,  
stays out in the sun, hoping for burning heat.

They see each other on occasion,  
when the missing gets too bad.

But they're quieter now,  
 less fighting,  
 less falling laughter.

### Chapter Eleven: Living Alone/Living In Love

The first change the Dead Girl notices  
 is that she smiles more.  
 The second is her skin  
 feels less like tissue paper.  
 She wonders how she got so good  
 at being Alive.

The Alive Girl laughs at her clothes  
 when they next meet;  
 a mixture of teasing and joy  
 at the modernity of her fashion.  
 Says she looks like a model now,  
 says she looks happier.

The Dead Girl notices her laugh lines,  
 feels twisting guilt at her promise to love them,  
 or at still loving them.  
 Or at deciding what she's allowed to love  
 anymore.

They part, split a quick embrace  
 right down the middle as goodbyes fall  
 like laughter.  
 The Dead Girl takes her smile,  
 her skin,  
 her fashion,  
 and leaves  
 alive as she's ever been.

# SEA SNAKE

Denielle Hill

I and my mothers slide through tall grasses  
awaken to fresh spring blood  
My hands as all daughters wet in red  
From the forest  
our laughs like the bubbling creek  
ride down to the salt bay  
rush into the ocean's lap  
undulating beneath the waves  
the past shook from us  
our eyes unblinking  
vague shadows, shallow waters  
we rose to sun baked rocks our bodies blackened the beaches  
we wait for the sun to hide  
into the cliff walls as we do  
awaiting another day  
beyond cave shadows



# SWEET MARGRET, YOU ARE SUCH A HANDSHAKE

Avery Allan Mackay

Faint footprints on the sands of time,  
Why should I make excuses?  
Why should I  
describe the cherry blossoms fall?  
Admiring the view,  
avoiding,  
the man pays no attention.  
You are not my cure.

# AN ODE TO THE AMSTERDAM CAFÉ (WHERE IT STARTED)

Sonja Andjelic

"I like your hair and smile, let's go on a date"

I don't even smoke  
But at this point it didn't even matter  
We were meeting at the Amsterdam Café

It's Alien to me  
An electric buzz like street lamps at midnight  
When you greet me with a thousand reunions

Like we were

Alone, together on planet 5 dancing further from the sun  
Tuning into r&b transmissions on a pirouetting gobstopper

The room is hazy from our spaceship landing  
Incongruous little Jupiterians ordering from a menu

You get us a banana split bigger than any planet worth visiting  
Everything melts into each other

And we kiss but it's not a big deal  
A drag of cumulus spills over the edges of our lips  
lounging on top of the cloud we amassed out of aphrodisia  
And then you ask me a question

"Where should we go next?"

I decide on a mellow adventure and we get back on our rocket  
leaving trails of pop rocks to tickle the tops of earthlings heads

Almost out of gas until we see a neon refuge

The numbers 7 and 11 in white-hot dystopia  
We go in and slip down the aisle  
Of blue slushies and butterfingers

The humming lights reflect off of the candy  
Between the snickers and your sideways glances, one wrapper shines the  
most  
You propose to me with a juicy red ring pop.

# GRANDMOTHER

Denielle Hill

oh wee girl  
you can stand  
on my grave  
but  
Ya donno  
                    know  
me  
love

                    I'm dead  
little dove

I never  
held'ya  
you  
never  
saw  
me  
dressed as  
I am best  
in the flesh

oh lilies are  
lovely  
for some  
I canna stop you  
but  
flowers  
were never mine

I was a  
woman  
a jenny



wren  
of war

a  
lieutenant

My eyes were not a gentle woman's  
soft warm hands  
in your dreams  
Are not mine

I see you with my moonstone ring  
screw back earrings  
And something  
Pressed against your chest

So  
Stand there  
for all I care  
The husband who loved me  
Forgotten  
The friends, the folk  
of the town  
Who kissed this stone  
have gone now  
To this place

Stand and cry  
For this woman  
But she  
was never me

# DREAMLESS

Mary Zhu

The Sandman is a figure made from the strands of time. He weaves dreams of innocence and wonder for children, the world's next hope, but that's all he ever does. He weaves endlessly until loneliness creeps up on him and forces itself into the mantelpiece of his heart because he himself cannot dream. He gives every piece of himself to all the children out there for countless of eons when only in return, his generosity is greeted with nothing but a distinct lack of gratitude.

He is supposed to be the maker of dreams, but darkness is a lingering parasite that gobbles up the vigor he once possessed.

Hovering above a small boy deep in his slumber, The Sandman twists together a formation of dreams: golden carousels, loving animals, happy families. It drips with gilded sentiment but—no, The Sandman has begun to hate this sentiment. It is futile, fruitless, flippant. Every eon has passed and he's seen nothing but foul actions be made from the children who have dampened his hope for a better mankind.

"Please stop," the boy whines in his sleep, brows furrowing as everything turns black, drips with ink, with ire, with dispassion.

But The Sandman doesn't stop. He's gone too far—painted black when he used to be golden—to escape the wave of vindictive emotions that curl around his throat.

He lets the darkness swallow him whole until he becomes a nightmare himself.

## FLEETING

Ian Tulalian

In a few years, with new friends that I want to impress, I'll tell a story from tonight. One of the many. If I can somehow choose.

This story—like I'm sure all the others would, had I chosen them—will burn like the fire warming my face, crackling and popping in time with laughter from around. My eyes will well with tears. My hands will paint a picture so vivid that they'll transport my audience to another world; my world, from my eyes. This night will be remembered by this story and the world that they'll see through me.

And they'll love me. These stories will inform others that I've been places they haven't. Life as I know it is done. Over. What else is left to do? I've peaked. Surely, I've peaked. Best night out of my entire history of nights, honestly. I can't wait to tell these stories.

But morning will come.

The sun will stream in from the window, amongst the light drizzle of rain against the pavement and I'll know I'll have forgotten. Those worlds will have lived and died in my brain faster than the smoke rises from the fire. They weren't meant for any time but now. The story I'd have told, and all the others, belong to tonight.

But in the morning, when I'm missing all the details and the plot and everything else, I'll know that each and every one of these stories was nothing.

Nothing but amazing.

I'm sure.

# TREE

Chance Plomp-Schweitzer

This tree was there. Photo taken on last year's Christmas. Just down the street from the house I grew up in. I had also been living there last year. I would walk past this tree on my way to sneak down to the river and smoke cigarettes, hidden in the brush between the bank and the red shale path.

This tree had been there since I was born. It wasn't in my front yard, it had no impact on me, but it was like a member of the neighbourhood. I met the homeowners a few times. They had just bought the place recently, and I stopped to converse with the woman, mostly about the weather. You never really talk much more than about the weather with anyone outside of a two-neighbour radius. She seemed nice, as we chatted through the hedges she trimmed, lining the path. On other occasions she had been planting flowers. I was usually unkempt, probably hadn't showered in a day or two; being home not a part of my life's plan, but sometimes plans change.

I wouldn't say what happened to the tree was sinister, but it almost feels like it. They turned the front yard into some sort of awful rock garden, before flipping the house, a blight on a neighbourhood with plenty of beautiful, manicured, front lawns. I shouldn't really feel anything towards it, but now it's a missing puzzle piece in the vista of my mind. This tree was there.



# NOTES

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