

FICTION

NONFICTION

POETRY

POSTCARD

2022 EDITORIAL



After a two-year hiatus, we are pleased to announce the commencement of both print and online versions of the 22nd edition of W49 magazine, a journal of award-winning creative writing by Langara students. As editor of the magazine, I would like to thank the many people who were involved in helping make this year's issue possible, beginning with the Langara English department members who volunteered to act as adjudicators: Deborah Blacklock, Kina Cavicchioli, Sandra Friesen, Caroline Harvey, Trevor Newland, Thor Polukoshko, Daniel Poirier, Sarah Richards, Erin Robb, and Roger Semmens. Invaluable assistance in seeing the project through to completion was further provided by Greg Holditch, Kathleen Oliver, Lynette Hawksley, and Josue Menjivar. **A huge thank you to Paola Rubio Portella for her graceful design, layout, and cover art work.** Most importantly, I would like to thank all W49 contributors, the Langara students whose talent and creativity is on full display in this year's edition. And we are also pleased to include, as per tradition, more Langara student writing excellence in the form of winning entries from Caroline Harvey's Postcard Contest competition.

Happy reading!

Guy Wilkinson

“

*I sink into my worn
recliner, slowly twirling
the polaroid photo
between my fingertips...*

10

x

x

x

x

x

x

x

x

x

x

x

x

FICTION

x

x

x

x

x

x

x

x

x

01

FIRST PLACE FICTION

THE
WAY IT
WAS*Braedon Lowey*

I sink into my worn recliner, slowly twirling the polaroid photo between my fingertips, listening as it squeaks under the latex glove. I wear it not to protect the photo, but to keep it separated from my bare flesh—once I touch it, it's gone forever. I ruminate over whether or not this is the right time as I stare at it. In the photo, Ash looks at me, his sandy blond curls dangling over his smile, which lacks the two front teeth—he was six years old in this one, and that was the day I discovered the camera's strange magic.

My husband, John, and I had each taken a photo that day at the beach. When I was packing everything up later, I touched the one he took, and it brought me back to that moment. Physically, I had travelled through time, though it took me a while to figure it out—I spent most of my time there trying to explain to John what had happened. Ten minutes later, I found myself back at the moment I touched it, like nothing ever changed, except that the photo was gone. John had no

idea anything had occurred, so I said nothing, but carefully tucked the other photo into my book to save for later.

I never knew if the camera's magic was limited, or if maybe it was in the film instead, so I used it sparingly and avoided capturing mundane moments like the beach. Instead I took photos of his life's biggest moments and held onto them.

The sunlight shining through the window warms my hand and bounces off the polaroid, scattering itself around the room. Holding the memory in my hands, I'm grateful now that it's a mundane one. It'll be easier to go back to.

I had pictures of his engagement with Michelle, his move into his first apartment, his high school graduation, his first car right before he drove it home, right before I dropped him off for his first date, and the two beach photos. I had been saving the pictures, planning to leave them in an envelope with a note for him to find when I'm gone, so he can relive his best moments.



That was my plan until Ash and Michelle were killed by a drunk driver. Now the photos are just for me, and I've been working my way backwards through them. After their funeral, I watched him propose to her again and he asked me why I was crying so much and I simply couldn't say the words.

There are still three empty sheets of film left, and I've lain awake all night before, wondering what they could have held.

I'm at the age now where I would be filing them away somewhere. My memory is starting to go. Not fade, or get fuzzy, but just... slip away. I lose pieces of it every day and nothing fills in the gaps— they're just there. Soon I'll be like my mother, whose memory eroded all the way back to her childhood before she passed. My heart broke watching her play with dolls and children's toys so passionately, but she was so, so happy. She passed on with a smile, even though everyone around her bed was a stranger to her. She was lucky. I hope that I, too, forget everything that hurt in my life.

I tear the glove off and seize the photo. It shatters into fragments of golden light and encircles me in a cobweb of radiant tessellations. I close my eyes and embrace the memory, beginning to feel the warmth of the California sun.



When I opened them again, I was there. The seagulls screeched overhead, preying on littered french fries from the town's first McDonald's. Ash loved the happy meals there. The beach bag, with the camera in it, lay in the sand beside me. My hair, long and soft and blonde again, hung over John's hand resting on my back. He had returned from his deployment not long ago, and before this photo was taken, we had a long talk about how grateful he was to be there. It would be many years from this moment that he'd disappear, telling me he needs space to grieve. Between those moments, I had considered, as many mothers do, what losing a child might be like, and had always thought it would bring us closer together.

Yet still, I smiled warmly at him, and he smiled back before giving me a peck on the cheek. Eighteen years from now I would hate him, but in that moment, I shared his sentiment—I was just grateful to be there. But I wasn't there for him. I looked out at the water where Ash was playing, and the great blue horizon looked washed out and was

FIRST PLACE FICTION

covered in a tint of sepia, reminding me that I was not only a tourist to the California shores, but to this time as well. The clock was ticking.

"Mom!" Ash shouted in a shrill, boyish tone. "Come help me dig!" I swore I'd never forget his voice, but it sounded strange and unfamiliar. In the last memory I'd visited, it had already deepened to that of a man's.

I sat next to him as he dug a hole. A moat for his sandcastle, he said, even though there was no sandcastle in the middle. It was huge. Large enough for him to fit inside. I found myself admiring his work, even though, really, it wasn't that impressive. It was just a pit where sand used to be and now was not. Muddy water began to trickle in, and I looked up to see that he had dug a channel to the sea, and the tide sent a rhythmic surge of water through it like a heart pumping blood.

I watched him as one might watch a monkey at a zoo, wondering what it'll do next, as he fetched his bucket and filled it with hard packed sand. He tipped it upside down into his moat, and a perfect cylinder of sand splashed into the water. His jaw dropped, and I chuckled. "You can't build your castle in a full moat, sweetheart," I said.

"Why not?"

"The sand holds its shape when it's damp, but not when it's wet. The hole you dug is filled with water now, and any sand you put in it will fall apart.

I'm afraid that this pit can't be the foundation of a castle now."

He looked down at it, and his lip trembled a bit. "Can you fix it?" he asked. Normally I'd try to do it with him and teach him the problem-solving skills that would serve him well later on. But it didn't matter there. I just wanted him to be happy.

"I'll try my best," I reassured him. I started to scoop water out while he dug another hole a few feet away, and I slowed as I started to feel dizzy. I only had a few minutes left here.

"Smile!" John shouted from up the beach. He was holding the camera, and, instinctively, I panicked and ran towards him. It was too late. He had already taken the photo. I shouted at him not to touch it, and got to him just in time to use the corner of my beach towel to take the photo from the camera.

"Christ, Emma, what's the matter?" John asked. I didn't like when he took that tone with me, but didn't react, as I was occupied with staring at the photo developing in my hands. It was the same one that he originally took on this day, except I wasn't in the frame this time, since I was sprinting to him instead. Looking at it gave me an idea that I was angry hadn't risen up in the eighty years following this moment.

"I'm sorry, John, I just don't remember how much film is left."



"There's eight sheets," he said, confirming my theory. Even though the photos are destroyed when I use them, the empty film is still here. I only had one more thing to confirm—I reached out and touched the photo. * "Christ, Emma, what's the matter?" John asked. A smile that I had only seen on other faces since Ash died finally appeared on mine again. I can nest the memories inside each other. There were eight sheets of film left and if I took a photo with each one, then I could jump into them and take even more, until...

The time I had here was technically finite, but functionally infinite. The math was too long to do, but by my estimate, it was an astronomical number of minutes. I could be there forever. Back in the real world, my memories were fading, and soon I'd unravel myself into living in a time where Ash was still alive. I would be like my mother in the care home. I would look at a nurse that looked vaguely like my son and ask them how Michelle is doing. The nurse, trained to handle women like me, would say that Michelle is doing just fine. I couldn't stand the thought of it. Nobody would be the real Ash, sitting in front of me like he is now, and I couldn't bring myself to be at peace with disguising someone in a memory.

I kept taking photos, jumping down the different branches of time that laid themselves out as I went. Every time I jumped into a memory, I found myself next to John again, staring at me like I had gone mad.



I went back to the sea where Ash was digging and apologized for stepping away. Knowing that I had longer now, I started to scoop the water out of the hole he had dug while I talked with him. The tide came dangerously close as I got down to the last bits of water, and after only a few more pushes, got high enough to fill the hole again. I began to scoop it back out, and felt myself get dizzy as my vision began to waver. Ten minutes already.

FIRST PLACE FICTION



I tried going faster, knowing it wasn't helpful. Maybe I thought that if I could return the water to the sea fast enough that it would be grateful and leave me be. It didn't.



At one point Ash asked me why I was going so fast. I knew that he would never remember this conversation, so I told him that he would die one day, and that I was back here to visit him. He seemed comforted by that.

"Am I in heaven?" he asked.

I told him yes, but I didn't know if I believed in heaven. I wanted to, but how could the same God that took my baby boy take care of him too?

"That's good," he said. "I hoped I'd go to heaven."



I tried building barricades from sand and towels and rocks. Either the tide would break through, or I'd spend so much time building it that I couldn't empty the hole. I wanted to make Ash happy, but I needed more than the ten minutes I had. No matter what I tried, no matter how hard I worked at it, I couldn't fix it, not even with help from Ash or John. I had lost track of how many attempts I made before I accepted that what I needed was more time, not more chances.

I collapsed next to Ash, exhausted, and wept.

"It's okay, mom," he said, blissfully unaware of how many times I'd done this already. "I'll build a castle somewhere else."

I wept harder, knowing that I'd never see it. I had tried everything I could think of for what felt like ages, and yet, the pit remained. The pit where once there was sand and now there was not, and I yearned with my entire self for it to be back to the way it was before.▼

SECOND PLACE FICTION

TENTH ANNIVERSARY

Claire Turner

September of 1949 was warm in Watrous; the pale house stood still at the edge of town. The front hall was dark, lit only by sunbeams pouring through the thin floral drapes. A shelf by the door held three photographs. The first was yellowed and depicted a young family of three – mother, father, and son, with matching light hair, standing outside the house. The second depicted the son with another boy, both knees deep in a lake, holding jackfish. A plaque on the frame read, “Tommy and George, age eleven – first fish.” The final frame held a more recent photograph of Tommy, now in his twenties, in uniform. He sported a natural grin, his arm wrapped around a dark-haired woman, who wore a light-coloured striped suit dress and a small veil, outside of a church.

Keys rattled at the door before it slammed open. Tommy stood at the threshold, crow’s feet wrinkling. His hair was disheveled, and dark brown suit rumpled. He hobbled over the threshold, a cane in his left hand and keys in his right. The cane caught on the carpet. He tripped and swore. He

quickly righted himself and plastered a smile.

“I’m home! Mr. Williamson gave me the afternoon off when he heard it was our 10th. I thought we could go have a picnic by the lake, just like we used too! Maybe pop by the liquor store for some champagne.”

Tommy elbowed the door closed and sat on stair. The house creaked slowly in the still air. He tossed the keys beside him. “Gone again?” His smile fell as he shrugged off his patched jacket and threw it over the railing. The shoes were next, placed neatly on the floor. He grabbed his cane again and limped up the stairs. Entering their bedroom, he sat on the right side of their quilted bed. The bedside table carried a small half-used candle and a glass of still water. He opened the drawer and pulled out a black leather-bound book. He flipped through to the latest passage.

Today is the day. I barely slept. I almost ran out of the house when Tommy left. No more secrets after tonight. I hope it’s not too much of a shock. I just don’t want him to hate me. We deserve better in our lives.

SECOND PLACE FICTION

Tommy ran his fingers over the scrawled words. The tips stopped at the word hate. "Never," he mumbled. His eyes welled as he took a deep breath.



The night they met the air was still. His cousin George came to visit and decided to go dancing at their local dance hall to get Tommy's mind off the death of his parents. There were many people, but two girls caught his eye. They looked identical with their matching curled hair and similar dresses, the older one pale yellow and the younger in pale pink. The older was swaying with the music while the younger leaned on the wall. Her blue eyes seemed to sparkle with fascination, but her body remained still.

Tommy turned to George and asked, "What about the one in yellow? She looks like she can dance well."

George followed his gaze and nodded. "The pink one doesn't seem like much of a good time."

Tommy grinned and laughed, "Yeah, but she'll probably talk your ears off."

George groaned, "The things I do for you."

Tommy clapped his back and they walked over. The older one's eyes met George's but quickly moved to Tommy. He had a way of moving that seemed to always draw eyes to him. He floated over to her and held out his hand.

"Care to dance?" Tommy asked.

The older one placed her hand in his. "Of course." They twirled off onto the dance floor leaving the other two to talk.

Tommy slipped his left hand to her narrow waist and pulled her left into his right. She slid her right hand onto his shoulder. They started to sway with the music. The beat picked up and Tommy gave her a twirl.

She laughed heartily, "Got a name?"

"Tommy."

"Jane."

"So, Jane. Do you come here often?"

Tommy smiled as he swung her around the space.

"No, but my sister heard about it from a friend, and I thought we should go," Jane said, looking back at George and her sister now sitting and talking. "She's not much of a dancer but loves the music!"

"I'm a good teacher," Tommy swung Jane to his side and guided her back towards the two sitting ducks. He leaned into her ear and asked, "What's her name?"

"Joyce," Jane whispered. She took a seat on the other side of George, cutting off their conversation about the weather. A smile easily rested on her lips, and George matched.

Tommy leaned over Joyce's lap with his hand outstretched, "Would you please let me take you for a whirl?"

Joyce blushed and leaned a little closer to Tommy. Her lips brushed his



ear, and a shiver went down his spine, "I don't know how to."

Tommy gulped. The band switched to a slow song. "How about we just sway?" She nodded and one dance turned into the rest of the night.



It had been quite a while since they had done anything like their first night together, but he was providing for their future. Tommy was lying to himself. Since he had returned, they spent most evenings listening to a radio show in silence, then retiring to bed. He stood quickly and the shrapnel stuck in his leg hummed against his bone. A yelp escaped his lips and he fell to the bed. This time tears freely flowed. He threw his cane back at the opened door and it fell onto the landing. He quietly sobbed, head in hands. A few minutes passed and he sat up, wiping his eyes quickly. **"Alright, Tommy. Let's go for a drive. Maybe she's just visiting Jane,"** he stated boldly. Not exactly a sound theory, but it brought him to his feet and gave him a destination. He leaned on the bed as he walked, his face wincing, but his focus didn't leave the cane until he had it back in his hand. He swiftly walked down the stairs, redressed for the outdoors grabbed his keys, and exited.

His car was a little rusty, but still ran, even if just a little slowly. However, the drive to Jane's was even slower than normal. Tommy had to stop periodically for families of animals to walk by. He almost started to cry again. Maybe Joyce would be more interested in him if they had children, but it had been painful to even try. The shrapnel in his leg was buzzing at the mere thought.

Heat waves crept off the late summer grass as he finally turned into Jane and George's driveway. The house seemed to loom over Tommy as he came to a stop. George was standing at the top of the peeling white stairs in a pressed black suit. His face broke into a massive grin. As Tommy pulled himself out of the driver's seat, George's face fell as he thundered down the stairs.

"What happened?" George asked.

"Is Joyce here?"

"No, was she supposed to be?"

SECOND PLACE FICTION

Tommy bowed his head, "Joyce is going to leave me."

George's brow wrinkled. "No, she's not. Why would you think that?"

"She's never home recently." Now Tommy had someone to talk to, the flood gates opened.

"Her diary said that she ran out of the house after I left today. I know I haven't been the most attentive, and we haven't done much, but we chose each other! Just the war and my leg." Tommy paused.

George gave a sympathetic smile that didn't reach his eyes. "I'm sure that's something between you and Joyce," he said adding, "Don't tell Jane, you'll worry her."

Tommy nodded. Jane walked out the dark blue front door in a yellow jacket with a matching party dress, looking like the girl he had met ten years ago.

"Tommy! What are you doing here?" she called, coming down the stairs.

George swung his arm around Tommy's cowering shoulders, "I called him at work saying we should take him and Joyce out for dinner!"

"Oh, how nice!"

"Yes dear, so he came to pick us up on his way home. We'll just swing by their house to change, and we'll meet Joyce in town." George lied so smoothly, his face level when Tommy looked up.

"Great!" Jane walked to the back of the car. George ran around and opened the door for her. After he settled her in, he ran back around to the other side and took the keys out of Tommy's hands.

"I'll drive," George said. Tommy slowly walked to the other side and lowered himself into the seat. He was a little shocked. Why did he talk to George? He wouldn't understand. Jane didn't want to leave him. George started the car. To Tommy, this ride felt quicker. He had gathered his thoughts and he understood what he needed to do.

"Tommy, why don't you go in and change, we'll just wait here," George said, leaning over to open the passenger side door. Tommy pulled himself out of the car and up the stairs. A man in a trance, he walked through the front door and up to the bedroom. He opened the armoire and looked all the way to the back, finding the suit bag and unzipping it. There it was, in perfect condition, like it had been pressed this morning. He removed his work suit and slid into his tails. They fit just the same as before. He limped to Joyce's floor-length mirror and took in his worn face. Seeing himself in his old suit, he could breathe easier, stand a little straighter. The person staring back



looked familiar again. He almost leaped across the room. Maybe she would stay if I could move, he thought. He grabbed his cane and walked back out of the house. When he slid into the car, George and Jane commented on how fine he looked. He moved his mouth into a slow grin, and they chatted about George and Jane's farm. They recently had a new foal born and were extremely excited.

"Oh Honey, we're here!"

Tommy looked up at Jane's squeal and saw the dance hall where he had first met Joyce. He whipped around to look at George, words failing to leave his lips. George nodded back, looking past Tommy to the door of the hall. The front doors opened and out walked a small woman wearing a familiar cream suit with pale blue stripes and a small veil. Dark curls framed her face. Tommy's eyes started to well. There was his girl, his Joyce. He climbed out of the car and walked over to her, his steps commanding. Her eyes started to water as Tommy drew closer. He looked a little closer and realized she was wearing her wedding suit.

"Oh, you look so handsome!" Joyce called, running into his arms. George and Jane kept walking and entered the hall with a wink back to a shocked Tommy.

Tommy looked down at Joyce, **"What's going on?"**

Joyce took a step back. "I thought we could finally have our reception. I wanted to surprise you since you've been working. I've even been practicing dancing with Jane and George!"

Tommy smiled. He grabbed Joyce by the waist and lifted her into a deep kiss. Years of forgetting, sitting at either ends of the couch, not buying her flowers, stripped away. He pulled away and saw the woman she had grown into. "You're too good for me."

"Oh darling," Joyce looped her arm in his and they walked to the doors of the hall. Tommy's mind wondered to the journal entry Joyce wrote. We deserve better. He gave his wife one last kiss on her temple before opening the door for her. ▼

FICTION HONORABLE MENTION

A
REQUIEM*Xochitl Leal*

I must have been exhausted from the journey; how long I'd slept I didn't know. I awoke confused, with very little recollection from the previous days. The last thing I remembered was the dusty ride down from the mountains; all of us boys bumping along sleepily in the back of the old pick-up truck, then taking the usual slow, jarring bus ride that wound through the valley. I remembered walking along the highway's edge from the bus stop to our town and thinking about Loretta. Ay, Loretta. I was so exhausted from working long days. Day after day up in the mountains. My shoulders ached, my hands embedded with dirt, I was tired of spending my weekends working so far from Loretta. But, I remembered our promise and I did this for her, for us, for our future. That's why I bought her pomegranates— for our fertile future, for the unborn children waiting for us. I had fresh chilies wrapped in tissue for mother, and for you, Salvador, I had in my pocket a speckled rock from the quarry. It looked like it contained all the night's stars.

I watched as the red evening sun fell behind the mountains on my left. There was more smoke in the air than usual; I remember wondering if someone must have started preparing the soil early this year. I was so weary, my lungs were full of smoke and bitter diesel fumes by now, but the vision of Loretta's sweet face kept me going. I still can't remember arriving home.

I had strange dreams of rushing water, of large watery fish eyes staring into mine; I dreamt I was falling into a river. I reached out to grab something, to stop my fall, and awoke suddenly, soaking in sweat. A high fever they said; four days I'd slept, they said. My leaden eyelids parted slowly to three huddled faces looking down at me.

"Rest more, my son, you will need the rest," mother said, pulling my wet shirt over my head.

I was annoyed when I awoke and discovered rocks in my bed; Salvador! My brother and his stupid pranks. They weren't funny. I reached to my nightstand for the chain I always wore around my neck and it wasn't there. I swear, I will get that little boy!



"Don't get angered my son, you must rest," and mother lifted my head to drink a hot, musky tea.

The three women shuffled out, closing the door behind them.

I could hear their low muffled voices outside my door. I recognised the voice of our mother, her sister, and the third voice I didn't know; they were saying that I had been calling your name, Salvador.

Our aunt's resonating voice was distinct, "he needs to be sleeping, he needs to forget".

"Don't worry," replied the voice of the third, "give it a couple of hours."

"We are so very hungry." I could hear my mother talking now but the voices faded into the murky darkness, my eyes were so heavy. I heard a click; did they lock my door? Then water.

More water. Rushing water, it was filling my ears, it was so loud, and I was falling. Slipping. I could feel my hand slipping, I could hear your voice Salvador, you were calling my name. I was losing my grip, letting go, grasping for a handhold, grasping at the submerged roots, gasping for air. I couldn't breathe. I was falling through the earth, being swallowed, fingernails scratching at the dirt, and on skin, not my skin. I stopped. I was floating not falling, my hair was caught on

something, being pulled, ripped. I woke with a start, immediately reaching up to touch the back of my head when someone grabbed my wrist and firmly laid my hand down across my chest; my

eyes opened to the back of my mother's head, pulling the sheet up to my chin. "You were yelling again," she said, "you are still very ill, you must rest."

"What happened to your hand?" Horrified, I reached out to touch what looked like a charcoaled corn husk where her skin should have been; her nails were black and deformed like the hard sunflower shells that the birds dropped in our yard. She briskly retracted her hand, turning to leave.

"Nothing, don't worry, just a small burn."

"Where's Salvador?"

"Just rest my dear, shut your eyes now."

With the closing of the door, I reached back and felt a small bald spot on the back of my head. Did she rip out my hair? When her steps receded, I got out of bed, carefully, as to not creak the old

FICTION HONORABLE MENTION

wooden frame. I walked across the cold stone floor and cautiously turned the handle, expecting it to be locked. I was surprised to see the house in darkness, with the exception of a low light emanating from within Salvador's room. His door was ajar and inside the three women were sitting in a semicircle, their backs towards me; they were facing what looked like a small pile of hair in the centre of the room. There was no sign of Salvador, no sign of him at all; not his small bed, not even one of his toys on the floor. My mother was holding her loom, my aunt had one hand full of hair and the other passing the shuttle through the threads, leaning in toward my mother and then back; in the rhythmic sway of a sapling in the wind. The third woman was holding up scissors – the glint of metal caught the candlelight. I crept low to the ground, my heart beating loudly. I needed to find Salvador.

Outside, the streets were crowded; a murmuring cavalcade of mourners made its way down the street toward the edge of town, toward the river. As the procession made its way past me, a sea of black garments fluttered in the breeze. Up ahead, four pallbearers carried a small coffin.

"Excuse me, what is happening here? Whose funeral is this?" I stumbled through the crowd, blank faces

looking through me, ahead of me, each carrying wilted flowers.

"Please, stop. Please. Who died? Excuse me."

My questions met with deaf ears; I was unseen, unheard. Two riders on huge, black, snarling horses were bringing up the rear, tails swatting flies from side to side. They reared on their hind legs in unison as they neared, and the rider on the left slowed his pace beside me. His horse's nostrils flaring, feet stamping, and he leant down to draw his face up to mine. His eyes were two black pools of obsidian; his mouth opened as if to say something but instead exhaled a deep sulfuric breath, knocking me backwards. My thoughts turned to Loretta; I needed to find her. I needed her to help me find Salvador; she would know what to do. I turned and ran. I ran down the narrow, twisting, stone streets. I ran past all of the colorful cinder block houses with their curtains drawn shut, past the century-old church where we planned to marry. I ran as fast as I could, the cloud of people long behind me now. I could see Loretta's house there at the end of the sloping road. There was smoke everywhere; the air was yellow with it, my nostrils filled with the acrid smell. I was frantic. I pounded on her door, and there she was exactly as I remembered her; her almond eyes smiling at me, shiny dark hair



reflecting the light. She ushered me in and sat me down at the small wooden table near the stove; my clothes were soaked, I was shivering. I didn't remember it raining; I must have stepped in some water. Or maybe it was a cold sweat, as she said; I was so damp, I was so cold. As I shivered there I watched her slender back, her delicate hands making us tea. I longed to touch her, to hold her. But, Loretta urged me to sit quietly, not to upset myself. I noticed all of the marigolds in the vase were drooping; their petals fell on the table. I looked up to comment, surprised that Loretta would let these flowers dry out— it was a bad omen, she knew this. Then I saw it, my chain around her neck. I wanted to believe it was Loretta that stood before me, I really did. But there was something in the way she moved; did her feet drag just a little? There was something in the way she told me **“you must rest.”** Something was wrong, I knew it wasn't Loretta, and I stumbled out of there as fast as I could. She tried to come after me, reached out to grab me, and when I was just out of the front door I saw her face change, her lips moved, and I heard my mother's voice say:

“Stop son. You are sick, this is a dream.”

But it wasn't my mother's face; it was the rider and his eyes were black mirrors reflecting flames. I ran to find you Salvador. I ran back through the narrow streets and when I thought I was a safe distance away I looked back. All of the town was gone; everything around me was ashes and smoke, piles of rubble concrete. I was so confused, I was so worn out, I stumbled; my legs gave way from under me.

As I lay on the ground a small voice whispered in my ear and a little cold hand grasped mine. **“Are flowers carried to the kingdom of the dead?”** she recited. **“Is it true that we go? Where do we go, when we go? Are we dead there or do we still exist? Do we exist there again?”** I recognised the ancient poem. **“You need to remember,”** she said. **“He needs you to remember you.”** I looked up into the face of a little girl. She pointed down to the river and beckoned that I follow.

When we stood on the bank of the river, I peered down and I saw myself there at the bottom cradling you, Salvador, in my arms. We looked like we were suspended in time; hair floating up like a halo, anchored in an eternal moment. I must have held on hard until the breath ran out, I must have cradled you so tight that when my life left we remained in this embrace like some ancient sacrifice to the

FICTION HONORABLE MENTION

old gods; the gods that may have been forgotten but don't forget. They only got hungrier, and they feasted on my grief. They'd been starving and I gave them their fill. I wasn't really here but somehow stuck here. Then I remembered it all; I had sat here for days on this riverbank, with your little body in my arms. For days, I watched your perfect face. So still, so peaceful, like smooth carved stone, eyes closed, lips slightly parted. I prayed to the spirits of the river; I called out to whatever spirits would hear me, "Take pity on me. Where he goes I go!"

I fasted at that riverbank as ash rained down from the heavens, and I wouldn't let you go, I couldn't let you go. I called to your tiny spirit not to leave me alone. All around me were ashes and charcoal now, nothing was left of my life: not my home, not Loretta, nor our future – there you were at the river as if you'd been waiting for me all along. What if I hadn't taken so long, why hadn't I been there too? I should have been there to carry you to the river, where the air was cleaner; I could have run us here faster. I opened your little clenched fist, unfolding those stiff cold fingers closed around a stone. I stared at that stone like it was some kind of relic and I placed it on my tongue. I swallowed that stone, pushing it down my parched throat with mouthfuls of cold river water. I could feel it slowly sliding down into my stomach, and like a vision, I saw: I wanted to be a stone in the belly of the river, swallowed up and leaden, heavy, dropping into the Dream. I knew then what I must do – I knew what I'd already done; my pockets were heavy, full of river stones.

Those nights at the river when you held me close to you, your warmth, I'd been so cold there waiting for you. You uncurled my fingers; so long had they been tightly closed. How I love you, how I waited for you, big brother. I waited when they all began to leave and walk the road home, I waited for you; when the last ones left, and the fires went cold, I was still here. I knew you'd need me to comfort you, I knew that even after death you'd be lost. So, I waited to carry you home. ▼

FICTION HONORABLE MENTION

A.I.D.

M.K. Nilson

Artificial Intelligence
Department's Independent
Contractor Terms
and Conditions:

142.3.57 ...Independent Contractor...
solely responsible...memory donation...

142.3.58 ...donated memory...
property...Company...trademark...
perpetuity....no access...by...
Independent...

168.1.49 ...donated memory...2-hours
before...Contract designated start
time defined...

217.6.21 ...before first contract...
Independent...go...Company...
procedure...collected memory...said
[collected] memory...selected by
Company...stored by Company...

217.6.24 Failure...suitable donated
memory...immediate forfeiture...
collected memory...use...All terms and
conditions...'donated' [memory] apply...



Tate Clifflands likes puzzles, which is why she stacks all the delivery boxes she receives, on behalf of her neighbors, in a Jenga tower. Even the

boxes marked with the bright, red fragile sticker. Right now, the tower is just past the doorknob of her bachelor apartment's door. She also likes neon post-its: yellow is for watering her away neighbors' plants; pink is a reminder to fulfill the obligatory, volunteer H.O.A. hours; orange is for one-off reminders; blue is to organize her Independent Contractor hours, or as she and others call themselves, ghost workers. Glancing around her apartment, Tate realizes the only color is the post-its. The walls are the original white when she moved in four years ago. Even though she waters everyone else's plants, she has none of her own. Outside of her bed, the biggest piece of furniture is her desk, where she spends many hours hunched over tagging visual images, as one of her contributions to A.I. development. The other contribution is not due for another three-weeks, at the start of the new contract.

Today is a day to participate in her favorite activity: people watching. The public park down the street has a bench, which, unlike the other benches, is crooked. Maybe one of the workers had had enough for the day

FICTION HONORABLE MENTION

and decided the bench could sit as it was. This 'as it was' bench provides an uncanny angle to the park. One in which Tate can see park users, while sitting hidden in the shadows of a tree. She likes that tree. While reaching into the hall closet, Tate glimpses another tree. This one resides in a crayon drawing taped to the closet's back wall. She grabs a jacket. This thrift-store find is a little too big and hits her mid-thigh. After sliding on her equally discounted loafers, Tate walks over to a small bowl. She pockets her keys. Then she picks-up and fastens a tacky, oversized, butterfly pin to her jacket's lapel. It is the kind of pin that dollar stores sell on the second-shelf up from the floor.

On her way to the elevator, Tate declines a phone call, while she steps around Mrs. Walker and her dinner invitation. Mrs. Walker tries to speak of her recent trip to Florida. Tate knows 'Florida' is code for her neighbour's periodic nips and tucks. Tate keeps walking. She presses the elevator button and pretends to listen to her neighbour talk about sandy beaches and tequila time with her sister, who lives in one of those retirement communities. As it descends, Tate looks at her reflection in the elevator's door. She needs to be careful or she will be the widow with a dowager's hump. Briefly, Tate attempts to straighten her posture. She fidgets with the butterfly pin. Part of the butterfly's orange body is shiny from all the times Tate rubs, polishes, it with her fingers.

She wanders down the block to the park's side entrance, which is through a small, wrought iron gate. She likes the slight squeak of the gate's opening. Once Tate takes her customary seat, she merges into the surroundings. She declines a call. A small, unicorn-shaped cloud prances across the sky. It begins to play hide-and-seek with the other clouds. When it emerges from its last hiding place, the unicorn has lost both its wings and horn, now it looks like a small, gray box. Tate takes a deep breath preparing to exhale slowly. The jarring ringtone of Jared Leto's Joker laugh causes her to choke and cough. Grabbing at the butterfly pin, Tate accepts the call.

"Hello Tate, we have a project for you!" says Pam.

"I have three-weeks."

"We have a project."

"Is there another project in a few days?"



"No worries. Per our agreement, an unscheduled break means voiding your contract."

"I can make it work," says Tate.

"The criteria for the mem are a little different."

"Excuse me?"

"Don't worry, it's all in the info pack and you still have your col-mem."

"My col-mem?"

"Yes, it fits the new params. So, don't worry. Have a great day!"

Tate once again declines a call: *hometown* drivel. Tate begins to take inventory of memories she is willing to donate to the new project. At least tomorrow is the H.O.A.'s bi-weekly potluck. Tate tries to cycle through different H.O.A. volunteer positions, which gives her slightly different donatable memories to cache for any new ghost worker's contract. Ghost workers, a catch-all label for nameless grunts, who do the visual tagging in deep-machine learning for the A.I.D. Tate feels her phone buzz. The Company's app confirms receipt of the information packet. Countdown: 3 hrs. 00 mins. *Wait! What?* She has until 3 p.m. to upload a memory or the Company will use her collected memory. It is not just a collected memory. It is Tate's

most cherished memory. No! It is her most cherished memory they are going to take, trademark, and bastardize for the A.I.D.'s new project. Tate sees red. A slightly under inflated, red balloon is making its wobbly way across the park. The balloon's broken, pink ribbon is trailing along, waiting for small chubby fingers to once again reach out to grab a hold.

Breathe... Tate reads the parameters of the project: happy; more than two people; preference event; preference summertime. The pressure on Tate's chest is like a too-tight elastic band wrapped around her heart. From her hidden spot on the bench, she scans the park for acquaintances. Due to the deep-machine coding process for visual images in A.I. development, donated memories degrade after one use. The private ghost workers' chatroom was created to try to warn each other about potential donated memory requirements, for upcoming projects, like an anniversary celebration, pick-up hockey game, gardening etc.

Tate sees another apartment owner from her building, Alessia, who is having a birthday party for her little girl, Alannah. Tate joins the party's fringe. She drifts past some debris on

FICTION HONORABLE MENTION

the grass – paper hats, noisemakers, gift wrap etc. She makes her movements a slow spiral, meandering inwards so as not to alert the host. Her fingers rub the butterfly's body of the pin, which she fastens on the left side of her jacket at heart level. Tate needs 20 minutes to lay down a usable memory.

Countdown: 2 hrs. 37 mins.

"Tate," says Alessia, "what are you doing here?"

"I came over to say happy birthday to Alannah."

"You need to go. We don't need you triggered."

"I'm fine. I can..."

"No." Alessia signals to Alex and Dustin, her cousins, to block Tate's view of the party.

Countdown: 2 hrs. 22 mins.

Tate exits the park with the smell of popcorn, BBQ, and the sounds of happy families, ushering her out. She walks past the AR-, VR-, and Sim-stores, with their flashing neon signs. For whatever reason, those types of memories do not encode on the brain's neural pathways like memories created in the real world, in real time. Tate strikes up a casual conversation with Vinny, *Mobile Dogs*' food truck owner. The impatient que forces her to move. She tries the neighbourhood coffee shop to see if she can crash Miller and Michael's cribbage game. Because she spends so much time people watching, Tate believes she knows her neighbours: *where is everybody?* In frustration, she almost throws her cell when it rings – decline!

As she looks for people, Tate pretends to window shop.

Countdown: 00 hrs. 23 mins.

"Tate, wait up," says Ethan. "Kim's been trying to call you."

Countdown: 00 hrs. 20 mins.

"Been working."

"That's why I'm in the city. Kim and I are having a baby!"

Countdown: 00 hrs. 19 mins.

"Hey, I'm sorry..." says Ethan.

"You're looking for a job?"

"Something remote. I know we lost touch. But you know..."

"It's okay."

"So, does your place have anything?"

"You know how to tag visual images?"



"Yeah!"

"I can probably set you up. My boss called and said I have to start today at 5. I was supposed to get three weeks off."

"I just need to tag visual images?"

"Yeah...I need the time."

"I get it."

"Okay...let me call my boss and see about doing some of the subbing prelims."

Countdown: 00 hrs. 14 mins.

"Hello," says Pam.

"Hello," says Tate, "I have an I.C. substitution."

"Really?"

"Yes, I'd like to introduce you to Ethan."

Countdown: 00 hrs. 12 mins.

Tate tunes out Ethan and Pam, who are discussing some of the job's particulars. Tate wants to scream. Scream. And SCREAM, until the echoes bounce off all the buildings in the neighbourhood; until the echoes build to such a crescendo that she can gather and weave them all together into a whirlwind. *I am going to: smash all of Remi's Pizza's tacky, orange patio furniture; sweep up that vintage, yellow VW bug and rip through the park; teardown all the mom-and-pop shops with cutesy, hipster apartment living above.* Tate stands on the sidewalk watching tiny, black ants march through a fallen Neapolitan ice cream cone. Their antennas wagging back and forth as each scan for the right morsel to pick-up and take home. A childhood delight now reduced to a mild annoyance for afternoon strollers. Tate fiddles with the butterfly pin.

Countdown: 00 hrs. 5 mins.

"Ethan Caddell, do you acknowledge you are a willing substitute for Tate Clifflands, as the Independent Contractor for A.I.D. project 4795F2, which begins at 5 p.m. today?" says Pam.

"Yes!"

"Ethan Caddell, do you accept, and agree to, all of the A.I.D.'s Independent Contractor Terms and Conditions?"

Countdown: 00 hrs. 3 mins.

"Yes!"

Countdown: Transferred.

"Great, come down and we'll get you started."

FICTION HONORABLE MENTION

Tate escorts Ethan to the correct LRT connection to take him to the Company's headquarters. He is now an official ghost worker; "ghost worker" that catch-all label for nameless grunts. For those in the job, ghost workers are the unfortunates who lose their Company collected memory. Tate isn't sure how the collected memory is warehoused at the Company, while at the same time remains accessible to her, in her brain. Yet, access promptly stops when the collected memory becomes a donated memory. Ghost workers, who lose this particular memory, will change over time; gradually, day-by-day interest will be lost in hobbies, friends, and family.

Entering her building, Tate pauses to look at the woman's reflection in the elevator's door. Her butterfly pin hangs lopsided. She has made the holes bigger in her jacket where the back of the pin weaves through. She is still wearing loafers, beige pants, and a slightly too big, brown jacket over a white t-shirt. Her brown hair still goes to her shoulders; the slight wrinkle is still there between her brows; the fine lines at her temples and the sides of her mouth are still there; she is still there.

In the elevator going up, Tate's phone pings a notification.

Thank you for helping Ethan get a job!

I didn't do much.

You did - thank you!!!

Just connected him to an acquaintance.

Sorry about the calls - lol!

After entering her apartment, Tate returns her keys, and the pin, to the small bowl. She opens her closet door. She drops her jacket. She starts yanking hangers. The current rod pops out of its sockets. She carefully removes the crayon drawing. She walks over to the fridge. Tate gently tapes the purple clouds, pink rain, and oversized, blue tree drawing to the fridge.

Tate calls Mrs. Walker to ask if the dinner invite is still good.

"Why, yes, yes, it is. 7 p.m."

"Thank you...Thank you, Edna."

The crayon drawing, taped to the fridge, is visible from anywhere in her apartment. ▼

NONFICTION

GRANDDAUGHTERS OF XOCHIQETZAL

Xochitl Leal

Two little girls in thin, white cotton dresses emerge out of the front door of a small stucco house.

The glint from broken glass and pebbled walls catch fractured light, glittering all around them.

An aluminum screen door slams behind as they descend, single file, faces upturned--squinting up into the midday sun; the concrete stairs warm the bare soles of their feet. Their small folded arms hug bundles of fragrant floral bouquets tightly against their chests; the rustle of plastic wrapping

interrupts the hushed atmosphere. They cross a bristly lawn to the front gate; a vacant shopping cart sits on the sidewalk just outside. The two of them carefully stack these packages of exotic flowers, the mingling of unknown fragrances filling their nostrils. These flowers: still cold from sitting in the basement fridge, still in shock from having been pulled from their tranquil dream state and stuffed tight into dark crates, then travelled along extended

stretches of highway in refrigerated trucks, crossed borders, swapped languages, stifled in a taut wooden box, wedged open, hammered shut, and tossed around by custom officers. These flowers still holding within them the songs of the workers who planted them, who cut them: Hibiscus heads lolling back and forth, the dry prairie air sucking out the last of their moisture, white, crimson-edged Carnations; petalled catacombs of orange and fuchsia Dahlia, plumed Birds of Paradise; delicate Baby's Breath tucked in between golden Marigolds, Cempasuchil, whose petals bridge the gap between the underworlds to the land of the living. The girls did this over and over, climbing the stairs, gathering more flowers after their father meticulously tightened ribbons around each bouquet, then laying them in their steel cradle: ascending, descending until the cart was full. They then held up their prized porcelain dolls, named for Xochipili and his twin Xochiquetzal: creator and



protector of flowers. They placed them down on top of the pyramid of flowers. Stiff in blue velvet and lace Victorian pants suits with yellow ringlet hair.

The wheels squeaked and bounced on every crack. They took turns pushing the cart while the hummed and skipped beside, their long hair swaying, dresses twirling, little fingers tracing the heavy embroidery of red flowers that bordered their neckline and cap sleeves.

*Miss Susie had a steamboat,
The steamboat had a bell.
Miss Susie went to heaven,
The steamboat went to..
Hello operator,
Please give me number nine.
And if you disconnect me
I'll chop of your...
Behind the refrigerator
There was a piece of glass.
Miss Mary sat upon it.
It went right up her...*

The drapes swayed in the front window of the first house they went to. No answer. From across the street, their neighbour stood in front of his open doorway and yelled at them: "**This ain't Mexico, you know,**" his belly shaking at this hilarious observation – the longhorn belt buckle threatening to pop open. His wife peered out over his shoulder, "yeah, you realize that, don't you? We don't do things like this here. Not in this country, we don't!"

The sisters looked into each other's faces and repeated their mantra: "**Just ignore them.**"

They continued, door to door, block after block, hands rose in the corners of windows; curtains parted, pulled back, and then swiftly shut. Eyes appeared in small windows on old, wooden doors, but most would not answer. They would not open. The dream of running after the ice cream truck with fists full of bills was slowly melting away. The

FIRST PLACE CREATIVE NONFICTION

girls parked their cart in front of each house, walked up and down exterior stairs, stood on front doorsteps, knocked and pressed doorbells. While they waited they would pick at the rust on the black handrails, they pulled long strips of peeling paint off of front doors, discussing what they would do with all the money they would make. "Edmonton has never seen many of these flowers, they will love the colours," their father told them, "they won't believe the smells, who would say no to two little girls-- just watch!" His eyes sparkled at them as he rubbed their cheeks with the back of his fingers.

*Ask me no more questions,
Please tell me no more lies.
The boys are in the bathroom,
Zipping down their ...
Flies are in the city,
The bees are in the park.
Boys and girls are kissing
In the D-A-R-K, dark*

A few people bought some of these lovely bouquets but only after enquiring where their parents were, and their shoes? Why were grown-ups always wanting them to wear shoes? A thin man with dark-rimmed glasses and sandy blonde hair wanted them to come in to see how the flowers would look in his dining room; he needed their help choosing the perfect flowers.

He would so appreciate it! And he had ice cream. Didn't they want ice cream on a hot day like today? He leaned out of the door frame looking past them, up and down the street; took a step towards them, as they took several back – stumbling backwards down the stairs. They ran. Both leaning in and pushing the cart together, passing the rest of that block and the next, little hearts pounding, chests heaving. They turned the corner, looked over their shoulders and were safe: he hadn't followed them. Their feet hurt, their lungs ached, the pavement was almost too hot to walk on, and the sun scorched their backs and the tops of their heads. An elderly woman, a couple of houses down, called out, beckoning them to come over.

"You poor honeys, you look a little lost, come in and have some juice and cookies," she called from the steps of a squat house. It was a relief to sit down at her little window table, a tidy array of digestive cookies on a china plate and two glasses of apple juice set in front of them. A TV game show host blared from another room. "Why are you girls pushing a cart of flowers," the elderly woman, asked. They weren't sure. "Our aunts sent them from Mexico, people love flowers." They couldn't tell her the whole truth, it was impolite – they would get rich. She inquired about their ages, their



names, did they know not to come into strangers' homes unless they had a "Block Parent" sign in the window as she did? "Call me Mrs. Babychuk, I'm a granny block-parent, a granny can never have enough grandkids." "We don't have grandparents," the older sister said softly. They had no family in this country, besides their parents. She did all the talking. "I am 10 years old, fours years older," pausing to savour that statement, "until fall when my little sister turns 7, then I'll be only three years older, but right now I am four years older." As the cookies disappeared, Mrs. Babychuk shuffled back into the

kitchen, her slippered feet rhythmically rubbing on the protective, plastic, carpet-covering. She came back with a plate full of crackers and cheese, and two decorative Pysanky eggs in her apron pocket. "My mother taught me to make these when I was little in Ukraine, every Easter we made them. They have to be made in secret you know, and best under the full moon. We used flower petals to make colours. They will protect you from witches and bring you so much luck. Keep them by your bed, let them take your bad dreams." The girls palmed these smooth, delicate eggs, turning them over to admire the detailed designs between mouthfuls of crackers. They peered out of this spacious, living room window, the curtains pulled back and tied with a big cloth bow. The light slanted in, reflecting off the formica tabletop, and they watched neighbours walking by, waving up, Mrs. Babychuk leaning back to raise herself from her chair and walking over to open the door. She greeted neighbour after neighbour, laughing, exchanging news and garden produce. And she did this over and over: ascending, descending. While the girls sat silently watching, crumbs falling onto the dolls on their laps.

*Lavender's blue, dilly, dilly
Lavender's green
When I am King, dilly, dilly
You shall be Queen!
Call up your men, dilly, dilly
Set them to work
Some to the plough, dilly, dilly
And some to the pond.
Some to make hay, dilly, dilly
Some to cut corn
While you and I, dilly, dilly
Keep ourselves warm. ▼*

ANSWER

Samantha Huang

“If I had the choice to feel that way all the time, and be here with you, I would. I would never leave this bed.”

You were answering my question. I had asked what it was like to try Oxycodone. I'd never been told something like that. Maybe a candle was lit because the air seemed pink in my memory. No, it was a lamp.

Maybe you were high. You were probably high. I didn't trust it when I heard the words that followed. You loved to smoke, too. Though, I knew when they happened, when I heard, that they would be branded both in my brain and on my forehead. I heard it. Then I figured I would carry your face around for the years that came after you. Then the years came.

You were answering my question. I just knew it by oxy then. Or percs. But I remember it diffusely as scratches. Scratches on a white boy's back. On calves, thighs.

“I fell in a bush.” The rationale didn't seem so lazy at the time. Nor was it necessarily out of character. Drinking is normal. That's how friends have fun together. That's how I made friends. Stayed friends. The irritation at the

question is what gave it away. The slant of his face when he was tired, high. It was plot. Something to be worried about. It took me outside of myself. Outside of my home.

What I also knew is that it felt good. This feels good after your dad dies. When you can't focus in school, when you're shit at school. But you're fucking funny. You're the funny one, you make people laugh, and you're brave. You're brave and you're trying things. That's what you're good at. This was plot. A matter of time.

The dimmer months come, then. Still outside of my home, where the pink light lit, I was playing your video game. I didn't have to drink, now, but I was away. Make, see, walk, shoot, kill. Away. You clutched my leg. You shook. You never got nervous, and then you were. Or were you sick? I watched you, hunched, walk. Something like a chunky faucet could be heard from the bathroom.

Then you came back, clutching. You asked why I wouldn't stop playing. Shaking more now. And even more, you were crying. Okay, I would stop, then.

Football. Green boys, blue boys. New oxy. Better. Fenty.



I heard that shit all the time. I heard you jostle the knuckle of your index back and forth over the space between your nose and mouth after. Face stretched, then scrunched.

If I had the choice to feel that way all the time. And you chose otherwise. That's where the if came in. Just scratches. Just plot. But you cried, shook. Sweaty, cold. You cried because you were never going to feel that way again, you said. You were never going to feel that way, again. It's really fucked up, you said.

It was Thursday night. On Friday morning, I had Comp Civ with Mr. Figg. never leave.

It also feels good to be a baby, again, rocked, shook. Babies cry when they want to be held. Or eat or shit. I knew this felt good because I asked you to do the same for me when you were new to me. In more plot than words.

So I held you. I wondered how long before I could play the game again, half away. Then I thought of Reese. Reese was fucked up now. A year ago he wasn't. A girl in White Rock died, too. Simone knew her. She thought she was doing coke.

Somebody told me they saw Reese on the Skytrain. He had a big backpack, a sleeping bag. Here, the corners of the sheets never stayed tucked. A boy's room. The elastic was getting old. The cotton would get all tangled, loose. Blue light from the console.

So I held you, all the time.

So I would be here with you. and be here with you.

I reach up into the hot air above me now and I imagine that when I draw the shadow of your face you could hear me. I say sorry to you every night like that. For a long time I could not grieve for that time. That time when there was so much time that it couldn't end. Even though it's just me, now, I savour that it didn't.

Then the years came. ▼

THE MAN IN THE MIRROR, THE VOICE IN YOUR HEAD

Braedon Lowey

“Are you sure you should be going out tonight?” I ask him. “You look tired.”

He glances down at the bathroom sink and takes a moment to think about it. He stares at it for so long that I begin to wonder if he’s gone somewhere else, until he finally picks up his phone and begins typing a message.

“You’re not going to message him, are you?” I ask, incredulous. “He’s going to try and force you to come out.”

He looks at me, confused, and I continue. “What are you going to tell him? Lie and say you’re sick? He’ll know. Just don’t message him. I know you don’t want to lie, but you don’t have to. Just go to bed, and in the morning, you can say you weren’t feeling well and fell asleep. He’ll understand. Or, he just won’t care. How much do they want you there anyway, right? He probably won’t notice that you didn’t show up.”

He sets his phone down and leans backwards, collapsing against the

wall. We stare at each other until, resignedly, he crawls into bed, and I leave him to sleep.

The first time I introduced myself to him, years ago, he sobbed.

He’d known of me before then. Heard of others meeting their own versions of me. Wondered if this day would come, and how he would know if it did. I made sure that he wouldn’t have to wonder. He would know.

He rinsed the shampoo out of his eyes as warm water ran down his back and steam filled the room. His weary muscles loosened, lulled into a sense of security by the warmth surrounding him in the way it rarely does after we enter this world. He opened his eyes, confident that he had cleared away the stinging chemicals, but found that tears still streamed. Then he saw me, standing in the glass doorway of the shower.

“You don’t know what this feeling is,” I said to him. I did not tell him how



accustomed to it he would become. "You've never felt anything like it before. It is an overwhelming sense of despair, an unshakeable sense that nothing is, has been, or will ever go right. Nothing has brought it here, and nothing will make it go away. It is relentless and intangible, inside you and all around you."

I did not ask him if he understood. He didn't have to. All he needed to know, as he sat on the floor of the shower tasting salt in the water that ran down his face, was this: "It's your fault that you feel this way."

I am the feeling. I am his reflection, a copy of his worst self that greets him in the mirror.

We have been face to face for years now. He wears a smile today as he splashes cold water on his face. It's one that I've seen before. He's met someone that he thinks could love him. He looks at me, almost expectantly, but I mirror his smile and stay quiet for now. It isn't prudent to be constantly announcing myself — I must let him have his moments.

He smiles harder at my silence and begins to shave the hairs from his face. I copy his movements and smile too, knowing that I am right here and he does not see me. I'm unlike him in that I do not need to seek attention or confirm that I'm participating in life somehow. I am acutely aware of my purpose and when I am fulfilling it in a way that he could never hope to be.

I wait, because he is still enamored by the mystery of what's to come, and whether or not he will be by someone's side in the near future. It is much more important for me to rip away love itself than merely the possibility of it.

I must let him have his highs and successes, so that I may drag him down harder. That's the way it works. Emotions are not a spectrum or a grid, they are an absolute value. A moment of euphoria can become a suicidal thought in the blink of an eye. He knows this too, and has learned how to weaponize it the same way I have — he's held blades to his skin and laughed in my face. I laugh back at him.

He misunderstands me. I don't want him to hurt himself. I only aim to keep him grounded. For every peak he summits, I am waiting in a valley to remind him that he is not invincible. I allow the momentum to build in this new venture with the same degree of calculation that he wastes on shaping the curls of his hair.

CREATIVE NONFICTION HONORABLE MENTION

I've seen them together since. They seem happy. he's stopped studying me in the mirror the way that he used to.

They're talking about me in the bath. "I guess it's been going on forever, in one way or another," he says of my visits. "But it got really bad when I was 14."

He tells her about the time I brought him to his knees. She listens carefully. "I know what that's like," she says. "Do you treat it at all?"

It, as if I am merely a thing. I am a part of him too.

"I used to," he says, "but I don't need to as much anymore. I've gotten good at living with it." He lies. he thinks he needs me. I tell him that I make him interesting. I help him feel things deeply, to write his stories and poems. I make myself valuable enough to not be exterminated. I convince him that I am necessary, and it's easy to do because it's the truth. To get rid of me would be to sever a limb that he's had his entire life.

"That's good," she says.

They continue seeing each other until I find an opportunity. He's just walked her out and he is beaming. He thinks she may be the one. This is the moment. He is getting ready for his day and foolishly looks over at me.

"You'll never be to her what she is to

you," I say. I've done it so many times and he still falls for it when I use his own love against him.

I stare into the mirror, standing in his body, no longer his reflection. He stares back at me from beyond the glass. Only moments ago the same eyes that looked into this mirror with love and hope now project contempt and indifference. The mongrel in the mirror stares back, a hollow reflection.

He does not, and could not ever, understand that I do this in order to protect him. He cannot be allowed to roam his world untethered, out of my grasp, for he will wear his heart on his sleeve until it is taken away or shattered beyond repair. He would saunter through the terrors of the modern world with no forethought whatsoever. Without me, without fear and despair and sadness, he would be reckless. And without him, I do not exist, so I must keep him safe. That means I cannot allow this new bond to continue. He has experienced love before, and felt it be withheld from him. Anyone who loves him is a liability, the least trustworthy, the most powerful. It's my duty to intervene. But he won't listen to me when I tell him these things. There's only one way to convince him not to pursue this.



"You do not deserve this," I say.

"You do not deserve this," he echoes in the glass.

"You should crawl back into bed where you belong," I say.

"You should crawl back into bed where you belong," he says.

"You're worthless," I say.

"You're worthless," he says. His eyes swim with brimming tears and I have never before experienced the way they look at me. We have exchanged looks of love, hatred, fear, admiration, respect, disgust, gratitude, but never pity. I falter, and there is a shift; a struggle for dominance. I am no longer sure which of us is in the mirror until he speaks.

"You don't deserve this," he says.

"You don't deserve this," I repeat.

"You are loved," he says to me.

"You are loved," I am forced to say back to him.

"I am loved," he says.

"I am loved," I am forced to say. I am disgusted, I think to myself. Never has he flipped me back into the mirror so fast. Never have I lost control so quickly. He wasn't lying — he has indeed gotten good at living with me. He stares at me, challenging me to try again. I meet his gaze and silently tell him that I am waiting, once more, for a moment when he is not prepared.

"I won't ever stop," we declare simultaneously, a promise to ourselves and the other. I realize, then, that there is no way for me to grow stronger in this war. I have been as powerful as I will ever be from the first day, and he has risen to contest me. I have a brand new thought as I look at him — a thought that he has voiced to me so many times, but never me to him — and I do not voice it, but I know he knows as his lips curl into a smile.

I fear you. ▼

“

*Our car is buried in snow
so deep, my father
has to dig a trench
just to reach
the gravel driveway.*

POETRY

FIRST PLACE POETRY

GRACE

Francis King

☞ Our car is buried in snow
so deep, my father has to dig a trench
just to reach the gravel driveway.
I follow in his footsteps, kicking up
little tufts of snow.

It is still dark. Slowly, morning
beats itself back into the world, like a shovel
against cold ground. Light
from the church parking lot next-door
illuminates my father's flushed cheeks.
With a gloved finger I dig into the snow
on the passenger side window
and engrave my name in ice.

The car is resurrected. I climb
into the front seat and warm my hands
under my thighs. The heat
isn't working. My breath puffs
out in front of me, little tufts of life.

As we drive down the old country road,
the plastic sheet covering a broken window
in the backseat flaps wildly. Intermittent
streetlamps cast out darkness
and project my name onto my lap.
I sing my favourite Sunday school song,
and the flapping plastic sings along with me.

Years later, as I swallow a pill the colour
of warm cheeks on a cold winter morning,
I sing that same song, and my flapping heart
sings along with me. ☞

SECOND PLACE POETRY

THE ORANGE POEM (BY CAPITAL I)

Yana Tarassova

☞ I woke up this morning
and smiled at the blue window
as it poured orange juice
onto the white walls,
painting them happy;
I unwrapped myself
from the white sheets,
reached for the alarm clock
and set it two days behind;

I walked to the kitchen,
(dust on the cold parquet floor sticking
to my bare feet)
and made myself
a big cup of black coffee;
the bitter smell took over the air
(the way that your love takes
over my reason);

I sat on the kitchen countertop
wearing nothing but
my whitest t-shirt,
inside out (so that my inside stays in);
For a second, i wished
that you were in the shower,
(the scent of your lemongrass soap -
reaching in to kiss me);

For a second, i wished
that you were still in bed,
gently whispering in your dreams;
For - only - a second
(the second when I realized
that for a second day
I have not heard from you)
i wished that I could see you;
i thought of wearing my t-shirt inside
in, my inside out (the way that you had
wanted me to)

But you knew,
that I know too well
the smell of rotten oranges
and the black stains
on the insides (outside of white t-shirts);
i wished that I could say: I don't care;
I'll probably call you sometime,
I'll say: I don't mind;
I have a box full of oranges. ☞

POETRY HONORABLE MENTION

MOTHER

Francis King

His neighbour has gotten used to the sounds
of hammers and saws, the grinding
of power tools echoing across the field.
She checks on him when she can. Before
a graveyard shift at the county hospital, before
her daughter drops off her grandkids
for the weekend. She sends her husband over
with jugs of water and cords of firewood. No power
in the blistering East Coast winters.
She remembers his mother, her Elsie,
stopping in for a cup of tea on her way home
from driving him into town. He was 16 then,
bell-bottomed, hair down to his shoulders,
and Elsie was already sick.

Wrapped in her terry cloth robe,
his neighbour shuffles over to the patio doors
and looks out across the field. She sees
an oil lamp flickering in the kitchen window.
She knows he is up and working.

He sits at the table and rolls a joint, the light
from the oil lamp casting shadows
on the white paper sliding between
his fingers. When she looks out again,
the lamp is out. She sees him walking
across the road to the church, the cherry
of his cigarette one step ahead of him
in the dark. He is going to see her.
She puts on the kettle. She should get some rest,
but she'll wait until she sees the light
in the window again.

He has seen people talk to their loved ones'
graves on television, pleading
with the cold granite. He does not talk
to her. He listens
to the soft waves against the rocky shoreline
and finishes his joint. Pocketing the roach,
he walks back across the road. He lights
the oil lamp and looks around the kitchen
at the half-finished walls. He is all alone,
just him, the ocean, and the woodstove,
and the burning oil.
She sees the light and walks down the hall
to her bedroom.

POETRY HONORABLE MENTION

ESCHATOLOGY

Xochitl Leal

☛ This is how the end of the world looks:

*your face nestled in my neck
my fingertip traces your spine
you are a flame wavering in the frigid night
like truth consumed by a lie*

*it is cigarette smoke
exhaled into an airtight car
chilled fingers stroking frozen hair
it is my ear to your bony chest
like bird's wings flapping against glass
the first breath in the dark morning air*

This is how the end of the world sounds:

*it is the wild whisper of the ocean
trapped in an empty shell
a chair dragged across a wooden floor
and the echo from the depths of a well*

*it is the pounding of my heart
as I wait outside the door
waves beating out a primal rhythm on the rocks below
it is looking down, contemplating descent,
and footprints sinking in hard snow*

This is how the end of the world feels:

*like laying face down in the dirt a heavy boot on my spine
I am the embers being stamped out at night
like stars swallowed up by the sky*

*it is licking the metallic residue
from your cut, swollen lips
holding my breath, palms against the wall
it is the distant memory of warmth;
cheeks pressed into a Mother's hips*

*This is what was spoken, prophesied as it was written
This is the end of it all ☛*

POETRY HONORABLE MENTION

I'VE HEARD BEFORE

(Reflection on the study of Michael Ondaatje)

Yana Tarassova

☞ I knew the sound,
but not the same way as
when you,
without lips, spilled
out of a smooth
ceramic spout,
like Sunday morning's cream in coffee, that -
otherwise - bitter and too hot, would have burned;
together, you are jazzing
like cats purring
out of
a saxophone;

Laughing, you climbed into my morning bed;
your feet were cold,
but your chest in flames
like a wood burning oven;
Your skin was smooth and everything about you - easy, calm;
Except, your ghosts;
They
lurked
about and I could see them hiding - small eyes poking out
of wicker baskets, from behind the door,
inside the closet;
I called them closer, and invited them to sit; as I made tea,
we traded secrets;

Then you left; and, thanking me, so did the ghosts;

As I cleaned, I measured my own growth;
I turned the empty coffee cup upside-down onto a plate,
To see what future I am fated,
And as I waited
I read the notes that you had left me with:
Deep solemn Gs of coffee beans;
Shea Butter A majors; Vanilla Cs;
Rooibos B minors;
a Wild honey solo;
Hibiscus half notes;
Nutmeg, sharp;

Wrapped in a silk notation I was swept away to another place -
warm and vibrant;
so generous of vegetation - everything green, it looked like what men think of
When they speak of the Heavenly Kingdom;
hard to imagine that it was real
and yet, my feet could sink into the emerald floor beneath; my hands could reach and grasp each
velvety
leaf;

I do not think that I would ever wish to leave or go to any place other;
Maybe, I'll stay, silently, for the fear of leaving footprints for the mankind to find, or worse - to
follow;

From afar, humbly, I offer a keyboard melody:
my fingertips tap tap tappa tapping praise;

You did amaze me in a subtler way than Copperfield could have
on his best day;

It all tones down,
the melody,
the jazzing cats;
I'm uncertain, only,
if the drummer
will contain the soulful thuds,

As the maestro

signals

a finale 🎵

“

*Feeling that
you shouldn't wear
the same clothes
you wore
yesterday.*

POSTCARD

POSTCARD WINNERS

YOUTH

Feeling that you shouldn't wear the same clothes you wore yesterday. Setting seven alarms every two minutes. Waiting for a reply that will never come. Choosing fast food. Suddenly forgetting how to breathe. Walking down the street and hearing 'You dropped your covid.' Begging for affection. Paring your nails to the quick once every two weeks. Feeling anxious one stop before getting off the bus. Avoiding eye contact. Putting earphones in your ears with no music.

Hating that you can't completely hate your parents. Showing everything to strangers and being wary of those you've known for a long time. Just getting hit by the falling rain. Finding a cat on the first floor of an apartment building. Being afraid to answer the phone. Running at full speed. Scrolling down Twitter's feed endlessly. Binge eating and vomiting. Missing someone you've never met. Watching yourself as an observer. Always being hungry. Wanting to talk and not wanting to talk at the same time. Watching street lights flicker. Drinking even though you know you will regret it. Complaining that everything is messed up. Charging your cell phone. Laughing in situations where you shouldn't laugh. Taking a shower for an hour. Pretending to love your lover. Living without dying. Counting the total number of exams left in your life. To imagine the worst of the angels. Running away. Having no money. Being sick for a week. Prefer cuddling over kissing. Feeling that life is like a boring low-budget movie. Buying books you won't read. Forgetting that time is passing and realizing that time is passing. Having nightmares. □

SHADOW'S EDGE

Another sun begins to set behind the Vancouver skyline. The fading light encourages the beloved to return to their havens. She walks amidst the congestion, without navigating with purpose; she allows the waves of bodies to push her out to sea. There is a familiar comfort amongst the inadequate and the undesirables. Bodies fight for lanes as they navigate the endless air strike of the West Coast, the atmospheric river taking her further and further away from her truth. Matted hair and no make-up, she keeps her spark dimmed; beauty draws attention and consequences, but tonight she just wants forgiveness.

The reflection from the fresh puddled rain creates a vibrant glow of neon streaks and fluorescence hues. She has always loved the rain, an only consistent throughout her life. She's brought back to the present by the instinctual sensation of an intrusive vulnerability. Her head turns to meet the glare of a sympathetic gaze. Discomfort overwhelms her and swarms to the surface; she seeks refuge amongst the shadow's edge. It's a new world of social awakenings, with fresh takes on familiar narratives, none of which will bring back her friend. A long-awaited reckoning to the edge of despair, she kneels. Tell me all about how you understand what I have been through she thinks, because you learnt about generational trauma. Tell me how 215 bodies captured your attention for a whole week last May. Tell me how that makes you, my ally. Tell me how we are in this together. □

POSTCARD WINNERS

THUNDERBIRD

I am looking forward to being here. The Thunderbird to Kanazawa. Underground - ready to meet the storm that awaits it. Angry palms tribal dancing, contorting in ways no animal can-can petticoats brazenly drawing attention to themselves outside of a wind-streaked fish bowl. Off in the distance, dark clouds take on the shape of a roiling Godzilla ready to crush this tin-toy train. Futuristic looking, but from the future of

the past. The trains stop running in bad weather. None of this has happened yet. The rhythm of Osaka dances without me as a partner today. A mad dash through empty streets with the delirium tremens of panic and sleep deprivation. It's very easy to get lost in Japan. Addresses are numbered in the order that buildings are built - helpful during excavation by an archaeologist. Testified to by multiple tides of salt stains on a shirt and a Gallic shrug, "wabi-sabi?" during another death march to humidity. It's too early to buy ekiben. No bento box of octopus with novelty keepsake octopus trap. I am at the mercy of the food cart lady on the train and my Japanese and her English, smiling and nodding and holding out yen for some unknown cost for something that looks like chocolate but definitely isn't. The train stops halfway to Kanazawa due to the storm. Doors open, I sit there. Hungry. Steamy. Bored. My train of thought. If it is not remembered, it never happened. If it is, I am looking forward to being here. □

FICTION

NONFICTION

POETRY

POSTCARD