

w49

a magazine of award-winning poetry,
fiction, and creative nonfiction
vol. 13



Editorial

Writing, said the American novelist Ernest Hemingway, “is architecture, not interior decoration.” What he meant—and what anybody who has ever seriously tried to write anything of substance knows—is that, contrary to the widespread view of “writing” as frivolous and useless in comparison to the work that needs to be done in the “real” world, writing *is* work. Writing does things: it designs expressions, builds history, ideas and arguments, gives sense and structure to that “real” world we live in every day. Writing is the product of strong, hard working people who want to actively participate in life.

This volume of W49 Magazine represents the hard work of former and current Langara students. These students have written the best poems, stories and creative nonfiction submitted to the 13th annual Langara College Writing Contest in 2008. We received well over one hundred submissions in the three categories. The submissions to each category were read and judged by faculty in the English Department: Heather Burt, Caroline Harvey, Paul Headrick, Felicia Klingenberg, Mary-Beth Knechtel, Ramon Kubicek, Trevor Newland, Roger Semmens, John Webb, Guy Wilkinson and Peter Babiak.

The Department of English would like to thank all the students and alumni who submitted their work to the Langara Writing Contest: the volume of manuscripts we received is a testament to your vitality and creative labour. We also thank Jessica Wilkin, who holds a BA in English Literature from SFU and is currently a student in Langara’s Publish program. She put her talents to work in the design, illustration and layout of this lovely volume.

For more information on the Langara Writing Contest, see the 15th annual call for submissions on the inside back cover. W49 Magazine is available online, through the Langara College website, so the writers in this volume will have their work reach a much larger audience of readers.

Peter Babiak
English Department

Langara English Department

The English Department offers a variety of courses at the 1st and 2nd year university levels. With few exceptions, credit for our courses is fully transferable to any university in British Columbia. We offer students the opportunity to design an innovative program of study which can range from classical to cutting-edge: a wide array of literature and composition courses, specialized courses in linguistics, theatre history, poetics and writing for the stage or screen. The English Department coordinates the following areas: English, Creative Writing and Communications. Visit us at:

<http://www.langara.bc.ca/departments/english/>

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Reflections by the Duck Pond

ABIGAIL BROWN

first prize: creative nonfiction

September 1976:

I'm seventeen the first time I walk past the duck pond under the willow trees, and through the big glass doors. I'm at Langara to find a husband. I want to get married and have babies. I want to be in love.

I find him in my second semester. When I ask him how he plans to make the world a better place he says, "have children." That's my plan too! I want to move to the country, build a house out of logs that I fell myself, grow all my food and raise the happiest, healthiest, smartest kids ever. He's a country boy. He spent the past few summers on the Blood Indian Reserve in Alberta. He's definitely my man!

Since he writes poetry too, I suggest we get together and share. When he meets me in the cafeteria the next day, he's wearing a denim shirt that his mom's embroidered with flowers. We sit outside on the grass in the sunshine. I can't understand his poetry so I figure he's super intelligent. He explains that everything's connected: the smallest movement of a butterfly's wing changes the course of history and causes reverberations in the farthest galaxies. Every so often he pulls his harmonica out of his pocket and plays a melancholy tune...

In June I accompany him back to his home in Yellowknife. We play tennis in the midnight sun and loaf at the lake. I thrill to eat Cheese Whiz, grape jelly and white bread—things my mom would never buy.

After a few weeks it's time to make some money. He stays to cook for a fishing crew and I go down to the States to be a camp counsellor. His letters are filled with little sketches of scenery and mine are about love.

At the end of summer we decide to go camping in the Okanagan. I post a note above my bed before I leave in case anyone wonders who I am and where I'm going. It's my farewell letter. The words I quote are by Tatanga Mani, a Stoney Indian:

Oh yes, I went to the white man's schools. I learned to read from school books, newspapers, and the Bible. But in time I found that these were not enough. Civilized people depend too much on man-made printed pages. I turn to the Great Spirit's book which is the whole of his creation. You can read a big part of that book if you study nature. You know, if you take all your books, lay them out under the sun, and let the snow and rain and insects work on them for a while, there will be nothing left. But the Great Spirit has provided you and me with an opportunity to study in nature's University, the forests, the rivers and the mountains, and the animals, which include us.

I picture my parents sitting on my bed; for once they are close to each other. There are tears in their eyes as they read Tatanga's words. Mom says to dad, "We never really knew her did we?" And dad just shakes his head sadly...I like to imagine that scene, but I know that no one will notice my note.

My man and I are standing on the side of the freeway waiting for a ride east. The sign we're holding up, the one we made last night, says 'HOPE.'

After Hope the rides keep going east, and we keep taking them. After a few days of this we decide to change our plan. Let's go to St. John's, Newfoundland and dip our toes in the Atlantic.

After that we pick potatoes in New Brunswick. We get up at 4:00 a.m., eat with the farmer and his wife, and then join the other workers on the back of a flatbed truck. We bump over the fields while the first glint of sunrise splits the night.

I'm a slow picker. Standing bent at the waist, head down to the ground with my legs astride a barrel, chucking potatoes in as fast as I can, I'm suffering from indigestion. In fact, I'm feeling pretty sick a lot of the time. He says maybe I'm pregnant but I don't think so.

Next we hitchhike to New York. Arriving there with no American cash, we find ourselves at the airport waiting for the money exchange to open. It's a rough night and we suddenly decide to beat a retreat north of the border. We take the next flight to Winnipeg.

From there we plan to hitchhike to Bella Coola and settle down to raise family. We get as far as Anahim Lake. It's so cold in the morning that I find ice crystals in my shampoo. The locals say we're crazy to be sleeping outside because of the bears. On top of that, I'm so nauseous! The rides going west don't come, so we cross the street and hitch back out to Williams Lake, and then south to Vancouver.

At Langara when our friends ask us where we've been, he quotes Johnny Cash and says with a big smile, "We got married in a fever, hotter than a pepper sprout." Our baby's due in June.

January 1988:

I'm twenty-nine when I walk by the duck pond and through those big glass doors for my second stint at Langara. I'm a single mom now and my children are 6, 8, and 10. This time I want to finish my Arts and Sciences Diploma and then go to UBC. I want to be a teacher and earn enough money to provide for my little family.

I can't decide what to focus on for my Bachelor of Arts. I still want to do something to make the world a better place. One day in the halls of Langara I notice a room called 'Geography Lab.' It has rocks, globes, maps, and pictures of rivers, mountains and lakes. Cool. At home I look up 'geography' in the dictionary and it says, "the study of the relationship between man and his environment." I can hardly believe my eyes! Geography includes the earth and people!

This time at Langara I'm here to learn and I love all my courses: climatology, meteorology, geomorphology. What a change from the parenting, cooking and cleaning that keeps me busy at home.

One of my first Geography assignments is to go out into the wild world of Vancouver, choose any place, big or small, and describe it in detail as we imagine a geographer would. I go to Kits beach near the Planetarium. I pick a boulder. A big boulder about four feet high. I describe it using all my senses. What it looks like is easy, and what it feels like is pretty easy too. Smell and taste is harder, and sound...well maybe if I was a little more advanced I could report otherwise, but as far as I'm concerned this boulder is very quiet. I ace the assignment!

After I finish at Langara I do two years at UBC to get my B.A. in Geography, and then I take the twelve-month Teaching Program to get my Bachelor of Education. During that last year of school I feel like I'm wading through waist-high mud with flippers on my feet. I focus on the end which is now in sight. I limp across the finish line, but soon after graduation I wipe out. I can't get up. We go back on social assistance.

After about a year of therapy and medication where my main goal is to keep breathing, I feel ready to teach. I get a job in a small private elementary school. I discover quite quickly that being in front of a classroom isn't my vocation. I feel like the man who saved up all his life for a sailboat, set sail at the age of sixty five, and discovered, much to his dismay, that he suffers from extreme sea-sickness. Now what?

I had pinned all my hopes on this one goal. I had worked incredibly hard to reach it. My secret dream from childhood was to have an article about me in Reader's Digest Magazine, an article written by one of my students saying if it wasn't for me their life would have been bleak and I'd made all the difference. Alas.

Teaching does me in. I crawl out of the classroom at the end of each day and drag myself home. My throat hurts. My head hurts. I'm always tired. Many mornings the bus driver has to wake me up when we get to Horseshoe Bay where my school is. And many evenings the bus driver has to wake me up at the end of the line in downtown Vancouver. "Excuse me Miss" he says, gently shaking my arm. I open my eyes to see this stranger looking down

on me in a darkened quiet bus. I jump off, alarmed and apologetic. Even my students have to wake me up when I fall asleep in the classroom sitting at my desk. “Mrs. Hearth, Mrs. Hearth” they say urgently, and I’d waken to see their concerned young faces.

So I decide to get less stressful work. Right around then something wonderful happens: I fall in love. We court for two and a half long years, careful not to rush into marriage. After our wedding he encourages me to take it easy and pursue my art.

January 1999:

I’m forty-one when I walk by the duck pond to attend Langara for my third fresh new start. Now my children are 16, 18 and 20. I’m here to take some writing courses. I hope that if I learn to tell a story well, I can help make the world a better place, and bring in an income.

Suddenly one night my son is hospitalized. He’s inherited my genes which predispose us to anxiety disorder. He can’t finish grade 12. The doctors tell me that his is the worse case they’ve ever seen. I visit him in the psych ward where everyone wears the same pajamas and slippers and eats with plastic cutlery, so they can’t hurt themselves or anyone else. My heart is busting up with pain inside watching him suffer, and on the outside I’m strong and brave.

My poetry teacher asks me to present one of my poems to the public during Langara’s Open House. I do, right after I’ve signed my son out of the hospital. Together we take the bus to Langara. He sits in the audience while I read:

*“... God, how do broken people give birth to whole children?
To children who know they count?
Children not afraid of the sound of their voice.
Children who can try, risk, dare,
And say, “I’m here!”
I need a ticket, a seat, a chance, a moment
to tell my story.
It’s my turn for Show and Tell.”*

January 2008

I'm nearly fifty and I'm back at Langara: take four! My children are doing well, and I have three grandchildren. I've published some writing, sold some art, and taught a few children a few things. I haven't done anything to earn an inspirational story in Reader's Digest, and I certainly haven't earned much money.

In my wallet is a little piece of paper that I found on the sidewalk years ago. It says, "We can do no great things. Only small things with great love." Apparently Mother Theresa said that, and I guess after all, she's right.

I'm studying to be a library technician. I love my classes, I love meeting new people, I love using my brain, and just as much as I did thirty years ago, I love walking by the duck pond under the willow trees.



Frida Kahlo

ALEX WINSTANLEY

second prize: poetry

Thick,
the spice
on Mexican fruit
fresh out of her temples—
pulsating hearts—
no halos.

Her face as
strong
as any man's.

Spattered blood surrounds her,
a fluid reflection of her image
made pure indigenous earth.

The stag framed fleeing,
wearing her head,
moving when she couldn't—

to get air she twisted and turned,
a jagged ache.

A broken skeleton
and abdomen impaled
by a bus
lives inside—
the song of death,
a decorated sugar skull.

Strength
in her chair-bound body,
house to so much beauty;
forced herself
out of blood
and into paint.

One by One

LISA LE BLANC SHIVE

honourable mention: short fiction

*Each time a man stands up for an ideal,
acts to improve the lot of others,
or strikes out against injustice,
he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope...
those ripples build a current that can sweep down
the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.*

Robert F. Kennedy (1925–68)

South Africa, 1966

Under cover of a still night, fifty-eight black-eyed mice line up on the docks. One by one they silently pass a large stack of bills to the snake at the front of the line.

One by one they jump off the dock and scrabble at a rope hanging off the side of a ship. Some miss and swim back to shore. They crawl back down the dock to start the long journey again, shivering, their fur already wet and cold.

Teenaged Yu shifts his weight to one side, as his father clutches all the bills that he could collect. “He is young. I don’t have the full price, but he can work for you on the other side to make up the rest.”

The snake's head juts forward at Yu. His forked tongue flicks at him, hissing, “Very dangerous, if anyone finds you.”

Shoving his son forward, the skinny grey-hair turns and staggers away, to return to the poppy fields. Yu knows there is no point calling out to his father, to argue again that he’s afraid to go alone. He peers up at the rope leading into the ship.

He will miss his friends. He will miss his mother. Since the Weasels had heard that she practices the forbidden dance, she hasn’t been home. Maybe when he gets to the other side he can

save enough to bring her across too.

In line behind Yu, a teenager cradles her growing belly. She whispers, leaning her head against her mate's strong shoulder. "The baby will come after we get across the water. Tell me again. What did your mother say when you called home from work?"

"She said not to come home. The Weasels were there looking for you."

"But how did they know?"

"The neighbours know we're too young to have permission to mate. They told the Weasels that you're living with us and that you're heavy with offspring. Mama was crying. She said to get on the boats. The Weasels will imprison us otherwise. We'll be beaten. They will make me rip the head off of our offspring before it even has a chance to open its eyes."

Yu shifts his weight and turns to face the pregnant mouse. "The weasels won't find us now," he sneers, and curls his lip in an attempt to smile.

Yu's teacher had threatened to report him to the Weasels. At night, after cooking and cleaning for his father, Yu was too tired to do his homework. Every evening he pretended to be asleep when his father staggered home from the fields, woozy from eating too many poppy seeds. His father would bellow in a slurred voice, "Fool! Lazy fool! You burned dinner again." Yu would curl himself into a tight ball, pulling his arms up to protect his face from the kicks that were sure to follow.

Last night, his father quietly ate dinner while he instructed Yu, "You are a bad student and there is no work here. Tonight you are going to cross the water, so you can send money home from over there." Yu knew that any money he sent to his father would be spent on poppy seeds.

Now it is Yu's turn to claw for the rope. He scampers to the edge of the dock and leaps out, his legs flailing. He scurries up and over the edge, then hits the cold metal floor inside the ship. He grunts "oomph" before rolling over someone's leg. Slinking backwards into the darkness, he leans against the wall while others scuffle in the dark.

Blackness fills every corner of the windowless container. Whispers pierce the night for a little while. The gentle groaning of the hull ripples the velvet silence. In the blackness, Yu can hear stamping feet and brushing hands of the forbidden dance. He imagines their bodies swaying gracefully. Here, where the Weasels can't see them, they still fear being beaten to a bloody death for the moving meditations that flow through their bodies.

The silence seems to heave the faint moan of the ship's engines. Occasionally, the silence is broken by the crash of waves or the sound of someone relieving himself into a bucket. When Yu needs to relieve himself, he feels around in the darkness to find a bucket too. He tries to ignore the stickiness that embeds itself under his nails and crawls along his skin as he reaches out into the darkness.

The mice know it's daytime when the walls and floor of the metal container sear their skin. Most of the oxygen has been sucked out of the air that is trapped inside. Time is spent sleeping.

Yu overhears the pregnant mouse awaken from a fitful dream. "We were eating rice at home with your mother. The little one was feeding, too. Suddenly, chaos broke out in the streets. The Weasels set the city on fire. Everyone was screaming, and clawing over each other to get to the boats. We were running. I looked down and realized that somehow, in the panic, we had forgotten to grab our little one."

Yu hears her scuffle over to the buckets. When she is finished, she curls her swollen body up next to Yu by mistake. He listens to her soft breaths for a long time before she awakens with a start and scrambles back to her mate.

Sometimes Yu dreams about the mysterious place across the water. Life will be different there. The rules will be different. Even the trees will be different. Once he gets off the boat Yu won't even be able to speak to anyone. He won't know the language.

For the first few days at sea, food and fresh water are tossed into the container. About a week into the trip, the ship rocks violently. Buckets slosh until a wave knocks the boat over sideways. Everyone slides into a pile at one end of the container. When the

ship levels out again, those at the bottom of the pile don't get up. Not even when the buckets fall over, spilling their contents onto them.

No food is delivered for a long time after that. No one calls out for food. They know that if they are discovered, the Weasels will be enraged that the mice have defied the rules. To discourage other mice from crossing the water, everyone on the ship would be caged and slowly tortured to death.

Behind parched lips, Yu's dry tongue sticks to the roof of his mouth. Hidden by the night, he crawls over to a bucket, and imagines that just a sip would be enough to wet his tongue. His cracked tongue feebly probes the darkness.

For the next few days, the symphony of moaning and retching swells. Sometimes when the ship lurches, someone rolls onto him and presses against Yu until someone calls out, "Another one." Then they pull the bony body off and pile it in the corner with others that don't move anymore.

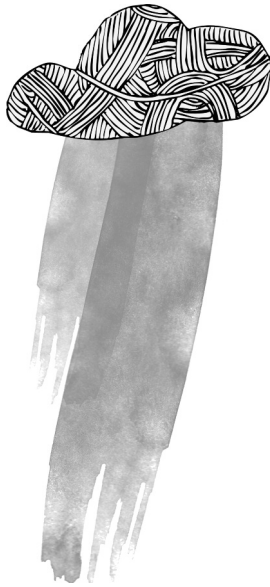
When the door finally opens a crack, food is tossed into the darkness. The mice pounce blindly, clawing at the food, scratching and biting each other until not a scrap of food remains.

When Yu hears voices calling out in a strange language, he thinks he's dreaming again. The door finally opens wide and a blast of fresh air rushes in, filling the mice's withered lungs. Yu's black eyes clench shut against the stabbing pain of daylight. He squints, trying to focus on the pale faces peering in at him. He blinks back at foreign eyes the colour of the sky. The pale mice point towards Yu and the others with authority, ordering the black-eyed mice to get off the boat. Their shiny fur reminds Yu of the black-eyed Weasels.

Yu scrambles to get out of the container, but his legs buckle underneath him. He trips back onto the slimy floor, knocking over the buckets. Scurrying to get up again, he's terrified of angering the faces looming down at him. The pale creatures slowly move forward. Yu stiffens and recoils as they reach out towards him. They smile at Yu, cooing softly. Lifting him onto his feet, they gently lead him out of the container and off of the ship.

All the black-eyed mice gather together under bright lights. They keep their eyes down so as not to anger the pale-faced mice. One by one, the older mice are led away to a separate cage. A sobbing voice whispers to the others, “The pale mice will decide if we can stay on this side of the water.”

Yu is left alone with the other teenagers. He reaches out to touch the shoulder of the weeping, pregnant mouse. He guesses that her mate is in the pile that doesn't move anymore.



Sandbox

SARAH SOUSA

first prize: short fiction

My pants are wet. Warm pee is running down my legs and into my socks. Maybe I drank too much water? I'm in Patrick's backyard. Before, we were playing alone on his swing set. Patrick is inside using the bathroom, and Max just came outside, he is watching me.

There is a squishy puddle of pee under my butt. My cheeks are hot. I am holding the chains and looking at my feet. The soggy pants remind me of what happened yesterday. It was raining, so I was inside. I was standing near the heater, the one in front of the window. I was trying to get warm and watching the rain. I love being outside and making sand castles. But when it rains the sand doesn't stay together. It gets all mushy and muddy and the moat goes up into the towers.

Someone stopped behind me. They put their large hand on my shoulder. They had dry Nike sneakers with white laces. I looked at them, and then turned back to the window. They moved closer to me.

I should be grateful. I should enjoy it.

The sliding door is opening. Patrick is back outside.

"Wanna play in the sandbox now?" Patrick is yelling. My seat is still wet. The puddle has drooled onto the dirt. I slide off of the swing and eat my sleeve. I walk slowly to the sandbox. The sand looks brighter today, maybe the rain cleaned it? Patrick is pouring it into his bucket.

"We'll make a castle in that corner," he says, but he doesn't look at me. I walk to the outdoor tap and fill up the bucket with a white handle. I bring it back to Patrick and drip half of it; I sit down and try to help.

"No, not there!" he screams. "We're making it over there," he points to the corner. He looks at me and notices. I feel naked.

"Your pants are wet."

"I spilled water," I whisper and stare at my dark pants.

He looks away and finishes filling his bucket. He pats down the

sand, flips it upside down and shows me a perfect tower. I start filling my bucket, but it takes a while. My sand jumps over the top and falls onto my crossed legs. I don't brush it way.

I was sitting the same way last Thursday. I wasn't building a sandcastle, I was reading. My teacher was sick, and they couldn't find a substitute. My Mom and Dad had to go to work. Patrick's Mom works at home. His kindergarten teacher wasn't sick, only mine was.

I was reading the pictures of *The Foot Book*, on the grass, when they sat down across from me.

"What are you reading?" they asked.

"The foot book," I closed the book and faced the cover towards them, so they could see the white book. They leaned closer, resting their hands on my ankles.

"What page are you on?" they asked as they slid their hands up to my knees and drummed their fingers. I flipped through the book, looking for my page.

"This one," I pointed to the page with the big yellow animal on top a white hill; I closed the book again. I looked at the ground; I felt goose bumps on my back.

"Aren't you bored of reading?" they asked, leaning closer. Their breathe smelt like mint and cinnamon. They were wearing black plastic glasses and their eyes were big behind them. Their Nike laces were still white.

I felt their hand move up my right leg. I started to shiver.

I should be happy and grateful. I am lucky and special. I should enjoy it.

Someone is touching my knee. I look up.

"Are you ok?"

It's Patrick. His eyebrows are wrinkled around his nose, and his bottom lip is curved down. He has made three sand towers, all perfect, side by side.

"Yah," I stretch my cheeks toward my eyes and show my teeth.

Later, Patrick's Mom calls us in for lunch. We have made a big fortress. There is even a moat with water in it, but we don't have a crocodile. I love making forts with Patrick, it's safe. We get up and run

inside, Max comes in too. My pants are still wet. Patrick's mom notices and tells Patrick to give me some of his. When I'm dry, we head back to the kitchen. We are having Portobello mushroom wraps and fruit smoothies.

I have to go to Patrick's house every Sunday, cause Mom and Dad need to work; we only live two doors down. We're the same age, me and Patrick, so we're friends. Patrick's older brother, Max, is in grade 11, he's cool. Every Sunday, after lunch, Patrick has karate. His Mom goes shopping in the mall for three hours, alone. Max stays home. I miss the sandbox; all you need is water and sand, which is dirt, to make anything. I wish I could make a fort.

But I'm kept inside. I stay under the crawl space, where it's dark, I can hide. That's where I am now. They're looking for me. They open the small door. How do they always find me? They close the door, and sit down facing me.

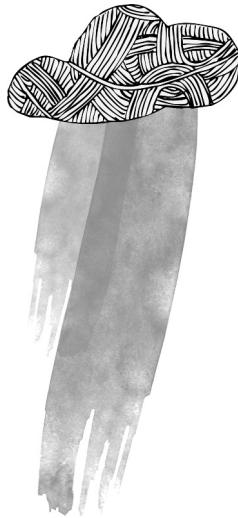
"Say it," he whispers and moves closer.

"I'm very lucky. I should enjoy this."

My legs are shaking. I hold them down with my elbows and concentrate on the floor.

Max starts, he always does.

I am grateful. I am very lucky.



Undermine

PAIGE HOHMANN

honourable mention: poetry

against the dark
and all so still
like a passion it bends walls
in her mouth his ugly name
 she spits again
 she spits again

a pearl of hate has settled there

from his finger
to her core
the thread between is thinner, poorer
it winds around and spans the road
and crawls beneath her bedroom door

Adventures in Catholicism

KATIE STEWART

honourable mention: creative nonfiction

For M.D.

(December 11th, 1974 – July 20, 2008)

I hate Jesus.

Why does even writing that give me such violent pangs of guilt?

I'm sure after years of overpriced psychotherapy I'll be able to write those words with the conviction of a full-blown atheist.

Growing up in a staunchly Catholic household was far from fabulous. I recall feeling left out when all of my childhood friends were riding bikes up and down my street while my sister and I were praying the Rosary to the three-foot Virgin Mary statue in our living room.

At first I thought my mother put this life-sized religious doll in front of the biggest window in our Chilliwack home so that my “pagan” friends could see my angry, little face as I spat out my Hail Marys, but later I realized it was part of my mother's ploy to intimidate the Jehovah's Witnesses that had the misfortune of being assigned to convert the residents of 5695 Janis Street. On those rather dismal Saturdays, when little old ladies came a knockin' with their copies of *The Watchtower*, you could almost hear my mother screaming “Praise the Lord!” at the end of every sentence: it was like she was trying to out-Jesus them. And between her overzealous Bible quoting and the giant Mary statue glaring at the intruders, she always won.

Don't get me wrong, I think for the majority of my childhood I had a fairly stable upbringing and I don't recall being bombarded with strange Catholic rituals. But for one miraculous reason or another, by the time I turned twelve, 4:30 p.m. suddenly became

pray-time instead of play-time. Wednesdays were especially exciting because our daily Rosary praying was relocated to The Bartholomew house, another profoundly Catholic family that didn't believe in contraception. They had six pimple-faced boys, all about 11 months apart: Michael, Anthony, Jacob, Noah, Daniel, and Joseph. (What? No Abrahams?) Throughout the fifty-three Hail Marys, I would stare at the boys and do rough calculations as to how many days Mr. Bartholomew allowed between the birth of his first child and the conception of the next one.

Granted, I didn't really mind these one hour chanting sessions. Not only did my math skills improve, but I was able to perfect my talent for detaching my attention completely — an indispensable skill for painstakingly boring Sunday sermons. I can be asleep with my eyes open. I remember one particularly embarrassing situation where I was completely in the church “zone” during a school safety presentation. When the presentation ended with applause, I “woke up” and automatically made the sign of the cross. My classmates thought I was *really* into safety.

Excuse me. Back to the praying.

As far as I could gather, the prayer group was a relatively elite group of Catholic fanatics headed by Mr. Joe Wittick, the resident Chilliwack visionary. For a man with only five front teeth and who habitually reeked of onions, the ability to have little chats with God made him into a regular celebrity among lonely Catholic housewives. After a Rosary session one evening, Mr. Wittick told us about his most recent vision where he was escorted to Heaven and driven around in a stylish white Cadillac. In this holy Hollywood, each saint was given a Beverly Hills style mansion nice enough to make Lindsay Lohan a convert. The sun always shone, palm trees lined the streets, and I'm sure Jesus and his gang of sun-kissed apostles roamed the sands of Venice beach looking for water to turn into wine.

I suddenly wanted to thrust my hands in the air and voice my enthusiastic approval of this star-studded heaven. Really, if praying

in someone's living room could bring me one step closer to my own celebrity villa in the sky, get me some knee pads—I'm in.

Even as a freckle-faced, Jesus lovin' kid, I had the distinct impression that not everything that I heard in Church was to be taken literally. I wasn't actually eating little pieces of a holy guy who died 2000 years ago, nor was I sipping his grape juice flavoured blood. Still, some people obviously took this shit seriously.

I recall being particularly troubled by the Bible story regarding Abraham and his attempted sacrifice of his "beloved" son Isaac. I was horrified by the image of poor, little Isaac lugging bundles of wood up a mountainside to build a sacrificial fire that would essentially be his personal tanning booth. But Abraham loved God so much that he happily strapped his kid to a ready-made barbeque and whipped out a shiny blade to finish off the job. And while I'm sure all the churchgoers were inspired by Abraham's selfless obedience, I couldn't help feeling a little worried that our church was filled with equally sadistic parents who would heartlessly butcher their children just because some giant voice in the sky thought it'd be fun to see if they would actually do it.

Usually the Abraham and Isaac story would be read during Sunday mass at least once a year, which gave me about 365 days to forget about how great God's sense of humor was. One Sunday after having the pleasure of hearing my favorite bible story, however, I made an enormous mistake. On the car ride home from church I interrupted the flood of inspirational Praise 106.5 FM music that pumped through our mini-van speakers:

"If the pope asked you to wear polka-dots to church every Sunday, would you do it?"

With a slight chuckle, my mother answered, "Yes, but I'm sure he'd have a good reason for it."

"And what if God asked you to sacrifice *me*, would you do that too?"

And with the same unwavering devotion, she replied, "Yes, I would."

Lesson learned. Never ask your parents questions that you don't want to know the answers to.

Catholic school with a mushroom cut is no fun. At about the same time that my family started praying for the sins of the world, my mother decided it would be a great idea to yank us out of public school and enroll us in private Catholic school, good ol' St. Mary's.

And as if switching schools wasn't traumatic enough, my sister and I were escorted to the hairdresser's where an overweight lady named Patricia gave us both some terrifying gender-bending hairdos. I remember watching huge chunks of my self-esteem float down to the floor with each violent snip of Patricia's scissors. It doesn't matter how cute you think you are — a mushroom cut doesn't look good on anyone. Ever.

Catholic high school is different from public high school in 7 very important ways:

1. In Catholic school you are required to wear extremely unflattering uniforms that typically involve plaid.
2. Contrary to popular belief, the Catholic school population is not necessarily comprised of just overly sheltered, Jesus loving, Bible trivia masters. When extremely violent students are removed from the public school system, it is common practice to give the delinquent student the option between juvenile detention centers or private school. The majority choose private school. Similarly, if a student in the public school system is caught dealing drugs, they are kicked out of the entire district. Catholic schools are outside of the district. And regardless of religion, all kids like drugs.
3. In Catholic school, once a month the entire school files into the gymnasium for an impromptu church service. Confession—the opportunity to be absolved from your sins—occurs between a priest and a student alone in a darkened sports equipment room.

4. As the Catholic Church regards premarital sex, birth control, condoms, and any type of contraception as mortal sins (the worstest, most horriblest kind of sin there is), there are absolutely no sex education classes in Catholic school. Instead, the entire school is periodically filed into the gymnasium/church for grotesque videos showing abortion procedures.
5. In Catholic school, Darwin's Theory of Evolution is not taught in Biology classes. It is only a "theory."

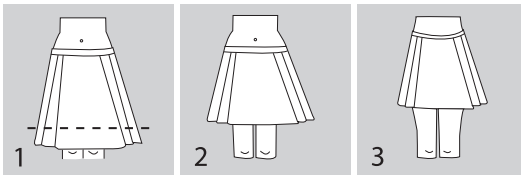
When you have to wear a uniform every day, it makes getting up in the morning significantly less stressful. Your options are simple: plaid with a bright red V-neck or just plaid. People can't judge you if you can't afford the latest pair of super-low rise Mavi jeans, nor can they make fun of your ugly stained polo shirts. Everyone is wearing ugly stained polo shirts. In fact, laundry is practically non-existent: just rub a scented dryer sheet over your uniform. Done.

The battle of expression, or simply setting yourself apart from the colony of uniformed drones, was particularly difficult. The focus shifted to bizarre and unflattering hairstyles and hooker-style footwear. As long as your shoes didn't have a clear-platform heel, you were good to go. Of course, modifications to the actual uniform itself were encouraged, and for females it was all about the kilt.

Kilt Shortening 101:

Step one: Purchase one, and only one, overpriced tartan-skirt.

Step two: At the seamstress', pull the kilt down as far as you can while your conservative mother indicates the "proper" length of the skirt (approximately no more than 2 inches above the knee, lest you be instantly impregnated by the opposite sex—God knows how, we didn't have sex-education after all). See Images Below.



Step three: Once you've picked up your modest-length skirt from the seamstress', reset the waist buttons so that the waistline is as high as your grandmother's stylish polyester pants. End product: you have effectively converted your uniform into an overpriced plaid dinner napkin.

DISCLAIMER: This technique may not be appropriate or successful for all students. In fact, the only experience I have had with this technique ended rather poorly. Once my mother recognized that my kilt was beyond repair, she confiscated my uniform and forced me to wear my older sister's conservatively long kilt. One day, a few months later, I managed to steal my kilt back from my mother's closet. Balancing my textbooks on my lap to cover my exposed thighs, I managed to survive the car ride to the bus stop without the Warden noticing. However, as soon as I dashed out of the car I'm sure I must have flashed her my underwear as I ran to the bus. I could hear her yelling as the bus pulled away. As soon as I arrived at school, the secretary of the school was waiting for me.

"Miss Stewart?"

"Yes?" I replied while readjusting my kilt.

"I just received a call from your mother. I believe the principal would like to speak with you in his office."

In order for the principal to make an accurate measurement of my skirt-length violation, I was asked to kneel on the floor so the length of exposed thigh could be measured with a ruler.

The rest of the year I wore pants.

By the end of my highschool career, I stopped going to Church and started dating a Mormon. In my mother's profoundly Catholic

opinion, this was equivalent to prostitution and drug use. I was kicked out of the house in grade 12 because I was too “sinful” to live in the same house as “real” Catholics. Considering all the suffering religion has caused me in my uneventful life, perhaps it is understandable why I have inadvertently become obsessed with it. I am completely fascinated with how ridiculous it all is: I love the corny plastic rosaries, the gold-framed holographic pictures of Jesus (when slightly angled turns into Mary), and my personal favourite—the handy-dandy pocket sized Jesus.

While in Spain last year, I realized I was in a Jesus Mecca. Beautiful handcrafted 4-inch Jesus statues (made in China) were conveniently sold for less than two Euros. I couldn’t resist. The mini Jesus and I had a wonderful European vacation together, and despite the frowns I received from other tourists as I posed with my holy companion in front of the Eiffel Tower and Big Ben, I felt like I finally understood the old Christian saying “Always have Jesus in your heart.” He fits nicely in a handbag as well.

One of the best things I ever got out of nine years of Catholic education was a laminated “Admit One” card for Heaven. I earned the card from being involved in a travelling Bible trivia group that competed against other Catholic poindexters from around the globe. It was kind of like Jesus Jeopardy:

Q: This is the rite performed by a priest whereby evil spirits are driven out of a person's body in the name of Christ.

(Insert buzzer sound)

A: What is exorcism?

I kept the card for years because I thought it was fucking ridiculous, but also because I thought that it might come in handy one day. A few years ago, I wrapped it up and gave it to my mother for Christmas. I think she was so excited that she cried.

Since I stopped going to Church eight years ago, my family life has been a constant battle against Jesus. Most ex-Catholics will probably say the same thing. I truly wish that somehow I could control my gag

reflex when I see energetic, newly “born again” young people running around town proclaiming the “truth.” I feel like a Pavlovian experiment gone wrong, but instead of bells and drooling, it’s Jesus and anger. It’s something in the back of my throat that could be bile and something in my chest that could be grief. It’s like Jesus was my flawless older brother that died too young in a horrible car accident; I feel a connection to him, but it’s bitter and angry and I am constantly competing with him for the affection of my mother. There are pictures of him all over the house to remind me that I can never be loved as much as he is.

I want to think religion is a wonderful thing for humanity—and when it doesn’t inspire us to murder one another in an endless bloodbath it really can give meaning to our lives. Looking back, I can see why the brutalities of The Crusades and The Spanish Inquisition were omitted from our Religion class curriculum.

I sincerely want to believe in God the Father Almighty, the creator of Heaven and Earth.

I sincerely want to believe that there might be a mansion in Heaven waiting for me if I follow 10 easy guidelines that were handed down to a crotchety old man thousands of years ago.

I also want to believe that a green, laminated card might help me get there.

I want to believe that when my parents die, they will go somewhere meaningful and beautiful and that has no pain.

I want to believe that after I die, my soul will continue living somewhere much nicer than a one-bedroom apartment in East Vancouver.

I want to believe that praying in my living room, holding a necklace of plastic beads will somehow cure the sick, feed the poor, and clothe the naked.

But I can’t.

A Darker Shade of Grey

BEN LEYLAND

honourable mention: short fiction

He's been blind ever since the bright flash of the bomb burned his eyes. Charles was driving us down the mountain, while the rest of us were asleep in the back of the truck. As Charles was crouched down, with his hands over his eyes screaming in agony, we saw the rest. A huge orange mushroom cloud gently rising over Vancouver. All our lives and obligations disappeared in a puff of smoke. The monstrous plume gave way to a sepia toned smog. Skyscrapers toppled over, only to kick up more dust into the air.

Was this the end of the world? You're damn right it was. Trigger happy nuclear powers, with excess bombs, spell mutually assured destruction. No doubt there was a bomb for every major city, and then some.

Charles recited a poem 'bout it once. It went something like this:

*All horizons lay desolate
And any daring eyes are scalded blind
Where the only sound is the thunders of despair
And it echoes through the charcoal skulls of the deaf
And the only thing with the courage to rise
Is a burning fungus of hate*

Vancouver turned from a sterile utopia to a smoldering ashtray at 4:19 a.m. on a Monday morning. My watch had stopped. Soon after, it started raining a heavy black rain. From then on, the sky wasn't its ordinary overcast, but a darker shade of grey.

"Since the shit's hit the fan, I guess we should break open our earthquake preparedness kits, or something," suggested Alberto. In the kits, we kept looting supplies: bats, knives, bags, and crowbars.

Our drive through the ruins revealed dark chalky people shapes

smearred on the pavement like bird shit. The people who weren't lucky enough to be vapourized, their charred corpses lay on the streets.

Shop windows were already smashed. Broken glass sprinkled the streets. We jacked whatever the fuck we wanted. I remember there were some "survivors." People that stumbled about like zombies, covered in burnt peeling skin. Unlike zombies, however, they were perfectly harmless.

After our gallivant across the city, we compared loot like children on Halloween night with candy. Marie picked us up some gas masks, which we painted in bright colours. They all looked quite cheerful. Marie was always thinking ahead, that's what I liked about her. To be completely honest, I've been secretly in love with her for quite some time. But she's been going out with Pierre for a couple years now, and—

"Whatcha writing?" interrupted Evelyn, as I wrote that last sentence down.

"I'm writing a book," I said. "It's called 'The Anthropology of the Post-Apocalypse,'" I continued, as I closed my notebook.

"Can I read it?" she asked, as she placed her hand on my hand that was holding the book.

"Umm... no. Now fuck off, I'm trying to chronicle what we collected on our first looting spree." I've got no feelings for Evelyn, but I gotta admit, she's a fox.

We also got a few of those self powered flashlights. The ones that recharge when you shake em like you're jacking off.

Pierre brought a bunch of books. Plenty of big fat textbooks, with titles like "The way things work," "Agriculture for dummies," and a bunch that began with "A brief history of..."

"Why the fuck do we need those?" inquired Alberto.

"We've got to keep the knowledge, man. For the future."

"There aint no future."

"Man, we can rebuild civilization, man."

"It's dead weight."

"It would be a bit of a schlep," I agreed.

“We’re takin’ em,” interjected Marie, “Now let’s get the fuck out of here.”

“Alright bitches,” said Evelyn, as she started the truck’s engine, “Let’s blow this popsicle stand.”

We spent the next few months driving around B.C. (or what was left of it). Forest fires were everywhere. A lot of towns burned to the ground. The few people we came across kept in small groups like us. The sky was never clear, always full of dust n’ smoke.

But life was good. We were just hanging out—the six of us close friends. Having fun. We had collected plenty of non-perishable foods, all of which we kept in the back of the truck. We’d have good meals of canned peaches, sardines, and cheese-wiz. Plenty of water in B.C.—just boiled it from the streams.

The end of the day was always the best part. We’d sit around and watch the sunsets. All the shit in the air gave em’ vibrant otherworldly colours. Cloud filled skies aglow in pink and green neon hues.

One night, I found Evelyn sitting off on her own, sobbing.

“You uhh...alright n’ stuff?” I asked, as I sat down next to her.

“I don’t know. How can I be okay? It’s the end of the world. How can anyone ever be okay again?”

“End of the world, schmend of the world. We’re still here, aren’t we? So civilization collapsed in a nuclear holocaust—so what? That just means we don’t have to worry about its troubles. No more school, no more work, no more worries. We’re free.”

“I suppose,” she said, wiping away her tears. “And I guess everything is alright, as long as we’re together.”

“Yep. As long as we’ve got our friends here, we’re good to go.”

“Yeah, but as long as I’m with you...” she said, leaning in close to me, with that look in her eye. Yeah, you know what look I’m talking about. That sparkly, I want you, look.

“Well, I suppose if I were the last man on earth...and you were the last woman on earth...” I said with a smile, as I leaned to kiss her.

“Yo, wussup bitches?” interrupted Alberto.

“Uhh, well, nothing...”

“Check out what I scored,” he said with a grin, as he held up two bottles of red liquid.

“Pomegranate liqueur. Persephone’s finest, eh? Eh?” Everyone else quickly joined us, their own bottles in their hands. Pretty soon we were all getting tanked.

“Well, I think I’m gonna drink myself blind!” exclaimed Charles. I might have made out with Evelyn later, but I definitely passed out at some point.

I woke up to the sound of an engine starting.

“The truck!” I yelled, “Someone’s stealing the truck!”

Everyone got up, in a panicky confusion. Pierre ran up in front of the truck, and pounded his fists against the hood, in rage. Whoever it was that was stealing it, just drove, crushing Pierre’s bones beneath the wheels.

“Fuck,” said Alberto in a panic, “We’re so fucked.” Being in the middle of nowhere at the time, we pretty much were.

“No,” reassured Marie, “We keep walking along the highway, eventually we’ll get to a town. It’s only a matter of time.”

Pierre couldn’t walk anymore. We dragged him along on a make-shift stretcher for a while. It was no good though; he was starting to get sick. After about a week, we were just about beat. Our stomach’s growled at us, as they boiled in famished rage. Exhausted, we sat around the campfire, hungry as wolves. We were all awake, except Pierre, who was sleeping with a high fever.

“Look guys,” said Marie, “If we don’t eat soon, we’re probably gonna die.”

“Looks like it.”

“This is about the point people would be resorting to cannibalism,” she said.

“Yeah, but not us,” said Charles. In his hands, he revealed one lonely white onion.

“Where the fuck did that come from?”

“It’s been in my sleeping bag this whole time. I’d have eaten it

a while ago, but I hoped, maybe I could plant it one day. Maybe grow an onion tree for future generations or something.”

“Good thinking,” I said.

“But, it looks like we’re all gonna starve, so here goes,” he said, and took a big bite out of the onion. He chewed slowly, as his face contorted, and tears rolled from his eyeless sockets. We could tell he wanted to spit it out, but that he wouldn’t dare waste the only food he’d had in a week.

“You know... onions aren’t as strong if you cook them,” said Marie dryly.

“Goes good with meat...” I said. All our heads slowly turned to Pierre, who lay fast asleep.

“Pierre’s probably gonna die anyway...” said Marie, “He might as well save us while we’re still kicking...”

“Yeah, but if only I could have a sandwich,” said Alberto.

“Yeah, or a bagel,” I suggested.

“Or a bagel sandwich,” said Charles.

“Bagels aren’t very good for sandwiches though,” I said.

“Yeah he’s right. I mean, bagels an awesome bread, sure. But it’s tough, and as sandwiches they don’t really hold together,” said Alberto.

“Unless it’s an open-faced sandwich,” said Charles.

“Yeah, but is an open faced sandwich really a sandwich? I mean, by definition, isn’t a sandwich a bunch of stuff between two pieces of bread? If it’s open faced, you’ve only got one bread,” said Alberto.

“No man, it’s still a sandwich. That’s why they call it an open-faced sandwich,” insisted Charles.

“Dude, listen,” said Alberto, “It aint a fuckin a sandwich.”

“Man, yeah it fuckin is!”

As they quarreled and barked, the anger in their voices grew.

“Well, fuck you!” yelled Charles, though in the wrong direction.

“No, fuck you!” growled Alberto, as he pounced. Punches were exchanged, as they wrestled to the ground in their rage. The rest of us just looked on in silence. Alberto had the upper hand of course, and I’m pretty sure he was a better fighter. In a quick act of desperation, Charles picked up a rock, and hit Alberto. We heard a

distinct cracking sound, like a splitting egg, as the rock was bashed into his skull. Alberto's body fell to the ground in a stark thud.

"Alberto?" asked Charles, who couldn't see what he had just done.

"You okay man? I'm sorry..." No response. He crawled towards where he heard that thud, and took up Alberto's limp body in his arms.

"Alberto?!" he cried, no doubt feeling the warm blood trickle from Alberto's head, onto his hands. Marie crouched down next to him, and felt Alberto's pulse.

"He's dead."

"No..." cried Charles, with tears streaming down his face.

"We all know what we have to do," she said.

It was dark; the campfire had died out. We had no paper to restart a fire, except Pierre's books. So of course we threw them in. We roasted Alberto's flesh over the flames. His meat ended up tasting kinda sweet, very much like pork. Went well with fried onion.

"To friendship!" I proposed, raising my piece of Alberto's arm in the air like a drumstick.

"To friendship!" the others said, raising their meat covered bones.

"To friendship," said Charles in a somber tone, before he began reciting another poem.

Friendship

To a tasteless end

Where the purpose of tongues has been long forgotten

And no fruit bears flavour

Where the only clear water, is that of the salty seas

For all tears drip with blood

And all mouths are dry and parched

Friendship must endure

To a hopeless end

Where the sky is always dark and grey

And all lungs choke

After we gorged on the feast of our fallen friend, we danced around the orange fire to a drum beat. Evelyn and I looked each other in the eye, and we started making out. Maybe it was finally having some food in our bellies; something primitive came over us. She and I went off to the bushes, and made love, doggie style. Sweat mixed with tears, as the sound of our panting breaths was drowned out by the primordial beating of the drum. We had become wild.

The next evening, we watched another radioactive sunset. The dusty sky flushed in unnatural shades. Charles recited a poem—asked me to write it down. I don't remember the words, except one line. It went like this:

Man has raped the earth. Their child is beautiful.



Little Pink Pills

NATASHA SANDERS-KAY

second prize: short fiction

Fifteen years old. I am in love with my boyfriend. We are both virgins, and despite the fears of pregnancy and disease the nurse at school instilled in us during her sex education lecture this year, we want to have sex.

I go to the doctor—A new doctor, one I haven't been to before, one my parents don't know. She smells like my father's Old Spice. I instantly feel like both running away and curling up in her lap. She wears a white coat, and I instantly both trust and fear her. She asks me questions about my family's history of health problems. I don't know much, and I tell her so. She asks some more questions, smiles, takes my blood pressure, writes me a prescription for the pill.

At home in my bedroom, I hold the packet of pink pills. I read the package insert and it leaves me feeling blank. I start my twenty-one day cycle.

Three weeks later, I make love to my boyfriend. The first time hurts, but after that it gets better and better. At first, with the school nurse's warnings screaming in our heads, we use condoms, but then we go without them, since I'm on the pill now and neither of us has any STD's. Every time I open my legs to him I have the time of my life. The energy that runs through me with him inside me is indescribable. No thoughts of something growing inside me, something planning to come out screaming in nine months, and no layer of latex shielding me from my delicious climax. All thanks to my little pink pills.

Seventeen years old. Two weeks ago, my boyfriend of two years became my ex-boyfriend. Crying in bed for hours every day, I continue to take my pink pills, out of habit. I crave him being inside me. I reach down beneath the covers and touch myself, but

the feeling reminds me of him and I cry. Craving connection with a new body to remember, I have my first one-night stand. He's older. I meet him at a friend's party and he takes me to his place. We slide into bed and he slides himself inside me. We use a condom, but it still feels good. I don't cry. I breathe. I come. A smile stays on my face the next few days and, even though we used a condom, I thank god that I didn't stop the pill. Without it, no matter how much latex blocks him from swimming into my body, I'll never be able to stop thinking about that crying person growing inside me. Without the pill, whatever comes into me will come back out nine months later with a deafening scream and fuck everything up.

Twenty years old. I go to college, live on campus, realize that the term slut is really just a word thrown at any woman who enjoys sex and has it when she can. I have no time nor desire for a boyfriend, but all the desire in the world for the pleasure that comes from sneaking a quickie in the bathroom of a house party with a guy whose name I may not remember in the morning. Another Friday night, another guy. Every time, I feel free. Every Saturday morning, I pop my little pink pills and thank them.

Twenty-six years old, and in love again. My lover and I move in together and make love all the time. We both love it when I'm on top. On weekend mornings we lay in bed late after fucking and talk about the future. We drink our coffee and talk about the cliché we'll someday crave like caffeine, the cliché where we own a house just outside the city. Ours will be purple, and it'll have a porch swing and a pear tree in the yard. A beagle will happily chew on a bone outside every day, and curl up in bed with us when we go to sleep every night at eleven o'clock. It's a cliché, and it's sickeningly sweet, but we both feel the craving beginning to stir. It even includes children. We don't talk about how many, and girls versus boys like the other couples, but we do talk about kids. Some day. Not now. Now we want each other more than anyone or anything else. Now I want to keep being able to stand up in the middle of

dinner, go to him in his chair, unzip his pants and climb on top of him. Now I want to get the promotion I know is coming my way at work, make some progress in repaying my student loans. I want to go to some place like Sweden, see what it's like to live in a socialist country for a year. Some place tropical would also be nice, for six months, some day. Feel what it's like to go swimming in turquoise water every morning before eating up a breakfast of exotic fruits, like mango and papaya. Now I can fuck my lover all I want and still have all this to look forward to before the purple house and the beagle and the kids. I can have it all because of my little pink pills.

Thirty-six years old, and vomiting into my current boyfriend's toilet so hard it hurts. From behind me, he hands me some tissues to wipe my face with. I'm too weak to stand up and wash my face, and I think I may throw up again. He asks if it was the yam tempura we ate at dinner. I tell him I've gone to that restaurant and had their yam tempura about twenty times and this has never happened. He suggests the flu, but somehow I know it isn't. He puts his hands in his pockets, bites his lip, looks mad. Tells me he thought I said I was on the pill, I say I am.

I go to my doctor, the same one I've kept since I was fifteen, the one that smells like Old Spice and has a framed piece of paper on the wall that says she went to the best medical school in the country. She reminds me the pill isn't always one hundred per cent effective and tells me to pee in a cup. Thank god, that cup of pee tells her I'm not pregnant, and she tells me. I smile and sigh, but even in that moment my stomach still feels like a million things are going on inside it, and I don't know what. My doctor tells me it must be the flu, or maybe a food allergy. I hesitate, then tell her I don't think so. She repeats that it's probably the flu, or I've been eating something I shouldn't be. I nod and admit she must be right. She offers to refill my prescription for the pill, and I accept. I go home and throw up.

A week later, I am crossing my living room to answer the phone and the pain starts, it seizes my leg so badly, I fall sideways

onto the arm of one of the armchairs. Warmth stabs my right calf out of nowhere and I moan. I try to walk, but I can't. I pull myself into the chair, roll up my pant leg, search on my leg for a visual indicator of the unbearably sharp pain. There is none, and I reach for the remote control, impatiently turn the TV on to distract myself. It doesn't work, but I'm stuck there anyway.

Eventually I'm able to drag myself to bed, popping a few aspirins in the bathroom along the way.

By morning my leg is red and swollen.

Back at the doctor's office, my doctor tells me it's a blood clot, and that it could also explain the vomiting. I ask how this happened, remembering vaguely something I wanted to forget, something I read and didn't understand on the package insert for those little pink pills that have kept me so free. She tells me to go off the pill, to use a different method of birth control. Not oral contraceptives. All these years I thought the only thing to worry about was that crying creature growing inside of me. It turns out, something else was, something that the doctor says has been lethal in some cases, but that "can be fixed" in this one. For the first time since I was fifteen, I won't be taking those pills. I feel nauseous. My leg hurts like hell and I'm starting to sweat. My prescription today is for a blood thinner.

Thirty-seven, doing my stretching exercises in front of the TV when my mother calls. Her voice wavers, I know something's wrong, I ask what and she tells me she has cervical cancer. I bite my lip, order myself not to cry until after I've hung up. I ask her if they know what caused it. I sense her biting her own lip on the other end of the phone. She says the doctors don't know for sure, but that the fact that she's been on the pill for the past twenty years may have had something to do with it. Something about estrogen. Something about recent studies. Inconclusive studies.

Months later, my mother's cancer is getting worse. On the news, bald women in hospital gowns are interviewed about how betrayed they feel. There are tears and reports of different studies, all saying different things. It seems like one day, the pill causes breast cancer,

the next day, it prevents breast cancer, and they still haven't agreed on what it has to do with cervical cancer, but most of the research says the pill helps prevent it, rather than cause it.

One day, a woman's face is splashed across all the papers, a woman who died from a blood clot while on her pink little pills. I want to throw up that day. I've been back on the pill for a month. I tried other methods (no diaphragm would fit, it turns out I'm allergic to contraceptive jelly, Depo-Provera has a bad rep now for destroying women's bones, the patch kept falling off, I still can't trust just condoms, I'm juggling multiple partners these days, etc). My doctor suggested I "stop having promiscuous sex" as a solution. She talked to me about responsibility. I changed doctors. It wasn't an easy choice. She had, after all, been my doctor for twenty-two years, but I'd also swallowed those little pink pills every morning for almost the same amount of time, and I'd stopped doing that. I told my new doctor about the blood clot, and he told me I would probably be fine this time, but that there's always going to be a risk, and that it is my choice. Choice sounds like a funny word these days. I choose to go back on the pill.

This morning, after seeing that dead woman's face on the news again, that picture of her fat happy, smiling face, a face now dead, I go to my bathroom cabinet, pull out my bottle of little pink pills as usual. I drop one into my hand, stare down at it like I did the first time I ever swallowed one. A pink speck in my palm, it sits and waits. I drop it back into the bottle, phone up a good friend, a friend who's been giving me orgasms like I've never had before, and I cancel our date for tonight.

I demand information from my new doctor. I want to know everything about the pill and blood clots and cervical cancer and breast cancer and death. He tells me the research has been inconclusive, he tells me what he doesn't know, he tells me there's always a risk in effective birth control, he talks to me about personal choices, he talks to me about responsibility.

I go back to my old doctor. The scent of Old Spice makes me feel sick. She is angry, she says the other doctor never should have put me back on the pill.

At home that night, I flush my little pink pills down the toilet. I watch the pink specks disappear, feeling like my body is a question mark, a secret I'm not being let in on.

Thirty-eight years old. Thirty-eight and I feel three. My sex life is slowly being killed off by thoughts of babies and lumps and viruses and infections and cancers and clots growing inside me. No pill or penis can come inside me without a week of nausea, of wondering what's going on in this body of mine I can never protect as long as I'm having sex. Maybe the school nurse was right when she said abstinence is the best choice. No bodies connecting, no exchange of fluids, no reliance on pink pills with the power to kill. Just individual bodies, keeping to themselves, responsible for themselves. This thought makes me want to cry, scream, vomit.

Sometimes I don't know if my nausea comes from the news stories about the latest research findings, or if it's from something growing in me, something bad. I've turned into one of those paranoid people I've pitied and made fun of when I was in my twenties, the students at college who were planning on going to med school, the ones who read about cancer, read about the signs and symptoms, and instantly diagnosed themselves and freaked out, running to their doctors, even though most of them were healthier than the rest of us combined, with their avocado sandwiches for lunch and their daily jogs around campus. Now I go running to three different doctors whenever I get a headache, to make sure it's not cancer or something else that's going to kill me.

Yes, my body is as much of a question mark to me as ever, an ugly lagoon of mystery. Memories of puberty rush back to me, the confusion, the disgust, the unanswered questions, that sad hatred of being female. Not knowing what's lurking in there, what created whatever is lurking, what's going to come out.

Forty-five years old and I miss my mother. The anniversary of her death is coming up. I place white lilies on her grave and think about how if a person had killed her rather than a cancer, her death would have made the front page when she died. I would be interviewed as

the angry, grieving daughter who wants her mother's murderer found and punished. Can't do that with cancer. Not in the same way, anyway. My mother's death may have made the papers had she died this year, when the studies do point to the pill for cervical cancer. Then again, the studies could say something different tomorrow.

Forty-six years old and no cancer yet.

Forty-seven years old and now the studies and the news and the doctors say something different again. It's progestin in the pill we need to worry about now, not just estrogen. Six months later they say the pill is safe...

Forty-eight years old and I miss having a man inside me.

Forty-nine years old and I still feel three.

Fifty years old and my body is still a question mark.



Untitled

BRONWYN LEWIS

honourable mention: poetry

fiercly self-sufficient, seismic lover,
older than you are,
Virgo, mother's son,
man of verbs.
devoted disciple of Dionysus,
great grandson of Prometheus.
grinning,
me, your lecherous lady,
I'll be pharaoh while
you're conquering Gaul.
I'll give you sons and
we can rule the world together.
or,
play Anthony and I'll come to you
in a rose petalled pleasure boat,
your Venus,
dripping gold,
drinking pearls.

One Million Years in Kandahar

ANDREA QUINTANILLA

honourable mention: short fiction

No sex. It's the worst part of being in the army; besides getting killed of course. I'm on my bed trying to remember my last Dalhousie girl. I think her name was Alice. God, I miss those Dalhousie girls. The trick is to go into a bar with your uniform on. It's like wearing a coat of honey or something. It's a true cliché that chicks love guys in uniform. I swear that the best pick-up line is "I'm shipping off tomorrow."

Second to girls, I miss the sea. There is nothing but sand here. The fucking sand gets into everything.

"Hey Rookie," Corporal Boyden says, interrupting my date by the sea with Alice. They used to call Ferguson "Rookie" until I came. Now I'm the rookie. Until the next guy in diapers comes.

"Stop being a loner", says the Corporal, patting my shoulder with his big warm hand. "I need another man on the table. You know how to play poker, right?"

Chan lays all the cards out on the table like butter on toast. Then flips them over and gathers them up with one fast sweep. The game is a five-card draw.

I won four Mars bars and a picture of Garnier's sister.

"Jeez, Rookie," Dylan says, "I didn't know you were so good."

I tell him, "My dad taught me when I was five and I've been beating the old man ever since."

I put Garnier's sister next to my sister, Molly. They look good together, like they could be friends in real life.

After dinner, an old man in a metal-covered uniform comes into our tent. Corporal Boyden introduces him as General Skinner. We salute on cue.

"As you soldiers know, tomorrow you are going into battle,"

says General Skinner. He took a pause, leaning on his walking chair for dramatic effect—or to take a rest. “I came to remind you young soldiers that we are not Yankees, we do not have guns for dicks. We do not shoot first, ask questions later. If they are not shooting at you, they are civilians. We do not kill civilians. We are peacekeepers.”

“How old is he?” I ask. “For a second there I thought we were going to break out singing Oh Canada or something.”

“Shut up, Rookie,” Garnier says, growing red. “General Skinner is eighty-one. You’re insulting a retired veteran who volunteers his time to give pep talks to punks like you.”

“Holy Shit, eighty-one. My grandpa went senile at sixty-nine. Hey, I guess the old guy doesn’t know about night missions. In the darkness, we can shoot at anything that moves.”

“Shut up, both of you”, the Corporal tells us. “Now, go to sleep, boys. So that you won’t be stupid tomorrow. Here, mistakes can kill. We leave at oh-six hundred.”

In the morning, we head west for Panjwai. We pass a group of Burqas and children running away from what we were running towards. After twenty minutes of Metallica, I was ready to shoot any Taliban arse hole.

“Where are those sons of bitches?” I ask Chan.

“Shoot and you’ll find out,” he replies.

We wage war from empty mud houses. People actually live here. The Corporal gives us our positions. On his cue, we start shooting at the invisible enemy. After about five minutes, they shoot back. They were in the bush waiting.

Dylan let me use his Eight-Four.

I’ve only used it once in training. I placed it over my right shoulder.

“Aim at a tree,” he says. “Those bastards must be behind it. Zero in already. Come on, hurry up. Steady and shoot. Hurry up. Before they kill us.”

There was a flash and a hissing noise. A trail of thin smoke flew towards the tree.

“Not too bad,” Dylan tells me. “But you didn’t kill a fly. You were too slow. They’re smarter. They shoot and move. So it’s no use shooting where they were five minutes ago.”

It’s not too fun. Shooting and waiting.

“Holy shit, it’s coming towards us,” Dylan yells out.

“Get behind something! Stay down! Stay down!” the Corporal cries.

The rocket looks like a black hole. It wants to swallow us whole. Luckily all three of the rockets hit the mud houses, not us.

Around lunch time, there is a rain of bullets. I’m scanning the horizon with my binoculars when I hear them coming.

“What the fuck,” I say as I fall to the ground.

If I hadn’t been wearing my helmet, those would have been my last words. The fucking bullet left an indent on my helmet. I kiss my helmet, my souvenir.

We fire missiles and throw half of our grenades. We wait three more hours, but no more bullets or rockets came.

The Corporal says “The Taliban went running back to their caves with their tails between their legs. Now, they know who the Canadians are.”

We rode back to the base happy; the mission was a success. The Corporal puts on The Rolling Stones. I’m out the hatch keeping lookout. There is a kid riding his rusty blue bike to the right of us. I tell Dylan to go a bit to the left, so that we don’t hit the poor kid. He pedals like he wants to win. It’s real funny: this tiny kid on his rusty bike trying to race a twenty tonne Light Armoured Vehicle. I call Ferguson up to take a look.

Ferguson laughs when he sees the kid.

He calls down, “Hey, it seems that the poor kid is giving up. Bye kid.”

Then I hear thunder. The law of gravity is lifted. There’s only darkness. I open my eyes. I see Ferguson beside me, a human jigsaw puzzle.

The world is on fire.

I try to get up, but my left leg is screaming pain; it looks like there is a bloody toothpick sticking out of it I crawl away from the wreck. I see Garnier throwing grenades at the bush. Chan phones in our location. God, Dylan is painted red. The corporal sprays whiteness on the fire. He is bleeding with shrapnel sticking out of him like thorns. I closed my eyes. It's not real. I hear a fly. It turns into a helicopter.

In the helicopter morphine helps me leave the world behind. In my dream, I hear the medics say that our convoy must have hit an Improvised Explosive Device.

They tell me, "It's going to be ok, son."

A lifetime later, I'm home. But I'm not really there. Everyone is playing a role around me. The worried mother, the proud father, the loving sister. But I guess I'm playing a role, too.

The house is filled with Celine Dion. Mom thinks we don't know that she puts Celine on whenever she wants to cry. That screaming banshee hides her sops.

Every morning she asks me, "Did you sleep well, sweetheart?" What she means to say is "did you wake up in a cold sweat, shaking and moaning." She sets my valium on top of vanilla ice cream sprinkled with chocolate ships, for Christ's sakes.

Every single day she asks, "What would you like to eat for dinner sweetheart?"

We already had meat loaf three times this week. "I made your favourite," she says. "I bet that you didn't eat this good over there. I'm going to fatten you up. You came home a bag of skin and bones. I hardly recognized you at the airport. But you'll be more handsome than before in no time, sweetheart."

After another meat loaf dinner, I went out for a smoke on the steps. Cigarettes later, I decide to open the letter. I've had this letter hidden in my pocket for a week now. I read and smoke.

The stars are out. I finish my cigarettes. I can hear my dad. He's watching Jeopardy in the living room. I can hear Celine singing softly in the background: mom must be locked in her

room again. I'm so tired. In the living room, I hear Molly talking to dad.

"Dad," Molly says. "Today, Brandon and I were in the kitchen making lunch. He was making Baloney sandwiches. Anyways, I wanted to watch a movie, so I put the popcorn in the microwave. When Brandon heard those kernels pop, he fell on the floor. It was, like, so awful. I stopped the microwave, but he was, like, on the floor shaking and holding the knife. It took me ten minutes to calm him down.

"He'll be ok. He just needs time to get used to things. "

"Well, I think he should see someone. Like a professional, you know?"

"Na, the Army doc said he was fine. A fine young man, that's what he said. He just needs time to adjust. Drop it. I don't want your silliness to worry your mother. That Celine Dion is already driving me nuts."

I light the letter and watch it burn brighter than the stars. Fuck, it burns. I drop it and stomp on it. I put the charred remains in the trash on the curb. I don't feel like going inside, so I keep walking.

I walk down to the pub. It's filled with chicks. More than usual. It must be because of the heat. Everyone needs a drink. I need a thousand. Bennie says my drinks are free because I'm a war hero.

Then, he adds, "But don't drink like a fish or you'll put me out of business."

He asks about my family. I lie.

I feel like I have sand stuck in my throat. I can't breathe because it's so hot in here. I down a beer, then three whiskies, but the sand holds on to the back of my throat.

A really pretty girl sits beside me. She smiles at me, thinking that I'm normal. She tells me her name is Sandy. I swallow the irony. I tell her it's a nice name. She has a few drinks and I have more. I tell her I'm a soldier. We develop the intimacy of drunkards.

“Can I tell you a secret?” I ask.

“Only if it’s a good one,” she replies. She leans closer towards the soldier. She smells whiskey mixed with Axe. Sandy thinks the soldier has nice eyes, but they are red from too much drink.

“I’m shipping off soon,” he tells her. Then he finishes his drink.



Sticks and Stones

GINA WOOLSEY

second prize: creative nonfiction

“...shit, piss, fuck, cunt, cocksucker, motherfucker, and tits.”

This voice, backed by an audience of laughter, blurts profanity from the stereo in the living room of our battered tin trailer. It's 1976 and I'm in grade four. I'm sitting with my brother, Shane, on the orange shag carpet, listening to the funniest thing I've ever heard in all of my 9 years on the planet: George Carlin doing his stand up routine about the seven words you can't say on television.

“The big one, the word fuck, that's the one that hangs them up the most. 'Cause in a lot of cases that's the very act that hangs them up the most...”

Shane and I are prostrate, tears streaming down our cheeks. I have the hiccups from laughing too hard, and that makes us both laugh harder. It's bordering on painful.

What a fabulous comic! What a brilliant topic! I found the record in the back of Dad's bedroom closet. I wasn't snooping. I was just looking for my runners. I didn't think we should listen to it, but we really had no choice. I mean, the title, *Nasty Words*, how could we resist? Besides, no one will be home for hours. There's no chance we'll get caught.

“...It leads a double life, the word fuck. First of all, it means, sometimes, most of the time, fuck. What does it mean? It means to make love. Right? And it also means the beginning of life, it's the act that begins life, so there's the word hanging around with words like love, and life, and yet on the other hand, it's also a word that we really use to hurt each other with, man. It's a heavy. It's fucked...”

Wow, the insight of this guy. We listen to the record a full three times before I carefully slide it back into the cardboard sleeve and place it exactly where it was found. I start to ponder

the duality, or even the multiplicity of the meanings of words. My brother takes up swearing with the energy of a zealot. I don't start swearing because it's sounds stupid when I do it.

Shane and I are strangers in this town where the trailer sits, on the edge of a crop field, with the other trailers. We came from Vancouver just a few months ago. Mom and Dad are getting a divorce, they swear at each other all the time. Shane and I go between in the tug of war.

We don't really fit in very well here. For starters, we don't go to church, even though this little town, Clive, Alberta, has 5 churches to service a population of 323 people. Well, maybe that's not a fair statement. At least half the congregation of each church is made up of farmers and their families, and they don't live in town.

We're also broke, or more to the point, my father is broke. Dad used to haul manure. He had cats and tandems with spreaders that he designed himself. He worked hard, day and night, but his soft heart couldn't stand the hard task of collecting on a debt; especially from a farmer. Eventually, the business went tits up and the machinery was auctioned off to those same farmers.

Now, dad and his new girlfriend, Terry Anne, run the only gas station in town, where no one buys gas, unless they're just passin' through. Clive is the size of town that has just one of anything: one country store; one bar in the only hotel, where everyone drinks but no one sleeps; one post office and bank combo, which happens to be in the front half of old lady Noblet's house; one school; one paved street—but we have five churches: two Baptist, one Catholic, one Lutheran, and one United.

Terry Anne is not very good for our status either. She is living in sin with my Dad, she's nineteen, and she insists that she can't walk in anything but high heels. She doesn't fit in very well, but she doesn't care. Terry Anne says she can get in the car and 'get the hell outta this place'. Us kids can't.

My Dad does his own version of escaping, at the Clive Hotel Bar. He can be found there most days, after five. It doesn't bother me too much, except that he's not home very much. He's a happy

drinker and he can really get people laughing when he's had a few too many. Rye brings out his inner George Carlin.

It's been pretty hard adjusting to our new school. Shane's already got the strap twice. We'd never heard of the strap before we got to Clive. It's a piece of old tire tread that has been cut thin at one end to fit in the Principal's hand so he can get a good grip to whack. If you're caught doing something really bad, like fighting, stealing, or maybe swearing, you get sent to the Principal's office to be 'strapped'. You put out your hands, palm up, and he whacks them with the hunk of tire. It's not that I know from personal experience, but, like I said, Shane's been there and he told me about it. He doesn't cry about it, but I do. I cry for him. I'm a crybaby.

I'm mostly having trouble fitting in with the kids. I'm sort of quiet and I don't have the right clothes for this place. All my things are too flashy, too city. I don't have any winter boots yet, so I have to wear a pair of Terry Anne's. They have heels and are a bit too big for me, so I walk funny. At recess, when I go to the mudroom to switch my sneakers for the boots so I can go outside, they have been stuffed with stinky garbage. Terry Anne is going to kill me. I cry while I empty them out, but I don't tell, and I try not to let anyone see me.

Today, at school, we have an assembly in the gym. The Principal, Mr. Shadley, stands on the stage and scowls until everyone is silent. Behind him, seated on a row of folding chairs, sit five freshly scrubbed housewives. I recognize them all. In a town this size, it doesn't take long to learn who everyone is. The ladies are beaming. They're all wearing Sunday church outfits: dresses that cover the knee and button up to the throat. They're smiling out at us kids, or at the back of Shadley's head, but ignoring one another. After we've all quieted down and found our places on the floor with our teachers in chairs at the end of each row, Principal Shadley begins his speech.

"Today, we are blessed with the gift of words...", Mr. Shadley is a big, big man. He looks like a linebacker in a suit. "As many of you know, the church congregations have been working very

hard to raise money for the benefit of your education. The profits of their labour have been pooled, and today, we are blessed with the gifts of their hard work,” he says, holding up a large, leather-bound and gold-embossed Canadian Oxford Dictionary. There are stacks of the new dictionaries on a table beside him.

Each lady gets a turn at the podium to elaborate on her church’s contribution of hard work; bake sales, quilt sales, knitted booties and sweaters, bottle drives (by the kids, of course), and door to door begging (again, by the kids). The Baptists raised the most money.

When the ladies are done, Mr. Shadley asks us all to stand. He calls a student from each class, a student previously identified in the careful planning of today’s pomp, to come to the stage and accept a new dictionary. The chosen children thank the church ladies on behalf of their class – the boys shaking hands with Shadley while the girls curtsy to the audience. Then we file out, back to our classrooms, following the bearers of leather-bound words, with our teachers herding us from the rear. A special place has been prepared on a shelf at the front of my class. Our new dictionary sits on the high shelf, face out and alone. Our teacher tells us he would prefer we didn’t touch this copy of the Oxford unless it’s an emergency. The library down the hall has 3 copies. He suggests we use those.

At recess, several of us kids head to the library to inspect the new thing we’ve been given by the adults. We do the obvious, not expecting anything.

“Look up the F word,” pages flip, flip, flip.

“Holy shit! It’s here!”

Mrs. Bell, the volunteer librarian, looks over and smiles warmly at our enthusiasm. Fortunately, she’s a bit deaf. We spend the entire 15-minute recess looking for every forbidden word we can think up. The definitions are often surprising—who knew a faggot was a bundle of sticks? Not us.

At lunch hour, on the playground, the new words are tested. We try them all in various ways and laugh at one another. It’s new, uncharted territory. We use the words in ways we’d never

heard before. “When I get home, I’m going to make a FAGGOT and strap it to my BITCH’s back so she can carry it for me!” All the usual games are forgotten, for now.

Later, at the corner store, I overhear two farmers talking with the Baptist Minister. “Well, it’s you guys ‘at got ‘em, your church ‘at picked ‘em out. Why didn’t you bloody well check ‘em?”

The Minister is red faced with clenched fists, but he does his best to be calm. “Please, ah, John, be r-reasonable. Who would have thought? I mean, such filth, and, and, and, it’s the Oxford, such a r-r-respected publication, we, we, we never dreamed of anything like this.” The Minister gets a bit stutter-y when he’s heated. The ladies love him all the more for this flaw, but it really bugs the men. The men don’t have time for that shit.

When I get home, Terry Anne is on a stool scrubbing the ceiling with a toothbrush. She has a clean thing. My Dad’s not home from the bar yet, and my brother is nowhere to be seen. I start the dinner; peel the potatoes and put the fish sticks on a baking sheet. I want to go and get started on my homework, but Terry Anne won’t let me. She says there’s work to be done and she’s not going to do it alone, ‘God Damn It’. She hands me her toothbrush and tells me to pay special attention to the cracks. There is no talk of the swear words, even though the town is practically vibrating with the news. Inside our trailer, it’s a different world.

The next morning back at school, we get a demonstration from Mr. Shadley. Without warning, he bursts through the door of our classroom. Three giant strides from the door to the teacher’s big wooden desk, and WHAP! he brings the strap down across the corner of the desk with all the force he can muster. He is fighting for our souls. The teacher drops his piece of chalk, jumps, and lets out a little scream before he has a chance to collect himself. I guess he wasn’t in on the demo plan.

Shadley glares at us with fierce, frightening eyes. He paces back and forth, piercing our skulls with his violent looks. He will exercise the demons from our minds. WHAP! the strap comes down on Jimmy’s desk. Another round of glaring, then he turns and strides

out the door. He doesn't say a word. He doesn't have to.

We hear him enter the class down the hall and start the demo over for the benefit of the souls in that room. I notice the dictionary is not in its place of honour. My ears are still ringing from the sound of violence. I raise my hand, incapable of anything else.

"Where is the new dictionary?" I ask, trying to sound casual. My classmates snigger or stare at me, amazed. My teacher can't decide if I'm goading him, or just dense. He opts for the latter.

"We sent them back. They were full of filth." The kids murmur assent, having been smartly brainwashed over pork chops at home. I think about the words, and it hurts to lose them. I feel lost. I know I don't belong, but maybe I did for a few minutes.

"But, why?" I'm almost broken, but I have to try.

My teacher blinks, dumbfounded. The kids whisper to one another that I'm crazy. After that demonstration with the strap, no one wants to talk about swearing, but I can't let go.

"I think if kids knew the real meaning of the words, maybe they wouldn't be swear words anymore. I mean, why are they bad words, anyway? There's no such thing as a bad word." No one rallies around me. I look at the faces of my classmates. Some regard me with a borrowed pity; their slowly shaking heads a little tilted to the side. Others glare, shooting me with passionate, youthful, unguided hate.

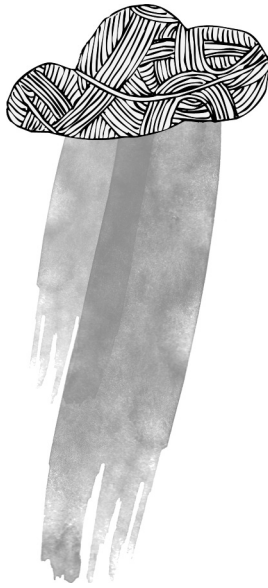
Back on the playground at lunch, I find myself surrounded by a group of hostile girls. "You're a slut, you know," the ringleader says with her face in my face. She spits on me when she says the words.

"Actually, I think you probably mean to say asshole, or loser, or even bitch" I reply, wiping my face with my ragged coat sleeve. "But since I'm still a virgin, slut is really not the right word to use here. It's meaningless." I turn and walk away. I don't cry.

Years later, back in the big city, I am reminded of my swearing education when my very young daughter decides to try out a few doozies on me while I'm driving her to pre-school.

“Mommy, you’re a mothersucker.”

I pull over to the side of the road so I can turn around and look her in the eye. “I think you meant to say motherfucker, sweetie. Or maybe cocksucker. But not mothersucker, that’s not going to get you anywhere.” I don’t take her to school. Instead, we go to the bookstore to buy her a Canadian Oxford dictionary.



The Loyalty of Crows

CHRISTANN KENNEDY

honourable mention: creative nonfiction

My partner, Gregory Sorensen, is a terrific gardener. He has lived in this house for twenty years, and in that time he and nature have worked together to transform a generic rectangle of grass into a gorgeous and varied ecosystem. There are fruit trees in the back yard, raspberries and blueberries along the driveway, and grape vines that climb around the deck and over the second-floor roofline. The front yard is a forest of trees and flowering shrubs that provide shelter, food and habitat for all kinds of creatures.

For the last few days a distressed family of crows has taken refuge in our front yard. I was awakened again this morning by their cries. Still groggy and blinking into the morning light, I pushed aside the green cotton curtains and peered out the bedroom window to see two adult crows perched in the magnolia tree. They were yelling at the mail carrier, who breaching their security perimeter, had started up the stairs to the front door. The cause of their distress was a young crow, fallen from the nest, who was hopping around in the mossy undergrowth beside the stairs.

I pulled on my ragged velveteen bathrobe, and shuffled down the hall to find Greg. He was in the kitchen, making breakfast.

“The crows are still out there,” I said.

“I know,” he replied, “they flew at my head this morning when I went out for my run.”

“Did you see the young one?” I asked, turning on the kettle to make myself a cup of coffee. “I think he is just learning how to fly, but hasn’t quite figured it out.”

“Yeah, he was hanging around on the hydrangea bush this morning,” Greg replied. “I think there is something wrong with his wings. I saw him hop and flutter up a few feet, but he can’t seem to make it up any higher.”

“I hope Ruby doesn’t find him,” I said.

“Me, too,” Greg said. Ruby is our neighbour’s cat. She’s not a great hunter, but she tries, and a flightless bird would be no match for her.

“Can we ask Jill to keep her in until the crow gets back up into the nest?” I suggested.

“I don’t know about that,” Greg said as he reached for the phone, which had just started to ring. “I’m afraid he won’t be able to get back up there.”

A lot of people don’t like crows. They have a sinister reputation, perhaps because they are black, and as scavengers, are associated with carrion and death. They are noisy, and assertive, and not easily intimidated, which from my point of view makes them a lot like humans.

I have always liked crows. I have been collecting their feathers and observing their behaviour for years. A large population of them spends the night in the park behind our house. Just before dusk, they congregate on the rugby pitch and hop around, talking to each other.

I imagine they are comparing notes about their foraging expeditions, telling tales of their successes and failures. Perhaps they tell each other where to find juicy road kill or ripe berries. They may also be sharing their intellectual property. I have seen crows use some rather ingenious scavenging tools and techniques.

For example, there is an enormous chestnut tree down the block, which yields an abundant harvest every fall. The nuts have smooth brown shells, which are as hard as wood and very difficult to break. Last year I sat down on a patch of dry grass by the side of the road to watch a crow get around this problem.

The crow paid no attention to me because she was busy placing chestnuts on the pavement. She kept gazing up and down the street, as if to calculate which spots would be most likely to lie in the tracks of an oncoming car. After several minutes of this activity, the crow retreated to a low branch of the chestnut tree to wait.

Her patience and ingenuity were soon rewarded. A silver Toyota

hatchback, containing a driver and two dogs en route to the park, drove by and broke open several of the chestnuts. The crow then stepped forward to feast on the exposed chestnut meat.

Another example of crow resourcefulness is apparent in our back yard birdbath. We have to change the water regularly because it tends to collect chicken bones and bits of soggy potato chip. Last week, looking out the kitchen window, I watched a crow arrive in the yard with a large chunk of what looked like hotdog bun in his beak.

He paused for a moment on a telephone wire, to survey the scene for possible hazards. Spotting no human or animal impediment to his plan, the crow dropped down to the yard and perched on the edge of the birdbath. He began to delicately dip the bread into the water, like a gentleman dunking biscotti in a cup of steaming cappuccino. He then proceeded to gulp down large chunks of the sodden bun, one after the other, until it was all gone. I wondered how far he had traveled to use our birdbath in this manner, and how many times this particular bird had been our guest.

“That was Robbie,” Greg said as he hung up the phone. “He wants me to meet him at Abruzzo at eleven.” Robbie is Greg’s younger brother who tends to disappear for months at a time, and then resurface when he needs something, usually money. This is a bit of a sore point for me, although I try not to make an issue of it. Greg’s loyalty to family and willingness to stand by those who are vulnerable are some of his most attractive traits.

“Well, if we’re going to get a walk in this morning, we’d better go now,” I said. I turned off the kettle. Coffee would have to wait until later. “I’m wearing a big hat, so when the crows buzz my head, I won’t feel scared.”

“Good idea,” Greg grinned. “Me, too.”

I got dressed while Greg ate his breakfast. Five minutes later, with our hats in our hands, we were ready to go.

I peeked out the front door. The two adult crows were still perched in the magnolia. They had been silent, but the moment they detected my movement, they resumed their yelling.

“Caw! Caw!” Both birds cried. Their compact bodies were rigid and straining with the effort to scream as loud as they could. I spotted the baby crow at the bottom of the stairs. He was almost as large as the adults, but his feathers were not sleek and tidy like those of his parents. His head looked brown and fuzzy, and before he hurled himself into his underbrush hiding spot, I had noticed bare patches, with white down poking through, on his wings and back. Poor little bird. He looked so awkward and vulnerable.

“It’s OK guys,” I cooed to the agitated parents. “We’re OK. We’re not going to mess with your baby.”

Greg stepped out on to the porch with me, smiling as he pulled his beige fisherman’s hat down over his ears.

“Let’s get out of here,” he said.

We didn’t speak again until we had cleared the yard and begun our clockwise circuit of the lake.

“If this keeps up, the crows will eventually get used to us coming and going,” I said.

“I doubt that,” said Greg. “With their little one at risk, I don’t think they’ll ever get used to us.”

“So you think this will go on forever?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he answered. “I’ve been watching to see if the parents are feeding him. So far I haven’t seen him eat anything.”

“That’s not good,” I said. “I wonder if there is something wrong with him, like if he has a birth defect or something. Maybe that’s why they aren’t feeding him.”

“One thing is for sure,” Greg said. “Those parents are determined. They’ve been aggressively protecting that baby for days. I don’t think other species of birds do that.”

“I think it’s because they are so smart,” I said. “I think they are capable of a lot of loyalty to each other.”

Greg squeezed my hand. We were standing together on a narrow wooden dock, looking out at the lake. A small group of ducks had noticed our presence, and was moving towards us. They formed interlocking triangles of wake as they paddled across the glassy surface of the water.

“Sorry guys, we didn’t bring anything for you today,” Greg said.

We watched the ducks trace lazy arcs around the dock for a few minutes, and then we resumed our walk. As we rounded the corner to return to the house, a light breeze came up from nowhere. It shivered through the tender branches of a willow tree as we passed.

“Do you think we should try to help by feeding that crow ourselves?” I asked Greg. “Or would that just prolong the agony?”

“I think it’s better to let things take their natural course,” he said, and I knew he was probably right.

Once, when I was a child, I found an abandoned baby squirrel under the lilac tree behind my family’s house. I picked the tiny creature up and cradled it, oh so carefully, in my hand. It was warm, and alive, and I could feel its little heart racing against the soft flesh of my palm. I carried it into the house.

My mom helped me to make a bed for the squirrel out of a Kleenex box. We lined the box with face cloths, hoping to keep the baby warm. Every couple of hours, we tried to feed it milk through an eyedropper, but it would not take very much. Its eyes and nose were clogged and it could barely breathe.

My mom said the squirrel was very sick, and that was probably why its mother had left it in our yard. She let me believe that the mother’s intention had been to leave her baby in our care because she needed our help. Of course I later realized that the mother had left her baby because she knew it was not going to survive.

When I woke up the next morning, the little squirrel had already died. My mom helped me to dig a shallow hole under the lilac tree, and later she helped me to fill the hole with earth. We planted a marigold on top of the little grave. That was my first direct experience with death.

I was thinking of that little squirrel this morning as Greg and I neared the house. He stopped to pick some berries in the driveway,

but I carried on around to the front yard. I was curious, and a little anxious, to see what was happening with the crows.

I braced myself against the auditory assault that I had come to expect, but instead heard only silence.

“Hey Greg, I think they’re gone,” I called. His head popped up from behind the car. He was eating blueberries.

“I think the crows are gone,” I repeated.

“How about that,” Greg said, walking in my direction. “Good thing we didn’t start feeding them.”

“Maybe I was right,” I said. “Maybe the young one was just learning to fly, and maybe he finally got it.”

“I think he did,” Greg said with a smile. He pulled me close and planted a kiss on my cheek. “Don’t you love a happy ending?”

“You know I do,” I said, “happy endings are the best.”

Greg went back to his berry picking, and I climbed the stairs to the front door. I entered the house and walked through to the kitchen, where I noticed the sun was streaming in the open window. A tender breeze floated past the curtains, bringing with it the smell of freshly cut grass. I turned on the kettle to make myself a cup of coffee.



On Tour with God

STEWART WILKINSON

honourable mention: short fiction

In December of 1984 I sat, cross legged, before the TV. I was a scruffy-haired, freckle-faced, ten-year old...and I was in love. Her name was Jane, an ordinary name for an ordinary girl. But when she danced, she was something else. She'd sparkle with gold and silver as she glided across the ice, like some majestic dancing queen, or an Angel who could walk on water. Zetra Stadium was the host for my Angel, in Sarajevo, Bosnia. Her and her figure skating partner, Christopher Dean, became icons as they swept the board with twelve perfect 6.0s. It was a good year, an inspiring year, a hopeful year.

Twelve years on, in December of 1996, I found myself before the very same stadium. Bracing myself against the fierce winter's night I looked on, blankly, in disbelief. I thought of my Angel whom this place once held and how she inspired so many. Huddling a little closer to the Land Rover my heart shivered, wondering where it had all gone wrong. That very same stadium now stood, blackened from fire, bullet holes, and the hatred of men. From inspiration to ruin, this faithless place was now a grave. Unblinking, I watched as dead body after dead body was pulled from its innards, a mother, father, daughter, son...a baby. I felt my heart break.

I'm no hero. I didn't try to save the world in twenty-four hours. Others have stories filled with more pain and glory. But this is my story. And it began one cold wintry night on the way to Sarajevo, in December '96, when, at twenty-odd thousand feet in the air...

Someone nudged me.

I tried to ignore them, but couldn't.

Raising my head, I shuddered at the throbbing pain in my head.

A memory-liquored-vision came shooting back, reminding me of the night before. Beer, wine, gin, tequila, brandy, beer, some more tequila, and whatever else has left me a wreck. It was a tradition we all went through, whether we wanted it or not.

Shaking myself too, I squinted through the blue of the neon night in search for whoever had nudged me. Finding him, I understood. Tapping his watch he signalled me to pass the message on. Talking was pointless. The noise from the plane, a C-130 Hercules or rather a sixty-five ton metal coffin, was like living in a speaker at a Rolling Stones concert. There were no windows, one toilet, seats made of netting like hammocks, but without the roomy comfort, sunshine, and palm trees. Nor was there any insulation, just cold steel between us and the angry world outside. Still, I straightened myself up, shook off the fumes, and nudged the next guy signalling to him that we were almost there.

Some knew what to expect, most didn't. And even though I was part of the latter, I knew the drill. We would start off at high altitude where we would dive to a sharp landing. This way we would reduce the time spent in enemy range, which reminded me... "*where the hell was my helmet?*"

Scrambling, I noticed the faces around me start to scramble too, some young and naïve, some old and wise, all unsure of their destiny.

My Bergen, or rather back-pack, seemed determined to keep me from my helmet. Maybe because wearing it wasn't the idea, but sitting on it was. Apparently it was just bad luck to get shot in the ass before landing, and as I was in no place to argue, and quite fond of my ass, I began to win the battle.

And so, there I was, balancing precariously on my *ass-helmet*, waiting, praying, and wondering what it felt like to get shot in the ass. It should be in the pub right about now if it had done what it was supposed to of instead of detouring into the recruiting office. For one, I know I wouldn't be flying to a place of, well, possibly no return.

I knew this.

We all did.

It haunted us like our shadow. Even the squadron padre was in on the show. After loosening our grip on our most treasured porn collections, he'd unleash his cheery rational by stating: "if and when you die, which you might well do, your families will have to take possession of your belongings, and discovering porn might upset them."

Well Cheers Captain Positive!

And... "Bollocks", too, while I'm at it!

I'd not only just lost my porn collection, but I might be kicking the bucket too. And by the way, it wasn't porn, it was exotic art. It was an inspirational collection that stood proudly on a shelf above my television, in alphabetical order, with a sign-in/sign-out sheet, and, of course, a damages fee for the young, eager, and disrespectful.

Yet, unperturbed, blind, and uncaring, the Padre pushed on unfazed by any atheistic parries and jousts I could get in. He was a bible-bully, a muscle man of God whose finalé ended on: "*Son, what we do here, we do for God and Country.*"

I stared at him, open mouthed, wondering what the white collar meant.

It looked like his halo had fallen round his neck.

It looked like a noose.

All I wanted was a job, a career, not a punch line.

Yet, others agreed with him. Fellow soldiers, brothers in arms, peacekeepers, of all ages, male and female, would tell me they'd joined the army to see what it was like to shoot someone—for *God and Country*.

When I'd ask why? They would shrug and reel off something patriotic, godly, irrational and lazy, glaring at me, fists clenched.

In Germany, shortly before my tour, I spent three months on suicide-watch for one of them. He was a new recruit who failed to blow his head off on the firing range. I was told to take him under my wing, eat with him, run with him, go to the pub with him, be his best friend and bring him back to the bright side...I tried, I really did, but I failed.

He didn't kill himself.

But he was discharged a wreck, alone, and discarded.

Soon after, I found myself on a plane to Sarajevo. My tour operator, according to the stamp in my passport, was “*Maybe Airlines*”—British humour.

My rank: Lance-Corporal.

My trade: Telecommunications Systems Engineer.

My weapon: an SA80 semi-automatic machine gun, butt number 103.

I cared for it more than I cared for myself. If it misfired, back-fired, jammed, or negligently discharged, I’d either be dead or hanging off the tail-end of my Sergeant’s boot. While loading it I braced myself for landing, which happened quicker than expected, and with my ass still intact...yeah! Some shouting and hollering hustled us out into the open and towards a hanger. As I ran, hunched low, I stole a look into the night. Tracer-fire shot across the sky like stars, so beautiful, innocent, and deadly.

I had arrived.

Week one flew by. We were introduced to every man, dog, and General there was. Commands and duties were drilled into us hard and fast. Initiations were carried out in a painfully swift manner: I’d drink myself blind, fight ‘til my fists wept, and challenge every rule there was. Most importantly, I gained a respectful and dignified tour while managing to avoid the initiation called *the flaming-asshole*. As you might have guessed, I’m fond of my ass; it follows me everywhere and does a pretty good job for what I want it to do. I have no inclination to set it on fire, unlike others, whose doctors notes have hilariously confessed.

Week two was orientation week. It was my first week outside of camp, the first week I saw a dead body, and the first week I lost count of the dead bodies I did see.

And not once did I cry.

I simply felt hollow and helpless.

Adding to the week’s toll was a sniper, rumoured to be a Canadian female, who was picking people off at random from a building near the city centre. Every time the building was rushed she magically disappeared...until, that is, the building was cheerfully

removed from the equation.

Sniper Alley was also a hot spot that clocked up the numbers. It was a street wider than most housing Serbians on one side and Muslims on the other, endlessly firing at one another and at anything that got in the way.

I felt dizzy, disbelieving, and in the wrong place. A helpless bystander, I watched mayhem unfold before my very eyes. Mayhem my forefathers promised I'd never see.

Yet, here I was, a child in a man's world.

It became so bad that we were soon confined to camp, allowed out for necessary work only. Unfortunately, being in Telecommunications and a Systems Engineer most of my work was necessary and outside of camp, which was simply...

Fantastic!

Absolutely Fucking Fantastic!

Soon a networking problem reared its ugly head. As I checked I had everything my translator walked in. She was around twenty, beautiful, athletic, and with eyes that could melt a man at twenty paces.

I moved towards her, aware of every step, every move. I thought of *Bond* and what *velvet-tongued-line* he might say. But, as soon as I we locked eyes, I froze, lost all coolness, and stood, dumbstruck.

And then she *cried*.

I was shell-shocked and confused. She unravelled a news article which reported the capture of her girlfriend and her girlfriend's father by Serbian extremists. It claimed the father was found dead in an abandoned warehouse, the top part of his skull removed, and a spoon lodged into his brain. His daughter, her girlfriend, was found several feet away, shot to death.

I was shaking. My stomach turned, my world span, I felt useless and under qualified. I wanted to take her up in my arms and fly her away from all this. Yet, I knew I couldn't.

The article further claimed this type of atrocity to be a common interrogation technique amongst Serbian extremists. It stated the daughter was given a spoon while they interrogated the father. When he failed to cooperate the daughter was forced to ram

the spoon into her father's brain. The extremists would have convinced the daughter that her choice to kill her father was a better one if it was left up to them.

The news was always this way. Uncensored, powerful, and devastating, designed to hit where it hurt while justifying hatred and revenge.

I decided the fault could wait. She would still be my translator, as after all, she needed the money, and I was lost without one.

This was my *turning-point*.

I stopped drinking, wrote home everyday, ran every day, and even asked for a six month extension.

Why?

I'm not certain.

Maybe I began to care.

Maybe I wanted to make a difference.

I know something changed within me.

So as I stretched out the rest of my tour facing land mines, booby traps, mass graves and child prostitution, I tried to help in any way I could.

I called home every week trying to convince my mother the news exaggerated the world I was in. My father, stoic as always, wouldn't say much, although my mother told me he cried once when I missed a scheduled phone call. He'd served too, as did my granddad, great granddad, and so on. It's in our blood. And the old man knew how to lie and pretend everything was okay when it wasn't.

One night near the end of my tour, I found myself on a balcony eight floors up holding *The Stranger*, by Camus. That night, as I read, I watched and listened to a once beautiful city die. And as I did I cried. And as I cried, I read. And as I read I tried to make sense of the absurdity before me, around me, and within me.

The Diagram of Lurve

PAIGE HOHMANN

first prize: poetry

Part I

When the blackbird flew out of sight
It marked the edge
Of one of many circles.¹

In this world of two dimensions
(in which we seem to be caught)
The blackbird transcends.

The blackbird
Is an emissary.
It visits his circle
It visits hers
 (whispers sweet nothings)
 (tells stories)
 (sends a little kiss)

They carry an impenetrable circumference.

On good nights, they collide,
and bounce off one another
 into the dark
 into the ether

On clear nights, she waves hello.
He mouths “how are you?”

The Diagram of Lurve

He is the core of an apple
She—the seed of a plum
To taste is to consume
To puncture is to enter
You have to die to touch the centre

¹*From "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," by Wallace Stevens.
First Published December, 1917.*

Part II

cut from bone by the bone knife, it depends from
her white, white neck.

It

(The Relic)

rests in the depression of her throat

falling in

falling out

with the breath that comes and goes.

what has she endured?

the devastating turn of the boy

the deep kick

the deep cut

the deep break that is

falling in and

falling out of love

smooth from the worry of her fingers, she joins

now in prayer

here they are

staring at each other across coffee.

Alone together. Together alone.

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lyrics, sonnets, raps, haiku, ballads, odes, limericks, songs...

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literary journalism, memoir, commentary, essays with a literary edge, travelogues...

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SUBMISSION GUIDELINES:

1. An entry may include up to 5 poems, or a short story or a creative non-fiction work not longer than 2,000 words
2. Entries must be type-written and double spaced (do not staple and do not put your name on the pages of your manuscript!)
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 entry must be accompanied by a \$5.00 entry fee. Make your cheque payable to "Langara College"
5. Deadline for submission is 2 April 2010.

W49 Magazine will notify all entrants after their manuscripts have been adjudicated. Those wishing their material returned after the contest must include a self-addressed, self-stamped envelope with the entry. All entrants will receive copies of the magazine at no cost.

Please direct all submissions and enquiries to:

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