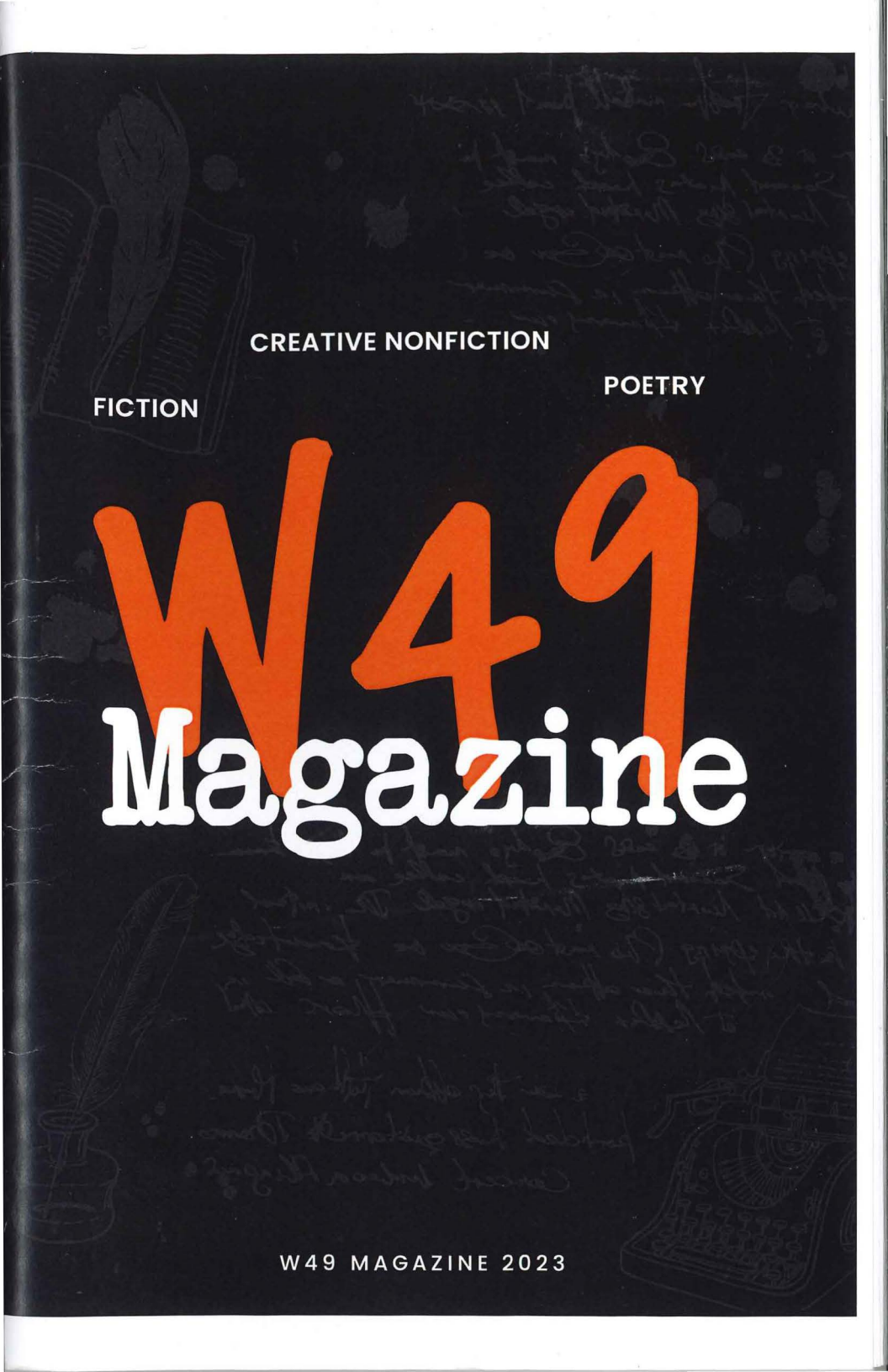




CREATIVE NONFICTION

POETRY

FICTION

W49 Magazine

W49 MAGAZINE 2023

W49: 2023

Welcome to the 23rdst edition of the Langara College English department's W49, a journal of award-winning creative writing by Langara students. It takes a village to publish a literary journal, so credit must be given to all without whom this edition would not have been possible. I would like to thank the English department's panel of adjudicators— Peter Babiak, Deborah Blacklock, Kina Cavicchioli, Heather DeLong, Sandra Friesen, Jill Goldberg, Caroline Harvey, Trevor Newland, Daniel Poirier, Thor Polukoshko, and Sarah Richards – for their dedication and expertise, and for their enthusiasm. Invaluable assistance in seeing the project through to completion was further provided by Coriana Constanda, Greg Holditch, and Kathleen Oliver. A huge thank you to Surbhi Kataria for design, layout, and cover artwork, and to Josue Menjivar, who continues to add his expertise in assisting with the publication of this magazine. Most importantly, I would like to thank all W49 contributors, the Langara students whose talent and creativity is on display in this year's edition. The level of competition in this writing contest is consistently high, and this year is no exception. And finally, we are pleased to include, as per tradition, more Langara student writing excellence in the form of winning entries from Caroline Harvey's Postcard Writing Contest. Enjoy!

- Guy Wilkinson

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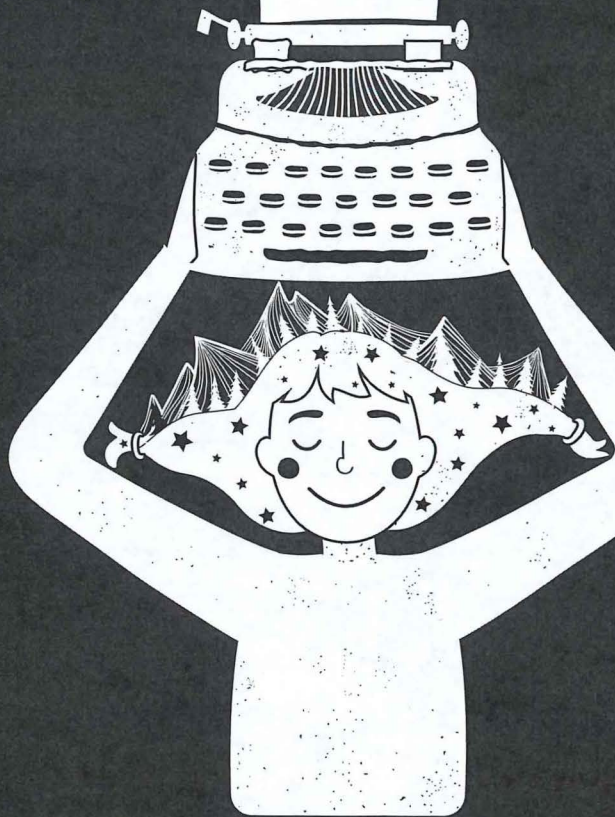
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W49 MAGAZINE 2023

01

FICTION



Fiction: 1st Place

A String of Hearts

• Apsara Coeffic-Neou •

Two months ago, I donated my broken heart.

I had to refill my anti-rejection drugs today, now that my body was pumping blood through silicone and plastic. After leaving the pharmacy, I struggled to keep my eyes open as the sun's rays pulled beads of sweat from my face. The fastest way home was through the abandoned garden, and the thought of my shaded studio was enough to hasten my pace. Speeding past overgrown bushes and dried out garden beds, I turned a corner and felt my bag bump into something.

Crash!

My eyes widened. A clay pot lay shattered next to the plant it once held. I heard footsteps in the distance. It doesn't matter, I thought, and carried on home. Inside, I pulled my pills out of my bag, and a pie from the grocery store. I cut out a slice. The shortening crust tasted like cardboard, and I scrunched my face when I reached the sour raspberry filling. I could easily bake a better one, but I hadn't even touched a bag of flour since my boyfriend left me.

"I don't love you anymore."

It had come out of nowhere. Four years of birthday cakes, butter tarts, and cookies. Four years of forest walks and cozy nights in. Four years of cuddles I

didn't get from anyone else. I dropped out of college. He left me broken for two years. But I was fine now. I swallowed some pills and tossed the rest of the pie.

A week later, I went out for groceries, and when I cut through the garden, something caught my eye. It was a pot covered in mosaic, from which a cascade of heart-shaped leaves poured out. The pot looked off-balance and was held together with glue.

"Isn't it pretty?"

It was a girl about my age.

"It's a rosary vine," she said. "Also known as string of hearts."

"I'm - It looks a bit rough."

"Yeah, it had a nasty fall, but I did my best to fix it!"

I tore my eyes from the pot. She smiled. *"I'd better go," I said. "Got errands."* She had barely replied before I left the scene of the crime. My crime.

In the following days, I avoided the garden. But breaking a stranger's pot was not a practical reason to move away, so I still caught glimpses of new plants on my trips to and from home. One morning, I received a large package I had never ordered. I struggled to carry it back to its owner, so I let myself through the garden.

I saw the girl walking my way.

She put down her tray of plants and stared at my load. I told her what happened. She asked me who it was for.

"Rowan Hadfield."

"That's me! Sorry you had to carry it all this way."

It was a bag of potting soil. She picked up her plants and showed me their new home, one of many raised beds she had been tidying. For a second, Rowan's arm slipped, but she caught the tray in time. *"There's parsley, basil, mint, lettuce..."*

Rowan said she lived nearby. Her late mother had taught her how to garden, and she'd been trying to revive this one for a while. How could she tend such a big garden on her own? When we reached that corner with the rosary vine, she stopped to check its pot. *"Why don't you just replace it?"* I said.

"I can't," said Rowan. *"It belonged to my mother."* We came to a shaded area and she pointed out some raspberry canes. *"These could use more sunlight."*

The leaves did look dull. I imagined it filled with deliciously ripe berries and smiled.

"Do you like raspberries as much as I do?" said Rowan.

I nodded. She walked me back to where the raspberries would go. I asked her how she would move the plants without damaging them.

"Why don't you come back tomorrow and find out?"

I couldn't help noticing the glued-up pot behind her. *"Alright. I'm Dahlia, by the way."*

That week, she showed me how to transfer plants. After some coaxing, she let me help her with the raspberry canes, and I even made my own plot of herbs.

The next day, they had all wilted. I sat down and stared at the shriveled leaves. All of Rowan's work into sowing them, gone. I heard voices in the distance and saw a young couple. The woman giggled as her companion picked a rose and placed it in her hair. I looked away. Those roses were the jewel of Rowan's garden. She had trained them to grow around a set of arches. I turned back to my failure. What right did I even have to be here?

Rowan wasn't fazed. *"It's probably transplant shock."*

"Didn't it take weeks to grow these?"

"Yes, but that's just part of gardening."

She ran her fingers through the dead plants. Then, her face lit up. *"Hey, at least one of your plants survived!"*

The raspberry canes still had their leaves, which had grown a little. *"You know what grows well with raspberries?"* said Rowan.

She ran off. Was she trying to cheer me up? Rowan came back with a bag of soil in one shaky arm and a pot of chamomile in the other. Her face was red, and her stride shrank with every step. I motioned to help, but she refused. She tossed the bag and handed me the chamomile with a grin. Then, she collapsed. My heart dropped. What was I feeling? Why was I feeling? I rushed to Rowan's side. My hand reached out for hers, but I pulled it back.

"Dahlia, I'm fine." Rowan sat up and shrugged. "This happens sometimes; it's nothing to worry about."

"Nothing to worry about?"

"Well, I did undergo surgery a while back."

"What for?"

"A heart transplant."

I frowned. Most people got an artificial heart if they needed a replacement. Flesh-heart transplants were rare, and I remembered how surprised my doctor was when I signed my heart away. I just wanted it gone and didn't care who got it. *"When was the surgery?"*

"Over two months ago."

She told me about her mother, who frequently ran out of breath and suffered fainting spells. The doctors were certain an artificial heart would help. But after the surgery, her body didn't take to the immunosuppressants. She died shortly after. Rowan was fifteen and had similar symptoms since childhood. She got on a waitlist for a flesh-heart transplant. Since the post-op drugs were less intense, she might stand a better chance.

"I was willing to take that chance," said Rowan, "because they didn't expect me to live much longer."

"How old are you now?"

"Seventeen."

We didn't say anything for a while.

"H-how's the new heart?"

"I'm not sure," said Rowan. *"I've been feeling a little off."* We cleared the dead plants and packed some fresh soil for the chamomile. The next morning, I called my doctor and he confirmed that Rowan received my heart. It didn't seem like she improved much after the transplant. It could just be a rough transition period... But what if there was more to it? Was it a mistake to give away my broken heart?

I headed to the garden since Rowan had ordered some new succulents and was eager for me to see them. When I found her, she was trimming the rosary vine. "Why are you cutting it?" I asked.

"It encourages growth," said Rowan. She handed me some cuttings. "See those nodes?" she asked, pointing out where the leaves grew. "When you cut beneath one, you can place the stem in water and roots will grow. More plants!"

I looked at my handful of leaves and placed them next to the pot. Some of the glue had broken off. I sighed.

"What's the matter?" said Rowan.

"I ... also had surgery over two months ago," I said. "I traded my heart for a plastic one."

"You did?"

"I checked with my doctor. You have my old heart."

Rowan's shears slipped out of her hand. "What?" She brought her hand to her chest and gave me a look of astonishment. "Why did you do it?"

"I just... wanted to help someone."

Rowan took my hand. "You did help," she said, tears in her eyes. "Thank you."

I couldn't look at her. "Let's see those new succulents," I said. As I followed her, I wondered where all these supplies were being delivered. Her home? One could only carry so much alone. And yet, whenever I came, she had already brought everything.

"Why do you love gardening so much?" I asked.

"I like working with my hands, bringing things to life," said Rowan. "It's also to honour my mother. She'd worry a lot and wouldn't let me do much by myself, but when we were in the garden, she could relax. Those were my best memories of her."

Over the next two months, I went to the garden as much as I could. We planted all kinds of vegetables and herbs. She even invited me to her place to cook with our produce. I had always liked zucchini, but these were so freshly picked that it was like a whole other species. Soon I was dining with her almost every night. But even though this was a team effort, she kept taking on more than she could handle. One day while I was cleaning up the greenhouse, she came in carrying a tray half her size filled with new plants. "Let me help you!" I said.

"It's fine."

She barely managed to wobble it onto the table, then picked up an orchid. She began to cough and dropped it.

I stamped my foot. "If you have to do everything yourself, what am I even doing here?!"

Rowan's mouth hung open. The orchid lay on the floor within its shattered container. I caught my breath. "How long did it take you to fix that pot?" I said. "A week, right?"

"Well, yes," said Rowan, "but how did you know?"

"I broke it."

"What?"

"I didn't mean to."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"I don't know!" How did I start working in the garden? She never asked me to. She was just sharing her hobby, and I kind of fell into it. Was I just trying to relieve my guilt? I left the greenhouse. She followed. Why? She didn't deserve such a phony friend. Several garden beds further, I stopped and faced her. I told her about my break-up, how I hated waking up every morning knowing he wasn't there. I couldn't get him out of my heart, so I figured I'd be better off without it. My voice cracked. "I didn't even think how it might affect the recipient."

"What are you talking about?"

"Didn't you say you've been feeling off?"

Rowan took my hand, but I snatched it back and clutched my heaving chest. My eyes clouded with tears. What good was a plastic heart if it could still ache? I dropped to my knees. Rowan sat down and took me into her arms. I heard her heartbeat. My heart. The heart I had given up was racing.

"It's okay," said Rowan. "The doctors knew what they were doing."

"What about the pot?"

She held me tighter. "Thank you for telling me."

Rowan ended up in hospital with a flu. I visited her every day for weeks. One afternoon, I brought her a pie I baked with the raspberries we had grown. It had a flakey butter crust, a custard filling, and a crumble on top. She died in her sleep that night.

Back home, I placed the rosary vine on a shelf. She wanted me to have it, since it wouldn't survive outside when summer ended. I took many cuttings and placed them in glasses of water. Soon, they would take root and my room would be filled with heart-shaped leaves.

Fiction: 2nd Place

Winter Snow, Spring Flowers



• Lucas Hames Shiguehara •

When I was a boy, I met a girl at an inn in Hokkaido. It was love found anew. She grasped my hands in her larger yet still delicate hands in the sleeves of her kimono. Her kimono bore a flowery pattern, and it was blue like the sea, peacefully raking the leaves outside as they cracked and fell into the ocean. So little light seeped into the room. It was early in the day, and our winter had been long and terrible, with cold rains and snows falling upon the earth. In a few days, spring would be here. Here and there, geisha pattered their feet against the earth upon their return to the inn. Some bore smiles on their crimson lips enshrouded in what looked like snow to my young eyes—there weren't that many geisha in Tokyo—while others bore frowns and looked at snow patches on the ground. Their kimonos were perfect. Often red or pink or blue, with flowers on them. Flowers, perhaps, that heralded the coming of spring. I smiled at them, then turned to look at Hanako again.

A slight smile rested on her red lips. Her hair was as black as a crow's plumes. Sunlight glinted off it. Maybe it was the cold, I thought, that flushed her cheeks then—they reminded me of cherry petals in spring. Then she spoke:

"I wish you would stop looking away so much."

"Why?" I asked, my voice high-pitched. *"It's all so new to me."*

"But you are going back to Tokyo tomorrow, yes?" she asked. Her smile vanished. In its stead, contempt and the coldness of winter rested on her lips. Strong gushes of wind slapped my face and tugged at my t-shirt and at my jeans and at her kimono and played with her hair. She yelped, and I chuckled. Then she let go of my hand and scolded me.

She combed her hair down over her shoulders. *"Anyway, you are leaving tomorrow, right?"*

I looked down at the tatami floor and began to patter my fingers against it. *"Yes. Yes, I—Mother is—"*

"I see. Then you have to go. But today, we will be happy," she said as she stood up and waved me over.

We went about the fields amidst farmers grinding rice and shopkeepers and geisha and tourists speaking of the winter we'd just had. There was much snow in our path, and my feet, frozen in the ice, struggled. My heart grew weaker and beat slower in the cold when all I wished for was the sweet sound of a shamisen being struck by Hanako's hands. Still, she walked beside me. Her smiles were sunbeams melting the snow. On our walk through the town, she would ask me things like, "*Are you excited about going to Tokyo?*" and "*So what do you think about The Tale of Genji?*" and "*I truly think spring is the most beautiful season of the year. What do you think?*" which I would answer, without much thought, with, "*Sure*" and "*It's fine*" and "*Winter suits me better.*" Sometimes, she would simply mouth "*Oh,*" look down at her sandals which pattered against the patches of snow or the muddy earth or the grass, then look at me again with that smile of hers.

Then, when morning came, Mother and I boarded the train. It was cold, and although it was supposed to be almost spring, snowflakes fell from dark clouds in the sky. The day was dark, like a camp after a battle. Everything was engulfed shadows—save for a little glint of light in the very distance, pale like the moon. I recognized those crimson lips and, of course, her flowery blue kimono. She looked like a lit candle. She held a blue umbrella in her right hand, shielding her hair, head, and cheeks from the snow, which now fell again in flurries. She moved like a ghost in the snow, and her feet seemed to float, lending her the quality of a sleepwalker or dream walker—this beautiful eighteen-year-old girl, my light in the dark. Then the engines roared and she waved a hand at me and tears streamed down her face and the train, finally, began to move. I noticed only then that my hand had been resting against the window. I shook from the cold. And as the train pulled away from the station, heading straight into the shadows, I watched my candlelight vanish into the darkness.



The next time I saw her was at night. I was not asleep.

We had just returned from Hokkaido. I had wept on the train ride back to Tokyo. I lay in bed and at night, before shutting my eyes, a copy of Osamu Dazai's novel *Ningen Shikkaku*, or *No Longer Human*, stared at me. It sat on my nightstand in the moonlight.

It's been so long since then, and I've forgotten so much—but not that night. A kimono's silks kissed my skin. Not my kimono. It floated before me. It was blue, adorned with flowers. And I gazed up at her, floating mid-air, and she waved at me like she had days before. Then she wasn't floating anymore, and she paced toward me, enshrouded in her blue kimono, and her face was devoid of expression. As though a sheet of snow had fallen upon her cheeks and nose and forehead.

"Hi," I said. My voice cracked. "*I—I don't know what—I'm not sure if...*" I backed away. Two steps, no more. "*Are you really here, Hanako?*"

She sighed and smiled and took off her metaphysical mask. "*Sorry, sorry. You're just so easy to spook.*"

I stomped one foot on the ground. Still, curiosity preyed upon me. "*You are—who are you?*"

She tilted her head slightly to the right, and the ribbons on her hair—blue, I'd just noticed—danced in the wind. She did not speak. Instead, she took my hands in hers, and we danced to the delicious song of the shamisen, which, I had just noticed, an older gentleman in a white kimono played in the corner of the room. I'd also just seen the candles lying upon the tatami floor. There must have been about a hundred, and they flickered to the rhythm of the shamisen's tune. Nothing was odd. Not anymore. At the touch of her hand against mine, I felt her enshrouding me and I knew I was hers and she was mine and I longed to be with her forevermore—more than anything.

Then I woke up and it was day. The tatami floors were cold, almost as cold as snow. The candles were extinguished, and the scent of ash hung in the air. The world outside was pale. Yet it was almost spring. When the doors slid open under my fingers, I was in my own room again, with its scent of instant noodles and chocolate, with its blue walls and shut curtains, with its piles of books scattered around the room, and with Dazai's No Longer Human sitting on my desk.

All I could think of was Hanako and the night we danced together. I needed her more than anything.



Recently, I was climbing up the same mountain path again. Snowflakes fell from the clouds, and in my head, it looked like a white cloak had fallen upon the oaks and birches. My boots were heavy, and they crunched the snow beneath them. A silver stream ran down the hill to my right, hissing as snow fell upon it and slowed it down. I shook as I marched on, and the snow upon my skin felt like the kiss of a winter goddess. Then the inn came looming in the distance, and my heart began to beat faster, and I hurried up.

Then I saw her. I was so sure it was her. She stood outside, by paper screen doors which bore smoke stains, and underneath rough straw sandals that dangled from the eaves' rafters. Her kimono held the same shade of ocean blue and bore the same white flower. During all this winter, perhaps her skin bore the similitude of the snow, or perhaps the pale sun lent her the appearance of a ghost. When she saw me, she smiled. I smiled back.

"Hello," she said. "*Welcome.*"

"Thank you," I said. "*It's good to see you again.*"

She raised an eyebrow, yet a smile still hovered on her lips. "*I apologize. I'm not sure if we've met.*"

"Oh."

Silence. Snowflakes fell from the sky, and the wind hissed as a couple of Shima enaga, or long-tailed tits, picked about the gravel and chirped and whistled. Hanako stood still, her right hand in her left. I shook from the wind's touch, my lips chapped, chilled, and dry.

"I... I," I said. I was unsure. Maybe this wasn't Hanako. Could I have been mistaken? *"You see—I wonder if you have any rooms available. If it isn't too much trouble, of course."*

"Of course," she said. *"I would love to host you for as long as you wish."*

I raised an eyebrow. *"You? There isn't anyone else?"*

She threw me a hurt look and faced her sandalled feet. *"My grandmother fell ill last year. So, I've been running the inn by myself ever since. And before then, there was a girl, of course. Her spirit still lingers."*

I took a step back. Could this be Hanako's sister or cousin? *"I am sorry. I... am so sorry."* A great sadness washed over me. Hanako's grandmother had been kind to me when I was little.

She'd made me tea, and we—Hanako, her grandma, and myself—would drink it as we watched the sunset, so crimson and decadent in the distant sky. By the time night had fallen, stars had speckled the sky, and I saw a star or two in my teacup, and in Hanako's eyes a star or two before I drank. The matcha tasted bitter, as always, yet I relished the taste. I remembered Hanako, a teenage girl six years my senior, and her grandmother, and the tea we used to drink, and the talks we used to have. Hanako's laughter had fluttered in the midnight air as darkness took the room, and the scent of ash pervaded our kimonos. And now those times were gone. I knew that now.

"It's fine," the girl said. *"But thank you. It's been a hard few months and years, but winter has been kind to me. It always has. I have taken refuge in the gap between winter and spring. Things change, and I've embraced change."*

"You seem to love winter," I said.

"I do. In the winter, I can look at a world that would look alien to someone who lives only in spring. They only get flowers. I get flowers, too, as the snow begins to fade and the sun shines evermore. It's the nature of this world, isn't it? You need winter for spring to shine."

I thought for a moment. Then I said, *"I suppose so. Yes, that might be the case."*

"You get a taste of the melancholy as winter nears its end. It's a fuller life."

"Right."

Joy settled over her face. She cared about the subject, and dearly so—the thought of winter snows as they faded into spring bliss seemed to haunt her mind much like a ghost. Like Hanako had haunted me. Winter, of course, had to fade, I realized. The spring flowers would soon bloom.

"Anyway," she said, waving her hands, "I apologize for that. I haven't had a visitor in a while. How long do you intend on staying, anyway?"

"Could I ask you about that girl?"

She seemed taken aback and looked at me with a blank expression for a second. Then a sad smile fell upon her lips. "Yes. Hanako. She was... a dear child. She left. Years ago. She was but a young girl then. There was a child—a boy—whom she cherished very much, and they couldn't be together. So, she took her own life. They found her floating in a river. It was almost spring. Almost..." Silence, for a second or two. "But I don't let that keep me down anymore. I used to think I wouldn't move on until I'd finished everything I needed to finish. But I've done all that now, so I can relax."

Silence. I bit my lower lip, then gritted my teeth. *"I'm sorry. I just realized I have an important meeting in Tokyo I'd forgotten about. I have to go."*

"Oh. Then don't let me keep you."

"I am really sorry," I said, then turned and began to walk.

The sun shone. Its rays kissed the snow and slowly melted it away. Near the river, now to my left, which still hissed as it streamed down the hill, now rested green grass and cherry blossoms. The wind seemed to want to pick them up, but it wasn't time. Not yet, anyway. It was time for blooming. *"I wish you the best of luck,"* said the girl.

"Live your best life... Takahiro."

I smiled and walked away. At the base of the hill, I turned around to see that she was still staring at me, throwing me that same red-lipped smile and waving at me as she had all those years ago. That, I now knew for sure, was Hanako. And at that last glimpse of her, she and her inn vanished, and in their stead stood a cherry tree. I took a last look at the winter snow as spring flowers bloomed, then walked into the village, aware of the Hanako that was and now was not any longer. And I had made peace with her. Spring had finally settled over me.



Intoxication

• Tristan Loncar •

"Where are you going? I don't mind. I've killed my world and I've killed my time. So where do I go? What will I see?"

— "Strangers," The Kinks

Why aren't the doors opening? What's going on? Was someone stabbed? Mechanical problems? Are the conductors changing? What's going on?

It's intoxicating: the fresh panic of a subway car full of people, some who feel trapped and some invulnerable few who are plainly unaware while the subway car sits motionless in the station it just arrived at. The people looking out at the people looking in begin to feel anxious. The heat of everyone's impatience slowly coming to a boil like a forgotten kettle left on the stove. Why aren't the doors opening? I have a job, I have a date, I have a meeting, I have an overdue library book. I'm late.

The subway car burps a compressed gas and the people, like Pavlov's dog, start to shift because they know it means the doors will open. The doors still don't open. Someone looks up to find that old and battered speaker built into the subway car roof. It's a tool that the passengers rarely pause their music or close their books for when it demands their attention. Now, with the doors closed and no explanation, the potential speaker had the passengers' attention; nevertheless, with everyone listening, it remained silent.

I stood there by the door with my headphones pulled down to rest on my neck. How long will it take for inspiration to possess a passenger into wrestling the mechanical doors open?

When will this subway car conductor completely lose the trust and the patience of one very determined, or very desperate, individual? How long would it take for me to do that?

More compressed gas passes. Again, those who wish to exit perk their heads up and look at those who wish to enter. Pfffffft. The gas pops and whirs obnoxiously, and the subway train doors begin to open much too slowly. However, to the passengers they open like the gates of a dog race; multiple doors, arranged in a line, all break open in unison. The dogs immediately pour from their confined pens and traverse through their respective gate, past the crack of the pistol, to chase after a mechanical rabbit that possesses each animal's souls.

We trade places. The people looking in are now looking out at the people who have just left. More compressed gas pops and with that I, and the others who've just left, hear the doors closing as we go up the stairs and out onto the busy street to wait for buses, friends, lovers, and data for further directions.

While my phone dials back into some magic satellite system I don't fully understand, I see a homeless man; he waits for change to fall into a damp and dirty looking baseball cap. He sits patiently, mumbling something inaudible to himself. His clothes are too big, and he wears several used sports jackets with holes. Truthfully, I don't care about him. I don't care and neither does the rest of the wave of people who spill past him. With the delay of the train doors opening, we especially don't have time to care for him – that's someone else's job. It's not as if I can walk up to him and ask, *"Do you take debit? No tap? Wait, it declined? Let me try my visa. What's a little more debt, right?"*

The directions are uploaded to my phone, and I realize I have gotten off at the wrong subway stop. I rush back downstairs and wait for my train. More compressed gas pops and I slip into the awaiting subway car where I join another wave of people who have lovers, dates, coworkers, family, and friends to meet.

Though we all look bored, it's intoxicating. Is there something in the gas that opens the door to the next station? Have we all been dosed by a city who offers all natural ingredients – some of which I've never even heard of – in their *"ultimate recovery smoothie?"* I wonder if the homeless guy – for a measly \$14.75 – would like the *"ultimate recovery smoothie?"* Who knew a little acai berry and lion's mane mushroom was all he needed to get back on his feet? Or maybe he needs a different mushroom? Maybe he needs to confront all the trauma, all the hate, all the deficit of love that has emaciated the tip of the iceberg – as well as the much larger hidden body of the iceberg. This has been taught to me to mean: the *"subconscious."* So then may this particle of mushroom split inside his stomach, churn about some nausea, and then explode into the most beautiful and mysterious cloud his mind has ever known; with a shockwave that emancipates the buildings, the trees, the lovers, the friends, the meetings, the pain, and the overdue library book from his past. And from this reaction in his soul, may it bring a new knowledge built upon the foundation of old tortured neurons. A new beginning. A fast and efficient new beginning which will move him out from the street, into a home, and into a busy subway car that will intoxicate him in a completely different way, so that he too may walk by a reflection of himself sitting on the ground, waiting for change – communicating with his body language, as it unnecessarily yells to his reflection, *"Sorry, I have a prior engagement I must attend to... good day sir."*

Or, of course, maybe he's a schizophrenic who, more literally than I first interpreted, is mumbling to himself. Mumbling to the body of the iceberg which everyone else fails to hear, but with good reason because no one else can hear it. In fact, many *"healthy"* individuals refuse to hear their own subconscious. This I read in a book by myself because the depth of it was not taught to me. He, or his family, has a

prior engagement with mental illness such as: depression, psychosis, bipolar disorder, or schizophrenia – so the use of cannabis or psychedelics may hamper him further. Truthfully, I don't care about him.

The subway doors pop open without delay. I race past the gate, elevate up the stairs, push past the wave of people until I'm forced to line up behind a slow elderly Chinese woman who's dragging a limp beat up cart full of cans. Like the crack of a pistol, the gate beeps to let me through. Once I'm through, I check my phone; I still don't understand the magic of the satellites, but it tells me I'm at the right station, and that I need to turn left at the intersection, walk 100 meters, and then it trusts me to hopefully, at that point, be mentally equipped with the knowhow of knowing how to open a café door. I do this.

In a large open room painted white – to make it appear larger – I scan for an empty table, or a table where my friend sits. I appear to be late, which is actually on time, despite the subway delays and my own personal errors of direction. Regardless, my friend is later than I, even though I know she lives two blocks away; roughly a 6ish minute walk compared to my 47ish minute commute. I scan the room again and find a table to make my own. Littered in the white room are people near motionlessly caffeinating; each sipping on coffee or tea, shaking their minds like an unopen can of pop thrown around by a child. Pfffffft. the pressure releases, the mind foams, the neurotransmitters engage, and the patrons place their cups back onto the table – faster than before — to continue their work, their meeting, and their leisure. It's a different type of intoxication altogether.

I think to myself, *"Do I love her?"*

Perhaps it's the most honest thought I've had all day. Perhaps more honest than the thought about the people on the train, who I thought of as dogs – myself included – pouring out of the open gate door to chase some mechanical rabbit who appeared to have control of their soul. I just thought it was neat and clever, and maybe that's all I am right now, or feel I am right now.

"Do you love her?"

A sweet feminine voice suddenly cuts in, *"Hi there, how are you?"*

Wow, I almost had a moment of introspection.

"I'm good. How are you?" I reply.

"Good. What can I get you?" the woman says.

"Uhhh." I mutter.

All that time waiting in line, attempting to be introspective, and I failed to do the one thing that being in line meant I had to do.

"Coffee?" I blurt out.

"Sure, wha si—"

"No wait, sorry, uhh, tea please."

The woman smiles at my stupidity in an oddly polite way.

"Do you have jasmine green?" I ask.

"Yes. For our green teas we have jasmine green and sencha. I think there's a few more on the tea list. It's just right there on the counter."

I start to feel the heat of the customer waiting behind me, like his impatient breath is beating against my neck. I don't actually feel this, but I know I should hurry...
Wow, that's quite a selection of teas...

Do I love her?

"Thanks, I'll just have the jasmine, please."

"What size?"

I pull out my card and she gestures to the machine. I'm about to tap when she catches me shortly before and apologizes for punching it in as debit when she should have noticed I had my credit card ready.

"What's a little more debt?" I joke to her to lighten the mood of her mistake.

She smiles and then I move to claim a table for me and my potential lover.

Does she love me?

My gut says no, and then I see her; she honestly looks as beautiful as a friend can be. It's cliché, and meaningless to my relationship with her, but coincidentally the light of the sun – that had guided me here – peeks out from behind the cloud to reflect just a single strip of light across her red-chilled cheeks, like war paint of an angel sent from heaven to do battle with my inner anima.

Everyone hears a pfffffft of a can burping quietly from somewhere in the café, but I don't notice it...

If life were a story, at least a romantic story, I'd have her forever - she'd be mine and the certainty of that relationship would be the most fundamental true thing, a split atom in my heart, to carry my soul into heaven when I depart this earth. Of course, the shockwave in my mind would emancipate the buildings, the trees, the ex-lovers, the friends, the meetings, the pain, and the overdue library book from his past.

Or, of course, maybe I'm mentally ill... or a romantic who hyper fixates on a select key number of variables; while ignoring the lurking variables that suggest a hole in my hypothesis – this is something I've both learned and been taught – which states: that the world does not revolve around me, or others who may be lucky or destitute – despite the raw and euphoric feeling that it should... that it must. Regardless of what the truth may be, at least this much is true: I don't know... or at least consciously I don't.

However, when she spots me, and moves out of the light, to share my table, to sit motionlessly with me in this café I had just arrived in, to share my company, as a friend, or a future lover, or a future ex or a future ex-friend, at least I think, consciously or subconsciously, I know simply this: it's intoxicating.



Into the Realm of Light



• Zander Macdougall •

Once upon a time there were two opposing kingdoms. One was led by a strict king who ruled by the stringent laws of his forebearers. The other was ruled by a witch who maintained order by impressing lessons on criminals through strange quests and absurd dilemmas. Both lived in uneasy peace, until one day, the king's daughter and the witch's son became imprisoned in the dungeons of one another's castles.

The king and his guard approached the young wizard, who was so securely bound that not a word could creep from his mouth nor a shape be formed by his hands, for these are the utensils of a sorcerer. *"Young devil you are caught! At last, your torments may end. A relief this may be, though a problem offends. Your mother keeps my daughter in similar restrain. I will ride out at once and seek a parlay, but know that for your crimes you still must pay!"* The young wizard murmured something that none could distinguish through his restraints. *"The crime is demonic corruption, for never would befall my daughter such seduction. To be mad at her king, her father, her grace, who rejects her affections that you have emplaced. No princess can love a wizard, you devilish ingrate; only through magic could you have possibly caused her state!"*

The wizard was thus still, his cheeks had become rosier, and sweat was forming upon his brow.

"We leave now at once, though do not be dismayed, an immortal such as yourself may survive while so pained. For three hundred years will you remain: chained in this dungeon, until justice has been laid." At that, the king and his guard absconded the dark crypt and rode toward the border of his kingdom to meet with the witch. While they rode out, the witch was similarly dealing justice upon the king's daughter.

"Fair maiden so young, what have ye done? You've ensnared my child, my wizard, my son. To impart on you a lesson not lost, I demand a service that is equal in cost. Your lips are confused by the wave of my hand, and so only through pure action may reason land. Go now at once, on a swift steed of mine, and convince your father that your love is no lie." When the princess spoke in response her words were complete gibberish, and seeing no alternatives, she left the witch's keep and mounted a pony, riding toward her father's kingdom with the good haste of love.

Through dark and gnarled woods, the princess travelled until she arrived at the border. She saw a small host of mounted knights, and at their head was her father. Throughout her journey she had thought deeply of what to do, but the probable loss of her love overshadowed her wits and left her practically paralyzed. Her father soon recognized the princess and called out to her, "*My daughter, my sweet, at once you must come! Freedom is here and with ease may we run!*" Still mounted, she approached the king and paused at the threshold of the two kingdoms. Unsure of how to explain her love with actions, she pointed at her heart and then beyond the king and his comrades. She repeated these motions, to their utter confusion, until the king chimed in, "*My lovely you must speak, for none have a clue, what your strange motions tell us to do.*" Growing red hot at her father's misunderstanding, the princess started to blabber a series of incomprehensibilities, which alarmed the king and his men. Many placed their hands by their scabbards, and some even drew their swords, thinking her possessed or a devilish incarnate cast by the witch. The princess realized that the witch's curse and her father's narrow mind would never conclude in reason, so she sped past the king and his knights.

Hastened by ethereal ferries, the princess reached her father's keep seconds before her pursuers. She ran down to the dungeon and found the cage of her love and spoke in words only he could unscramble. "*My greatest desire, my truth and my heart! I have come back at once to be no longer apart.*" By the grace of her truthful words his bindings slipped so that he could embrace his love and speak at last. "My fairest adored, my light and my soul! You should not be here for in your father may stroll!" His words were thus acknowledged, as the king clambered down the stone steps with his knights in tow. "*My daughter is lost, gone to the dark! For as my father once said, once the witch has ye, the line to the devil is crossed!*" He turned to his nearest knight, "*Take up your sword and take off her head; this evil cannot linger but must be purged instead!*" The knight drew his sword and lined up the blade with her neck, striking sideways with great force. As the shimmering edge neared her fair skin, a divine light permeated the entire dungeon. This was not the breaking of the witch's spell, as her father was still unconvinced of her love, but it was the magic of an even greater power: a divine perfection that radiates upon all who dedicate themselves to the devotions of love. The sword and the bars between the two were dissolved and the two lovers were intertwined into a golden sphere of indescribably perfect beauty. The dumbstruck king and his knights watched in tears as the lover's orb lingered for a short time before it launched upward, effortlessly passing through the stone roof without leaving a single mark. The king attempted to give chase, but only caught a final glimpse of his celestial daughter as the united lovers took their place upon the night sky, forever imparting their radiance on the two tenuous kingdoms.

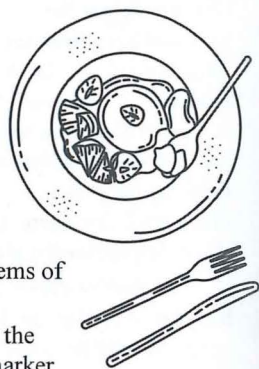
Many years of peace followed, as the king and the witch, guided by the radiant wisdom and love bestowed by the cosmos, united their kingdoms as one under the starlight of their cosmically betrothed children. The people then strove for perfect love amongst one another for as long as the stars were bright.

A Modest Dinner

• Joseph Lazaro •



The table was set; the stage set too. Familial mayhem. The bronze cutlery placed around the long aluminum dining room table readied itself to deliver a ghastly meal. Of course, the Everwards knew nothing of the sort; no, nothing of ghastly. For their things had been imported from around the world, delivered to them by wealth while perpetuating systems of wealth.



On the mantel, in the middle of the dining room, fixed upon the wall, lived the taxidermic ruins of a once living polar bear. A marker of their interest in the exotic, no doubt. Of course, polar bears aren't even alive anymore. And if you think about it, humans are to blame.

What was quite queer was that the Everwards had taken a particular fancy to this here polar bear. They named her Viola and off the bottom of the wooden plaque, that which fixed her to the wall, engraved on sterling silver, read: "Exit pursued by a bear". Shakespeare no doubt—a love for the classics cures the meanest souls, so it goes.

It was dinner time and the Everwards had prepared themselves for their hearty meal. Each of the family members took up their place. Father sat at the head of the table. The details don't matter, anywhere he sits is the head of the table. He's the male after all.

Daughter sat adjacent to her father. You could say that she had a particular liking for her father, but then again, Freud has nothing to do with it.

His other daughter, well, that's a toughie. She's dead. They didn't eat her if that's what you're worried about—the system did.

The brother, well isn't he a handsome young lad. A strapping potent lad. He won't be eaten, I'm sure of it.

And the mom. How do I say this? She's gone a little, well, crazy. She refuses to eat, her husband tells her to, she says no, then he reprimands her again, she still says no, and the cycle continues until, well, you know, she says yes. But the damage has been done by that point. Comments are made, things get thrown, pills

get popped, and faces are slapped. The details here are quite graphic, I know, I watch them every day.

You could say it's the husband's fault. But what if she had just swallowed her food like she was supposed to? Then things would not have gotten so heated!

Now, it's time for dinner.

"Is mother upstairs?"

"Of course, she is. She's so against the new rations."

I hear them talking.

"Oh god she's gone crazy again."

"Yeah, it's getting funnier, and funnier, every day."

My boy is handsome, yes, he is, and he'd make a great meal. But instead, they're eating my daughter. Why are they eating my daughter? Give her back to me!

"Isn't the food so yummy dad," asked the daughter.

"It reminds me of your long-lost sister."

And isn't it curious that my youngest daughter isn't at the table. Well not really, I guess huh?

Fiction Honorable Mentions

The Morning After

• Eugene Lee •



Don't wake up.

I don't want this dream to end.

The yellow gas in the hallway made it difficult to navigate but we made it through. We're safe.

The floor was covered in cockroaches, and the glazed eyes watching from every corner didn't say a word. The overwhelming smell of incense made my eyes water and my throat itch, but I kept going – you were my greatest priority.

The series of doors in the hallways had doorknobs that beckoned me to twist and walk inside. I obeyed. Not out of curiosity, but because it was teleological.

You might wonder about the stains on your shoes. It's wine. You dropped a glass; although it's a moot point now, seeing that you'll have to replace them. Though moccasins would better suit the décor of the hallway.

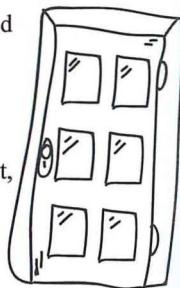
On the left was a painting of Janet Malcolm by Salle. It only had 41 strokes, no more, no less. It did look expensive, that's for sure.

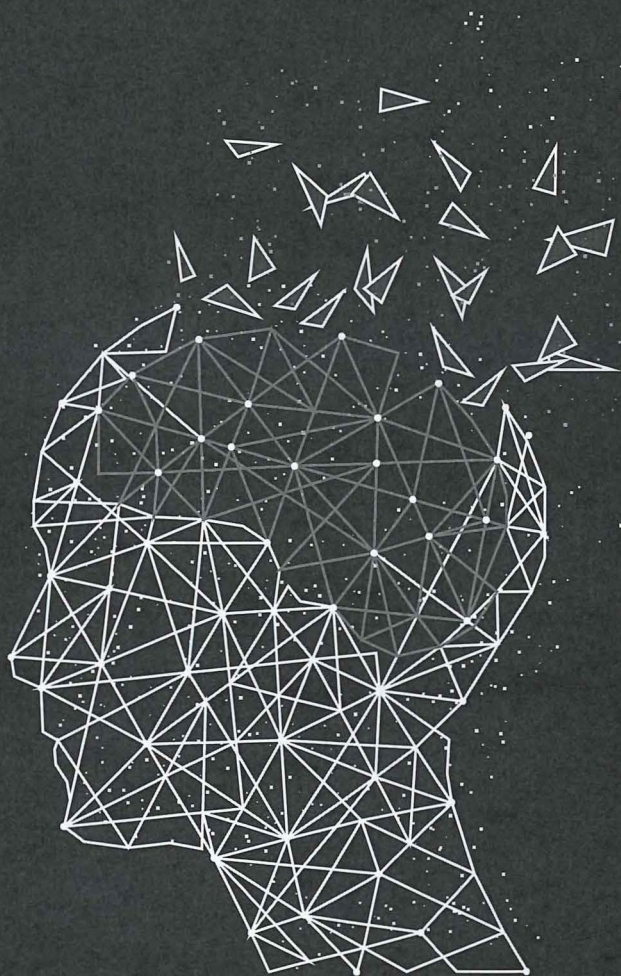
The blood stains on your sleeves were from the carcasses you must have brushed up against. They won't come off, but you can buy a better jacket anyway.

Take it from me, you're doing much better than them. They could have had everything to lose. But you're different. You're mine, Constanze.

You will learn who you should be. I promise. I'll keep opening doors and dragging you through. Not because there's an end in sight, but because I have, and I must.

Congratulations on your admission.





02

NONFICTION

Creative Nonfiction: 1st Place

I

When A Seed Is Planted



• *William Joseph Nofall* •

It is simple, really, but miraculous, nonetheless. It starts with the basic substrates of life: oxygen, soil, water, and a seed.

One of the earliest memories I have is of a mysterious door in my childhood basement. The memory isn't so much about the composition of the door, but rather, the peculiar, unnatural blue light that forced itself through the cracks in the perimeter of the frame. My father would always insist that he was growing strawberries in the room, and that opening the door would kill them instantaneously. I never entered, just like he asked. I never ate any homegrown strawberries either, like he promised.

The seed gets inserted into the soil approximately an inch, then is covered with some topsoil and dampened with some water. The seed needs darkness to grow; this promotes the stem to reach for oxygen and light through the soil.

My family moved into a new house when I was in grade six. My parents were very popular when I was growing up; they always had different friends coming over

every night, but they would always hang out in my parents' detached shop. They seemed to have lots of fun at our house; everyone would laugh so hard that they eventually ended up coughing. Although only one person would cough at a time for some reason.

Germination will occur in 3-10 days. As the root navigates the soil for water, the shoot will erupt from the seed and ascend for the surface in search of air and light.

My dad had this small, opaque, white plastic container with a brown lid. He brought it with him almost everywhere he went, including on the family road trips we would take from our small town to the nearest city to go shopping for things our town didn't have. My dad always drove, and my mom sat in the passenger seat and fiddled with paper from inside my dad's container. I could never see what she was doing with it, I could only hear her folding it back and forth, making these annoying crinkling noises repeatedly, and producing a strange, pungent smell. One time I asked what the smell was, and my

dad responded instantly, informing me that “*your mom farted.*” Mom would fart on every road trip.

Seedlings prefer lighting that emits a blue spectrum. Blue photons are less energetic than green or red photons but prevent the seedling from stretching for the light and developing a lengthy, frail stock.

One day—during the summer before I enrolled in high school—my younger brother and I were playing frisbee in the backyard and he accidentally threw the frisbee onto the roof of the shop. The frisbee was just beyond the gutters; I knew I could reach it if I had a rake, but my dad kept all of his tools locked away in his shop. My little brother fortunately knew where my dad kept a spare key and helpfully hurried away to obtain it. My dad always told us that we weren’t allowed in his shop, but I only needed a rake.

The summer sun illuminated the entry as I slowly pushed the door open. I told my little brother to stand guard by the door in case anyone was to come home. I took a few steps inside and scanned the room for a tool that could liberate my frisbee, but my eyes were drawn towards a closed door in the opposing corner of the shop. A closed door with a peculiar, unnatural blue light breaching the doorframe’s perimeter.

Once I arrived at the door, I reached out to clasp the doorknob with a sweaty, trembling hand. The knob turned without resistance, so I simultaneously pushed the door open and turned my head away to shield my eyes from the intense blue light.

Once my pupils adjusted, I peered inside the room at several small plants, a few jugs of fluid in the corner, and some lights that were suspended from the ceiling that illuminated the plants palm-sized leaves and crystalized, twinkling green bulbs. I left the room, grabbed a nearby rake and rescued our frisbee. I then returned the rake, locked up the shop, and went to my room.

By week six, it may be possible to determine the gender of the plant—considering that cannabis plants can be female, male, or hermaphrodite genders. However, this may lead to disappointment, considering that only female plants produce the highly sought-after flowers and males do not.

Upon enrolling in high school, it was only a matter of weeks until I received the crash course on cannabis from the general student-body. The subject was unavoidable since its use was ubiquitous throughout my community. Subsequently, I connected the dots that my parents as well as my older brother were growing and using cannabis. I felt neutral about discovering this. I knew it was illegal and I knew they could get in in trouble. But it didn’t make them bad people. It didn’t make them bad parents. I had lots of opportunities myself to try cannabis during my first semester. But, for reasons I can’t fathom, I intently avoided it until summer vacation.

During weeks 8-11, the plant will begin its flowering stage. The appearance of mature cannabis flowers will be apparent, boasting copious crystalized trichomes—small hair-like projections found on many plants—that will display a milky/whiteish sheen. Within this resin substance comprising the trichomes are the molecules that incentivize

all cannabis growers to produce the crop: Delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinoid (THC). THC affects our mood, hunger, and pain regulation, and is also responsible for the blissful, euphoric feeling simply known as feeling “high.”

The first time I smoked cannabis was with my older brother and his friends in our camper. I needed to ask my brother a question, so I made the commute out to our camper, and as I opened the door, I instinctively ducked under the plume of smoke that wafted over my head. I stepped into the camper and stood above the table that my brother and his friends surrounded. After greetings were exchanged, I began posing my question to my brother regarding our paper route schedule, all the while with my eyes fixated on the array of cannabis smoking paraphernalia scattered across the table. One of my brother’s friends acknowledged me studying the items on the table and inquired,

“Yo, have you ever been stoned before?”

I lowered my eyes from his gaze and responded by slowly shaking my head to signal that I had not. His friend became giddy in his seat in response to my answer, and piped up, *“BRO! we have to get you stoned! It would be fucking hilarious man!”*

I felt my face get hot and my stomach become queasy with angst. My brother’s friends chanted encouragement until my brother settled them down and insisted that I only had to if I really wanted to. Their eyes all peered at me eagerly in anticipation of my response. I didn’t feel obligated, but I needed to know what all the hype was about. Why everyone did it even though it was illegal. I cleared my throat and answered, *“Maybe just a little bit.”*

His friends erupted in celebration and quickly pulled out the bong, loaded the bowl to the brim with ground cannabis flower, and coached me through the procedure. Then, my brother handed me a lighter and I sparked the flame, hovering it over the bowl, watching as the smoke spiraled up the chamber towards my lips, waiting for the boy’s signal to pull the bowl, and suck back the smoke. After what felt like an eternity, they finally shouted, *“NOW!”*

As I pulled the bowl from the stem and began inhaling, I was met with the insurmountable urge to cough profusely. They all keeled over in laughter, while I paced the camper trying to catch my breath. After I composed myself, they made room at the table for me to accompany them. As we sat together, my brother’s friends asked me with persistent frequency, *“Hey bro, do you feel it yet?”*

Which, in all honesty, I did not know how to answer. What was it I was supposed to be feeling?

Perhaps five minutes after my bong hit, I noticed I was unconsciously drumming along to the music, as if it was flowing through me. Then, I unintentionally announced, *“I feel like dancing.”*

To which, my brother and his friends responded like a pack of hyenas. It felt great to be high. It felt great to be in the present moment, to be unperturbed by the world that

existed beyond the walls of the camper. I didn't know it at the time, but it was because dopamine neurotransmitters were synthesizing at an incredible rate throughout my 13-year-old nervous system, flooding my perception with the sensation of euphoria. I was hooked.

The World Health Organization (WHO) determined that approximately "*147 million people, [or] 2.5% of the world population, consume cannabis.*" Moreover, surveying conducted by the Canadian Government verified that approximately 19% of Canadians utilizes cannabis daily.

That fateful day when I first tried cannabis as a 13-year-old, signifies the day that I became a part of the populous that represents the 19% that consume cannabis daily. For the most part, I have been a part of this demographic for the past 15 years—more than half of my life. I have had innumerable positive experiences with cannabis, and it would not be an exaggeration to state that it is integral to my identity. Cannabis has shaped and molded me into who I am more than any other environmental constituent. However, that does not necessarily mean that it is exclusively beneficial for my well-being. My chronic consumption of cannabis has hijacked my innate reward systems, perpetually placing me in a dopamine-deficit, forcing me to succumb to the substance in order to feel normal. And that is the aspect of this addiction that has pushed me to my boundaries of tolerating it any longer. I no longer want to require something external just to feel normal. I just want to be normal.

When a seed is planted, it is extremely vulnerable and is easily subjected to the influences of its environment. If care isn't taken to provide the optimal developmental conditions, then the seed can become tarnished, jaded, diseased, or worse, deceased.

My parents were excellent at growing cannabis. They understood how to cultivate an environment that allowed their plants to flourish; I just wish that it didn't come at the cost of exposing my brothers and I at such a young age. You see, humanity does not differ drastically from the plant kingdom. In that, the concept of developing within optimal environmental conditions as a requisite for healthy maturation is valid for both life-forms. Where my seed was planted, in the setting that I developed within, I grew concurrently with the cannabis plants, parented by the same caretakers. The difference though, is that this setting was only conducive for one of us. The plants thrived, and my brothers and I conformed.

Cannabis is often colloquially referred to as "weed". The etymology of this literary slang is derived from the growth rate of cannabis, considering some strains have the potential to reach a maximum height of 34 feet. It was then said that "Cannabis grows like a weed."

When you cultivate an area for gardening, it is often necessary to prune and clear the area of other types of vegetation. Amongst the plants you eradicate, it is almost certain that you will come across a variety of weeds. Weeds can be very detrimental to a seedling's development. They can choke your seedling off at its roots and rob it of its potential to thrive. It is mandatory to clear the weeds from your setting if you want

your seedling to thrive. It has become mandatory for me to clear the weeds from my setting, so that I may thrive too.

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Mother Tongue

• Athena Berting •

Mothers and daughters, mothers and daughters. Words often sighed by my father as he stretched out on his seat, watching another night go from quiet, to quietly tense, to not-so quietly tense, to my mother's and my inevitable chaos. My father—poor Dad—often ended up as a hostage to our arguments, a captive on his corner of the couch, forced into mediating his wife and his teenage daughter night after night. He shouldered this responsibility with varying degrees of amusement, sadness, and gentle exasperation. And patience, which did not vary, which I have always loved him for.

My older sister, Dal, often retreated to her room around the quiet and tense part of the night. Yelling is a terrible backdrop for her video games, and we were starting to approach yelling, just then. Just the beginning signs of it—the talking over each other, the sniping interruptions, the words that were getting tighter and tighter on a leash, starting to show teeth. My father's eyes, flashing warily between us. My mother's hard mouth that only trembled when she thought I wasn't looking. Me, furiously batting away tears, desperate to remain composed.

The fights started the same and ended the same. The particulars of them felt important then, but there is only one thing that actually mattered at the core of them, and it is this:

WHY DON'T YOU UNDERSTAND ME?

The crux of it all. We took turns saying it. Every fight led to it. I think every fight began with it, in some way or another, though it came in the form of things like "*you're not even listening to me,*" or "*that's not what I said.*"

Why don't you understand me? Once one of us said these words, there was typically a storming off in opposite directions. We never seemed to have an answer for it. I might've done a door slam or two, if I felt like I hadn't gotten the last word in. My mother never slammed doors, but she did her mom equivalent, which was silently, furiously cleaning the dishes in the kitchen downstairs.

Sometimes my mom would walk off before I could say it, and I would have to turn to my dad and say it instead.

“I think,” my dad would start, gentle and reprimanding, “that sometimes you both go out of your way to misunderstand each other.”

This is half true. I was not always an easy teenager (is anyone always easy, let alone a sixteen-year-old?) and was prone to being pedantic to the point of spitefulness. My mother, in turn, was coaxed and then forced into playing defence.

The full truth is this: we often, quite literally, cannot understand each other.

My mother was born in Hong Kong, eldest of seven. She started working when she was only twelve, long hours at a plastic toy factory full of noxious fumes, and came home every day to a three hundred square foot apartment with her six siblings, her mother, and her father. Most nights, she cooked dinner for everybody on a hotplate in the apartment complex hallway. All of her earnings went into groceries or her parents' hands.

She came to Canada in her late twenties, against the wishes of her mother. She met my dad while she was working in a café in Squamish. My dad was working and living on a boat. It was love at first sight. It pretty well had to be, since my dad didn't speak a lick of Cantonese and back then, my mom probably only knew eighty English words in total, half of them from the café menu. It didn't seem to matter for the two of them. I guess it doesn't, when you're in love.

It matters a little more with a stubborn teenage daughter.

On the days when we weren't fighting, our conversations were an inelegant but effective mix of Cantonese, English, and dramatic hand gestures. Google Translate filled in some cracks. We speak the other's native language well enough to get by, but the gaps are always there. I am often reminded that, in a lot of ways, there is so much that I've missed from my mother, that she's missed with me. All the subtleties of language are lost in translation. There's almost no room for sarcasm, no room for dry humour. No puns (the horror!), no clever turns of phrase.

“Do you know what this means?” we'll ask each other often. Sometimes, with context, I can guess the definition of a Chinese word correctly, and my mother will laugh and clap in delight. It is a delight to be understood without explanation.

Sometimes, we spend long stretches of time defining every word, explaining how the change in word placement also can change its meaning. Explaining how context can change its meaning. This can also be a delight, or it is now that I'm older.

Much of love is an act of translation, and translation demands patience. I had very little of it at sixteen. My father had—and has—it in spades.

“Oh, you know that's not what she was trying to say.” My dad's most used line whenever he was caught in our crossfires. He still knows very little Cantonese, but seems to understand my mom in a way I never could back then. I was envious of this in the same way I think my mom was envious that my dad never needed the clunky, stilted help of Google to know exactly what I was trying to say.

This is a difficult divide to have exist between two people who so desperately want to love and be loved without all the seemingly extraneous effort. I often gave up arguing in an impatient huff, tired of translating every fifth word, turning to my dad and pleading, "You tell her what I'm trying to say." There was real disappointment on both their faces whenever I would say this. I didn't understand it then—their disappointment had only made me bristle and feel defensive—but I think back and feel ashamed for it now.

Because it's not extraneous, is it? All that extra effort is the core of it all. It almost doesn't even matter if we get a perfect translation in the end; a perfect translation isn't the point. I think any translator will tell you that a perfect translation is impossible.

The point is this. Let me sit with you and talk through all the ways we're hurting, the ways we've hurt each other. All the ways we make each other happy, or furious, or grateful. Let it take twice as long. Let it take our whole lives. I want to spend that precious time with you, trying to understand you. Will you try to understand me?

And though, looking back, I feel that shame for being impatient and denying my mother any understanding, I also know this kind of patience is probably impossible for a teenager, or at least it was for me. Anger felt so good when I was young, I was almost looking for ways to be misunderstood. Looking for ways to misunderstand.

Now that's the real shame: that there's some pleasure in feeling wronged, especially by people who love you. I'll admit that sometimes I have to fight the urge to feel that way now, even with people I share a mother tongue with. Turns out, sometimes, there's no perfect translation in the same language, either.

Lately, I've taken to retranslating all my mother's past words and actions, like a historian going back into the annals of memory, pulling out old records and finding that whoever had tried to decipher my mother previously had been too literal, willfully ignorant of culture, or context, or nuance. Without these, Cantonese can be a punchy language, aggressive even. There's none of the fluff to ease landing of language, like there is in English. If you go to Hong Kong, you have to be ready to jostle elbows and shout orders at food stall owners. You have to know how to be the right amount of affronted when bartering in markets. And you have to learn to take zero personal offence when this is all directed at you.

Aware of all of this now, I pull out a memory and try again, with care this time.

And I think of this.

I've just turned seventeen and I have a bad flu. I'm also angry, because my mother's first reaction upon hearing I was sick was to call me a "*careless girl*" in Cantonese. Already been feeling miserable and sorry for myself, I hear that and

turn around without a word, shutting my bedroom door (forcefully). I'm angry for the whole day, spurning every knock at my door, holing myself up in the dark, shivering and sweating, and wondering why my mom can't be someone who says things like "*oh, my poor girl, come here, let me hold you.*"

It's hours before I emerge. The house is dark, everyone's asleep. I stand in the living room upstairs, feeling pathetic and alone and sore all over my body, clenched with a fever and the notion that my mom had just called me careless and then went to sleep.

But she's not asleep. Of course she isn't. Not now, looking at the memory again. She's awake, I can hear her downstairs. I'm halfway crawling down the steps, a blanket wrapped around me like a thick shawl. The door at the bottom of the steps opens before I can even reach up for the brass knob.

"*So loud, mui mui,*" she says in English, but her tone is soft, worried. She switches to Cantonese. "*Why are you up?*"

"*I'm hungry,*" I whisper in the same language. She gestures with her hand for me to follow her to the kitchen. The oven fan is running on low, and I can smell the starch of plain congee brewing in her big soup pot. I have to lean against the frame of the kitchen entrance to keep myself upright. She goes and stirs the pot. "*I'm sorry I got sick,*" I say after a moment, in English.

She doesn't turn to face me, but I can catch the side of her mouth as she frowns. "*Sorry? For what? Don't be a silly girl, don't be sorry.*"

"*Because I was a careless girl,*" I say this in Cantonese. She does turn to face me then. Her face is soft, almost regretful.

"*Go sit,*" she says, instead of trying to explain herself. "*You shouldn't be standing.*" The wooden dining chair is painfully hard under my slumping body. I close my eyes and hear the familiar sounds of my mother cooking in the kitchen, the clink of ceramic spoons and bowls against each other, the sound of her washing her hands under the faucet. For some time, it's all I can focus on. Then I hear her take the seat across from me. I open my eyes and watch her deliberate something before she sighs and puts the bowl down on the table. Her hand is cool against my fevered skin as she cups my cheek.

"Mom—"



"My careless girl," she says, stroking me lightly with a thumb. "Do you know what I mean?" she asks. "My careless girl." I'm staring at her wordlessly. She brings her other hand up until she is holding my face, patting her fingers gently. She looks up at me. I'm taller than her now, even when sitting. I don't know why I haven't noticed this before. My tiny mother, in the kitchen at midnight, making me a bowl of congee, holding my face in her hands. "My careless girl, okay?"

I don't think I say anything in reply. I don't think I can. I do think I reach up and take one of her hands. She just smiles at me like she understands.

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Creative Nonfiction: 3rd Place

Doomscrolling

• Malique Nichols-Rodriguez •

“Major sea-level rise caused by melting of Greenland ice cap is ‘now inevitable’”

“We cannot adapt our way out of climate crisis, warns leading scientist”

“Microplastics found in human blood for first time”

As I scroll through the latest articles detailing all the ways the planet is being ruined by humans, I wonder how it has come to this. Me spending my time reading and saving these articles about climate disasters as if in the future I am going to become a storyteller of lost civilizations, submerged cities, and decayed monuments¹.

“‘Doomscrolling’ is slowly eroding our mental health”

Doomscrolling has become a time sink for me when I could be spending that time engaging in new hobbies. Drawing, programming, reading, writing, and boxing are all things I have been trying to pick up. Hobbies that require dedication, discipline, and huge investments of time compared to reading news article. One would find it hard to believe that reading doom articles could be such a time sink. Reading a newspaper for example only takes a couple of minutes. Hard to believe that something that takes a couple of minutes out of your day could take a couple of hours out of mine. It is something we all have done, especially during the time of covid and lockdowns. But for me it has become all-consuming. It is similar to eating a pack of cookies: you don’t just stop at one. You eat one at a time, and by the time you realize you’ve eaten the whole bag you think to yourself, “*Next time I will show restraint.*” Next time always being something I pushed to the distant future. It is no wonder I am still trying to learn these new hobbies. Doomscrolling is like fast food compared to a home cooked meal. I could spend the time preparing ingredients, cooking the food, and then washing up. Or I could just log onto Door Dash, click three times and have fast food delivered to my door². It’s easy to get sucked into the vortex but hard to escape from it. Even when I do make a serious attempt to learn, whenever I think of the future I get doubts about whether it is useful to learn these skills when headlines constantly read like this³.

¹ “Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!”

“Vegetable Prices Soar 40% as Crops Fail Under Extreme Weather”

It also speaks to my apathetic attitude that I have spent most of my time learning about climate change but continue to do nothing to prepare for it. I guess I am still wondering if a future like this is worth it.

“Climate grief: The growing emotional toll of climate change”



In the beginning, I went through my own version of the five stages of grief as I learned how fucked we truly are. I was in denial climate change could be happening and so quickly. Anger that we haven't done anything but pledge to do something in the future. Bargaining that the worst of climate change will come after my time. Depression that the worst will be in my lifetime and likely worse than the projected figures. Acceptance as I come to view climate change the same as death or taxes. Inevitable. But I have come to realize it is not stages I am going through but a never ending rollercoaster ride, never consistently going in one direction and never ending. Right now, the ride has begun the loop of acceptance, or more accurately, apathy. Acceptance would mean I would move on with my life, but I haven't with this constant doomscrolling. I have not moved on but settled into this abyss. Instead of committing to my interests and living life to fullest like some others who have accepted the inevitability of climate change have done, I continue to spend my valuable time doomscrolling. They have decided to not give up hope. They have decided to make the most of the time they have left. To travel around the world and experience its wonders. To restart hobbies that they left behind, or start new ones they always wanted to. To reconnect with lost family and friendships and strengthen existing one. To build or join resilient communities to stand against climate change and the inaction of our politicians. To love, to cherish, to grow despite what is coming. To see world leaders adopt the same plan of inaction as me is encouraging in a dismal sort of way⁴. A younger me would be furious that they continue to talk action but do nothing. But now, now I am glad I am not heading down this road alone⁵.

“World heading into ‘uncharted territory of destruction’, says climate report”

² If they can get the door right. Seems like I am ordering food more for my neighbors than me.

³ Learning new skills just loses its appeal when extinction is breathing over your shoulder, you know?

⁴ What can be done today, can be done tomorrow. What can be done tomorrow, can be done next week.

⁵ Misery sure does love company, especially on a species wide scale.

The more I scroll, the more I realize that me living a post-civilization world would be like being a fish out of water. I have adapted to this world of stable climate and modern technology. I guess most of us have. No one really imagines that the life they have been living for so long is going to be upended. That the water will run out, the electricity will turn off, and that their homes will be destroyed. All the projected scenarios from scientists and experts seem to predict this and that is going to end poorly for someone like me who has become accustomed to the modern lifestyle⁶.

Sea level rise, heat domes, increased natural disasters, political extremism, societal breakdown, and Mad Max biker gangs are all just unfathomable to me, to the point that I see no point in trying to survive such a world. Maybe because I know that going solo, while my preferred choice, is suicidal, and for someone like me the only chance is in a group. It is the age-old debate of individualism versus collectivism. The rational strategy of joining a group and pooling resources is realistically my only choice, but even then, for an anti-social person like me, it is still just as appealing as joining a bunch of cannibals. Having to deal with social climbers, backstabbers, gossip, and pointless drama in real life is already tiring now⁷. Going solo may seem cool, but in the real world there is no plot armor. In fiction, it looks so amazing to see the main character go against all these obstacles as a lone wolf. In the real world, there are no main characters, and there is no central plot protecting the main characters until their happy ending. Even if this was a story, would I even be a side character⁸?

"Putin flirts again with grim prospect of nuclear war – this time he might mean it"

Ah, how could I forget about nuclear war? Humans seem intent on playing this stupid game of nuclear sabre-rattling to win the ultimate prize: extinction. The age of the cold war may be over, but that clock keeps ticking closer and closer to midnight⁹. Prepping for natural disasters is one thing, but how does one even prepare for a nuclear holocaust? The fallout alone would be impossible to avoid as the winds carry it all over the earth. A nuclear war would be so damaging that scientists had to invent a new term, "megadeath." The potential cool metal band name¹⁰ aside, the term "megadeath" refers to a unit of measure with one megadeath equalling one million deaths by a nuclear explosion.

I remember a quote saying, "If the bombs drop, I pray they drop on me." That quote captures the idea of nuclear holocaust so perfectly, that death is preferable.

⁶ "Give them bread and circuses and they will never revolt." - Juvenal

⁷ "Oh my god, did you see the battle armor Stacy was wearing? So last season."

⁸ I'll be lucky to be the token black friend, and my pride would never allow that.

⁹ As of writing it is 100 seconds to midnight.

¹⁰ Sadly, for any inspiring musicians reading this, that name has been taken.

Some may fool themselves in thinking they can prep for such things, but I can't delude myself that well ¹¹. "Duck and cover" won't be my motto but "Drop and pray" ¹². I do wonder if I will get to see the fireworks before I go.

"Scotland 'snow-free' for fourth time in six years"

"We have no dry land left': impact of Pakistan floods to be felt for years"

"Doomsday glacier,' which could raise sea level by several feet, is holding on 'by its fingernails,' scientists say"

As I scroll through more articles; I start wondering if this addiction to doomscrolling can continue. Endlessly scrolling through these articles and fantasizing about what a post-civilization collapse world would look like. Valuable time wasted. Reading these articles isn't going to change the future. The future of earth has been set by centuries of environmental devastation before my time. I can't change that, but my future is still undecided. So maybe I should be using this time instead for hobbies that I always want to start. They say it takes a minimum of an hour a day to master a skill, which doesn't sound like a lot when compared to the countless hours I have spent depressing myself with these articles. I can only imagine the progress I would've made if I invested my time correctly. What would my drawing skills look like if I spent that time practicing? I doubt I would've been Picasso-good, but still after all that time I could've been decent. Instead of worrying when I should start, I should just start. Reminds me of a quote "The best time to start was Yesterday. The next best time is Now."

I'll start tomorrow...

¹¹ Still trying to convince myself off my plan of going solo.

¹² Both have the same amount of effectiveness.

Creative Nonfiction Honorable Mentions

Side Effects

• Belinda Li •

You are ten years old and the first and only kid in your class who is experiencing one of the dreadful afflictions of adolescence: acne.

Every day you are reminded by the mirror, or worse – other kids.

One of the first unfriendly reminders occurs during lunch time in the school cafeteria when someone blurts out: “*What’s on your face?*”

Other kids at the table turn to look at you. You wish you could close your hair, like curtains, over your face. It’s probably a genuine question since even you don’t know what is happening.

For the next four years, your skin continues to mutiny. You fight back with harsh products – peroxides and acids – that leave your skin red and angry. People continue to point out your skin to you, as if you are not the most aware person. Your skin finally relents by the time you are fifteen.

You are seventeen years old. Your acne-prone skin and your frizzy gypsy hair, former banes of your existence, are under control.

You start work at a movie theatre, and you meet your new co-worker, Taylor. She’s cheerful, popular, and outgoing. By the end of your first shift, she asks for your contact information and regularly messages you. When you mention you want to dye your hair, she says, “*Me too! Let’s go together!*”

The world has gotten friendlier as your appearance improved. You don’t have to prove yourself worthy first by being helpful, a good listener, or clever. You continue to pick up instant friends – a phenomenon you did not know in your spottier days. You’re becoming confident, outgoing, and comfortable in your own skin. Still, when a small constellation of blemishes pops up around your jaw in the winter – you are so self-conscious you keep calling in sick to your workplace.

You are nineteen years old, and your skin behaves, except during the winter. You assume people fixate on your blemishes and think they’re ugly, even though they will never say anything out of politeness.

You know people who had their doctors or dermatologists prescribe creams or

antibiotics for their skin. You think you can do the same. You're aware that you're young and that your life is just starting out. You want to begin it well – by driving the final nails in the coffin of your skin problem.

You are nineteen years old, and your skin behaves, except during the winter. You assume people fixate on your blemishes and think they're ugly, even though they will never say anything out of politeness.

You know people who had their doctors or dermatologists prescribe creams or antibiotics for their skin. You think you can do the same. You're aware that you're young and that your life is just starting out. You want to begin it well – by driving the final nails in the coffin of your skin problem.

You show up for your appointment with your family doctor and are soon called to the examination room. You contemplate what you should say. You don't want to be dismissed because your skin is fine right now.

The doctor, a middle-aged man in a white coat, enters the room with your chart in his hands. After you greet each other, you begin to explain your problem. He's not very good at making eye contact. He'll look around or at his papers as you talk.

You decide to be brief: *"My skin usually gets bad during the winter. I've tried everything."*

To you, 'everything' means that you've tried a lot of products labelled 'clarifying' in skincare aisles over the years. The doctor takes your statement to mean something else entirely. He doesn't examine your skin, nor does he investigate what you've previously tried before, saying, *"I'll write you a prescription for Accutane"*.

He starts to write on his chart. *"You can start with 30 mg a day. You'll need to do a blood test first to check your liver function."*

"Okay, sure," you naively agree. *"Thank you!"*

He doesn't have more to say and wishes you a good day. He turns and walks out of the door that he's stood beside during your entire appointment.

That was fast, you think, as you glance at the time.

You complete the blood test. You register that this must be a serious medication due to the blood test. You don't mind; you believe serious is synonymous with effective.

When you finally get the prescription in your hands, you run to the nearest pharmacy to fill it. Later, you watch videos about other people's experiences where they rave about isotretinoin (brand name Accutane) and call it a permanent cure, their miracle. They mention the side effects, and so does the pamphlet that the pharmacist gave you, but you don't pay much attention. There are side effects for every medication anyway. The most common side effect is dryness. You make a note to yourself to buy some moisturizer.

The medication comes in a blister pack. You push the curved plastic side, and a little red pill breaks free from the foil. It's the size of an adzuki bean and a bright poppy red color. Three of these a day is your starter dose.

By your second month on Accutane, there's hardly a mirror you can walk past. You admire your bright, luminous skin. Your pores have evidently vanished, and you couldn't find a blemish if you tried (and you do). Your skin always looks matte and feels soft. Your skin is beyond what you would have been content with before; now it's everything you could have dreamed of.

Yet this new skin isn't necessarily low maintenance. Each day and night, you plaster heavy creams on to keep the dryness at bay. The thought of applying these heavy, pore clogging creams (on your face especially) would have terrified you months ago.

You're not exactly happy these days, but the change has been so subtle and slow that you didn't really notice, nor did you attribute accordingly. By the fourth month, you realize that while you didn't pay attention to its slow creep, an unshakeable gloom has now settled in you.

You're about to complete your fourth month on this medication. You're not certain when the finish line is. Your doctor hasn't told you. He doesn't inquire much about your experience when you've seen him to get your prescription renewed. You suppose he must have a plan – you'll ask next time.

You continue to experience the same side effects. You also get intermittent headaches and feel pressure building in your head. You have trouble thinking, as if there's cement in your brain. Someone says your name in a room, and you flush red.

You're walking home on a cold night and your joints hurt. When you step forward with your right leg, you feel an ache where your leg bone meets your hip socket. You worry that you're even dried up on the inside – that maybe you don't have enough fluid to lubricate your joints. You imagine your bones creaking as you move. Look at you: while technically still a teenager, you have the creaky bones and aching joints of an old woman.

Months before, you had seen Taylor. You broke into a wide grin when you spotted her, knowing it was going to be a fun day. Today you see Taylor and she's grinning and waving as she walks down the street towards you. You wave back but you don't feel anything – no joy or excitement to see your friend. You contort the muscles around your mouth to form a false smile.

You and Taylor board a bus to go to your lunch destination. You're still en route, but you don't know how keep the conversation going. It feels like two people hanging out alone for the first time and regretting it because it turned out to be awkward. To your horror, every sentence you work to muster up is painfully obvious or boring. You

wish you could eject yourself out of this bus, and with any luck, another one will run you over.

You're aware you're supposed to have emotional and expressive responses to what Taylor is saying, rather than stare back with a flat affect and a robot's disposition. You wonder how you related to other humans before. It once came naturally, but now you're missing the right programming. It's like your personality has been scooped from you, and there's just a shell left. The air is dead. Taylor starts to inspect her hair for split ends, and you stare out the window. You remember another time, not long ago, when you guys sat together during a five-hour long Greyhound bus ride, and there was not a moment between you that wasn't filled with chatter or laughter.

You've always been a happy person. When something bad happens, you recover quickly and eventually find the amusement in it. Now you feel numb – incapable of positive emotions, but gripped with new anxiety.

You research side effects, and many of them apply to you: dry skin, dry eyes, dry lips, rashes, itching, headaches, muscle and joint pain, eye inflammation, skin irritation, intracranial pressure, and depression.

You have eleven side effects – fifteen if you add the flushing, crippling anxiety, reduced cognition, and personality changes that you didn't find on various side effects lists. You've been living with these adverse effects in stubborn tolerance for so long that you're astonished at the breadth of your everyday misery.

You decide to stop this medication. Your main concern is whether the treatment will still be effective after you bail on it. You didn't think about the side effects persisting. From your understanding, a side effect is a temporary experience that dissipates, then disappears, when whatever causing the side effect is removed.

Winter arrives, and acne is the least of your concerns – but not in the way that you hoped. The winter exacerbates your dry, itchy skin, and joint pain. While the headaches are gone, you believe your working memory is declining. If an instructor begins a sentence, by their second sentence you may forget their first sentence and have difficulty following along. Your anxiety related to cognitive / memory issues, flushing, and awkward interactions with others causes you to feel overwhelmed. You withdraw from your classes and retreat from actively participating in life.

You tell your closest friends about your Accutane experience, but you still feel a growing distance from them. You witness the dissolution of various relationships and the end of your era of spontaneous instant connections.

You fall into a rabbit hole of Accutane research. You learn that this medication you took for seasonal breakouts is one of the most dangerous drugs on the market. Since it's been available in 1982, it's been marred by controversy and constant lawsuits. You read about how this drug slows brain metabolism, damages DNA, and causes

apoptosis (cell death) in many cells of the body. You feel sick with regret as you read about long-term effects and complications from journal articles, as well as personal stories. You understand that this is a poison that functions to kill cells in the body, and its side effect was clearing your skin.

There's no guide on healing from Accutane, so you tinker with things to try. You take up running and notice it improves your mood. It's hard on your joints, so you try yoga, which helps with your anxiety and cognition. You try an exhaustive number of supplements. You soak up the sun when you can. You try to be kind to yourself when your skin "relapses", or when you feel like ruminating over your losses or missteps. You are motivated by your slow improvements, and you continue to grow around what happened.

You used to be someone else at nineteen. After inadvertently poisoning her, you've been trying to recover her. Since over a decade has passed since your Accutane encounter, the memory of that nineteen-year-old girl can no longer be your aspiration. Returning to her is impossible. Even if she never took Accutane, she wouldn't have remained static after all these years. The consequences of Accutane were an abrupt introduction into adulthood – where you comprehended (instead of intellectually knew) that the world is unfair, and you became disillusioned with systems and professionals you trusted. It taught you your most expensive lessons – that your brain and body are your most prized possessions for what they do, your relationships are the source of your happiness, and you should never go to war with yourself again.

X

Renge was there.

• Bryan Ngo •

Summer break. I laid my back on the cool, tatami mat. I was holding a handheld game console with both hands as I rapidly moved my fingers. My mom called out to me, saying it was time to go. My eyes lit up. After hearing it was time to go, my body had a sudden rush of excitement. I grabbed my small backpack and threw my game console inside. I also folded grandma's letter and tucked it into my pocket. "*Did you forget anything? Are you wearing your buzzer?*" I reached for the little dark-blue buzzer attached to a long neck strap hanging from my neck. I raised the buzzer for my mom to see. My mom ruffled my hair as she complimented me. "*Make sure not to lose it, okay?*" I gave her a "*of course!*" as I put on my small sneakers.

Summer break. As I stepped outside, I felt the heat waves splashing against my face. It was blazing hot. Me and my mom were greeted right away as we stepped outside. It was dad. He was parked right at the front of our home, waving at us. My dad drove us closer and closer to the body of blue that had no end in sight. No matter how many times I saw the unending waves of blue, it still scared me a little. But now, I felt like I could say it had become somewhat less scary than before. I patted my pocket that had grandma's letter tucked in there as I watched the gigantic sea of blue grow bigger and bigger. The closer to the port we were, the more the boats floating nearby came into sight.

The ferry. There was a building that had "*Okayama Port*" written in bold on it as we walked out to the entrance. Beyond the entrance was a very big white boat, with a big blue line drawn across it. My dad was talking to a woman wearing a black uniform with a thin, red scarf. She handed something to my dad, and my dad passed it onto me. It was a ticket. I felt a tinge of nervousness, because this was my first time riding alone. But at the same time, I couldn't hold my excitement back any longer. I waved goodbye to my mom and dad or else they would have kept me there asking me to double-check my stuff all day long. I moved on to follow another woman wearing the same outfit, gesturing to me to come along with her.

The ferry. It was hard to avoid the smell of salt in the air. The woman said we would be riding for about 90 minutes until we reached the island. I was alone, but it wasn't comparable to the loneliness I felt at school. Wherever I went, the woman followed me. I looked up at the woman and asked if she felt bored following me for so

long. She shook her head and smiled at me. *"If you need anything, just ask me. I love riding boats, so I am having plenty of fun right now."* She appeared genuinely happy as she looked out at the waves of water. With her presence as well, it did make me feel a bit less lonely.

The town. The town was in view as we approached the island's port. When the doors finally opened signaling passengers to get off, the woman gestured to me to follow her. As I stood by her side, she called for another woman, and they talked for a bit about something. They were using a lot of difficult words, so I instead gazed at the idyllic town before me, in a daze as nostalgia struck me. After a minute or two, the same woman kneeled before me, and asked if I had my map with me. *"Yeah."* I took out a piece of paper, with the drawing of the route I needed to take, and showed it to her. She described some landmarks for me to remember before letting me go. I could vaguely remember the route from the times I had been here with my parents. I glanced around, noticing some new buildings I had never seen before. There was what appeared to be a hotel, and a tall white pole with a red flag in the front of a small store that said *"ramen."* Not just the changes around me, just being alone made me feel like I was in another world. It was a bit scary, but my grandma's cat – I definitely couldn't leave, not until I met my grandma's cat. I followed the directions of the hand-drawn map from my mom. I looked up to see if there were any street signs, but I couldn't find any. *"The next turn should be after this block and... Yeah, without this map it would've been like a maze."*

On my way. The closer I was to my destination, the louder the sounds of crying cicada became. Crossing a very short, concrete bridge, I glanced down at the small stream curiously. I came across an empty plot of land, then to a small red tower with a bunch of megaphones attached at the top. As I dragged my body up a hill, beads of sweat were starting to form on my forehead. I noticed a small shop at the top, so I curiously stepped inside. There was a lot of colorfully-packaged candies and crackers on the shelves. Here, I saw rick crackers covered in salted seaweed. There, I noticed a pack of chewy-looking sour candy in the shape of a turtle. There was also a cooler with a selection of drinks, and a small freezer with a few popsicles and ice cream. There was an old woman behind the counter, and she greeted me with joy. She asked me where I was coming from, and I answered Okayama. I told her I was going to stay at my grandparent's house for this summer. I had money in my bag, so I opened my bag and took out some coins to buy a watermelon-looking popsicle. The moment I took a bite, I almost screamed *"This is so good!"* in front of the old woman.

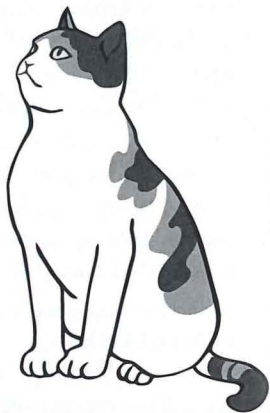
On my way. I settled down on a bench in front of the shop. Thinking about whether I should head back in to buy a bottle of water, I suddenly heard a Meow~ from under the bench-- Meow? It was a tabby cat. He was a mix of light brown and white. The cat approached me and started rubbing his head against my leg. *"Uh, do you want*

something?" What should I do? He appeared to be wearing a collar, so he was apparently someone's pet. I stood up and headed back into the shop. When I came out again, the cat was still standing there, as if he was waiting for me. I opened the bottled tea cold to the touch, and drank it slowly as I moved to rub the cat's warm, slick fur. It was somehow soothing to see the cat spoiling itself as he laid down in satisfaction while I was rubbing his fur. Thinking that I had spent long enough, I stood up and took out my map again. As I continued on my way, I heard pitter-pattering seemingly following from behind me. I glanced behind me to find the cat was following me. *"Shouldn't you go home?"* Of course, there was no answer. I decided to forget about the cat and continued onto my destination.

On my way. Unlike the mainland, it was much quieter here. The only noise was the cries of cicada. There were white flowers I have never seen before outside the island. Sounds of pitter-pattering reached my ears again. I glanced behind me and found the cat was still following me. *"Do you want to be my friend?"* I voiced my thoughts without thinking, as he started rubbing his head against my leg again. *"We're friends from now on then!"* I crouched down and rubbed his head. I realized that I wasn't as nervous anymore. All I felt was excitement.

Destination. I reached my destination. The trip didn't take along at all. Before me stood the same traditional house from my memories. I called for my grandparents before the door, but there was no answer. Starting to feel worried, I heard a meow from behind me. I turned to look. The tabby cat was still behind me. I crouched down and petted his head. It didn't take long before I heard someone call out my name. *"Oh my, I thought you would be here by the afternoon! Come on, now. It must've been hot standing out here for so long!"* I ran and gave her a big hug. *"I'm glad to see you again, grandma!"* Patting my head, she appeared delighted to see me. *"Oh? It looks like you've meet with Renge already."* She noticed the cat when she begun to usher me inside. *"This is Renge!"* This tabby cat was the pet grandma was talking about all along in her letters. My sense of familiarity with the cat started to bloom. My first friend was actually the one I wanted to meet all long from the letters. I believed that we will be able to get closer even more from now on, until we reached the end of my summer break.

Afternoon. I explored the house for anything new, with Renge in tow. There was light green tatami mats covering the floors, which were cool to the touch. My grandparents had sliding doors that opened to the back yard. *"Grandma, can I go to the shrine?"* She laughed with amusement. *"My, didn't you just get here? Don't you want to rest a bit?"* I shook my head. *"I'm not tired yet."* My grandma smiled wryly. *"Why don't you go visit the shopping street?"*

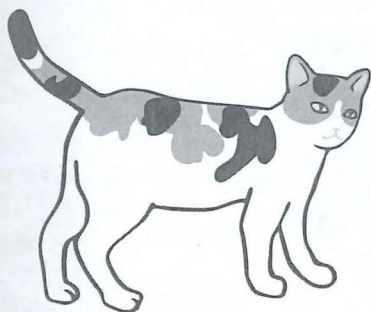


When she said that, an idea came to mind. At that moment, I heard sounds from the front entrance. It appeared that someone had come home. I went to take a look and found out it was grandpa. *"Oh, you have grown so much since the last time I saw you!"* I ran up to him and hugged him. *"Grandpa!"* He laughed and raised his hand, holding something in a bag.

Evening. I watched grandpa prepare the BBQ grill at the back yard. He bought some small-looking fish to grill today. He made the preparations and skewered the fish. *"Give it a try and flip these here."* I watched him as he flipped the skewered fish from one side over to the other by rolling the sticks. I took care not to burn myself as I flipped a few of the skewered fish myself. It didn't take long until the fish started to give off a deliciously tempting smell. As I watched the grilling fish, I petted the cat that was watching me from the top of my stool. My grandpa turned off the grill and handed me two skewers. He gave me a wink and I thanked him with sparkling eyes. I handed one skewer over to the tabby cat. He greedily devoured the fish as if he had long been waiting for this moment. I laughed at how fast he devoured it. I grabbed my own skewer and took a bite. It was still very hot, but it was cool enough for me to take in the strong salty taste as I chewed it carefully. I glanced up at the orange sky.

Morning. I dragged my body from the bed and found my grandma moving about in the kitchen. I glanced around the living room, and then looked around the back yard. I curiously asked grandma, *"Do you know where Renge is?"* She shook her head. *"He always comes and goes. Maybe you'll see him later."* Thinking back on when my grandma suggested I visit the shopping street, I put on my shoes and called out to her. *"I am going to the shopping street, grandma!"* Hearing my grandma's parting words *"Don't forget your buzzer! Remember to watch out for cars!"* I stepped out with a drawn map in hand. It had the directions to the shopping street written by grandma.

Shopping street. It was hot, with the sun up and blazing, but it wasn't as bad as yesterday. I glanced around, searching for the appearance of a particular store.



Fortunately, I found a shop with an appearance I was hoping for. It was a small shop for pet owners, with signboards of dogs and cats at the front. I headed inside to find a collection of pet food and toys. I grabbed a bag of treats for cats that was displayed as a popular item, and paid for it with the allowance I was going to save for a new game.

Maybe a toy too? There was a small section for cat toys. I decided on a stick with a soft

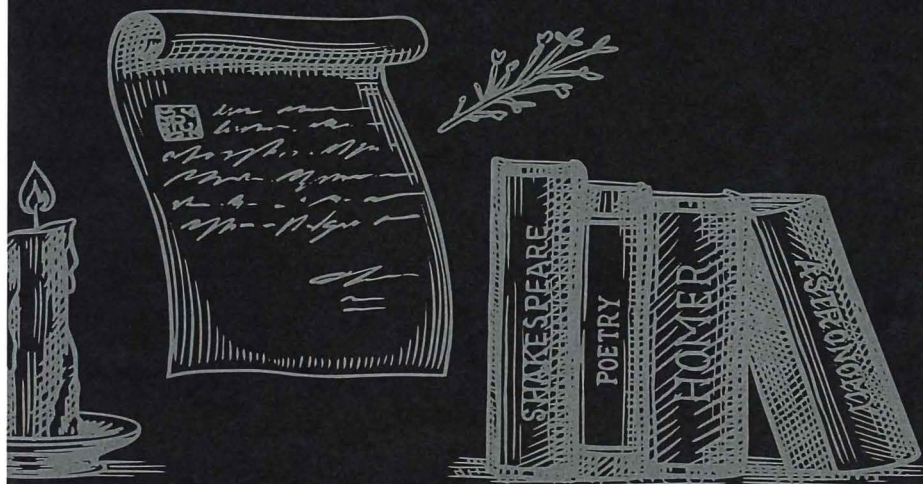
fish-looking toy attached at the end - like a fishing rod. This looked fun to use to play together with Renge. Having decided on the second item, I made my way back home.

Disappearance. Morning became evening, yet there was no sight of Renge. There was no sight of even his shadow the following morning as well. I felt dejected. I went to ask grandma about Renge once more, but she shook her head. Apparently, Renge could disappear for days before making his appearance again. He loves roaming around, so my grandparents always leave him be. I decided to roam around as well for a day, but I wasn't able to catch a single glimpse of Renge. Tired from walking, I stopped by the shop I visited the first day. I asked the old woman if she saw a tabby cat around, but she shook her head. I bought a watermelon popsicle and settled on the bench at the front of the shop. My thoughts drifted off to the sensations of Renge's warm, slick fur. Where are you and what are you doing right now? I started feeling a prickly sensation from my eyes as heat started to accumulate. The watermelon popsicle was likely delicious under this blazing summer heat, but I wasn't able to tell how it tasted today.

Departure. I needed to go back home. I thanked my grandparents for letting me stay with them. I told them how much fun I had. I had visited some newly-opened shops as well as a café, stopped by some shrines, and explored around Takamiyama park. I asked them if they saw Renge today, but they shook their heads. They had also begun wondering where Renge had disappeared off to. Down to the last minute, I was not able to see him again before I left. But for some reason, I didn't feel as lonely as I thought. My real first friend was but a bittersweet dream before I returned back to reality.



03 POETRY



Poetry. 1st Place

Hiking Up Soames

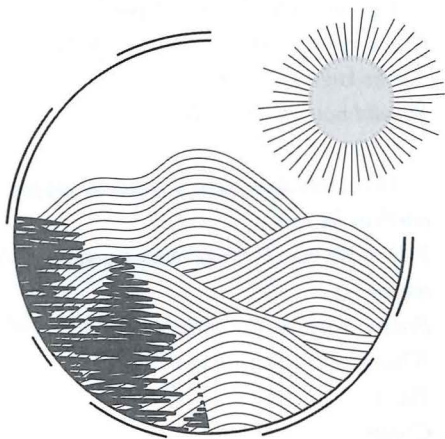
• Athena Berting •

*I left with you before daybreak,
forfeiting all
our usual tender morning patterns —
sex, and breakfast, and the cat still curled
under the duvet—
to heave up this dark incline,
the stone still damp from last night's
necessary rain.
It's slippery, you say, and I want
to be wry, but you look younger
in your eagerness, so ready
with a hand that that I don't mind
losing my footing.*

*You catch me
smile when we summit,
and I pretend not to see your
own satisfaction in this,
the sun beginning to summon
morning, yellow light pressing through
mist, finding us sheltering
among the arbutus.*

*You take my hand,
both cold and both warming,
looking with keen expectancy.*

*Are you still unsure?
Who else would I arrive with,
to sit and watch rise
this unfamiliar, spectral light?*





The Potter

• Sophia Ludwig •

*He came into this world quietly
His breathing like snow in the night air,
For he knew that to be seen,
You did not need to be loud.*

*His hands danced their way Across the
earth as he ran,
Filling his new home with fragmented
memories
From a past life Recently left behind.
When you arrive with nothing,
You have no choice but to
Create.*

*He never found the need to speak
Of all the little things in life that he
loved.
Instead he carved them in clay, Left them
out on display to
Whisper sweet nothings to those
Who peered past their own reflections
In the windows.*

*His laugh was thunder, An
otherworldly warning for those
Whose hearts had grown bitter To take
cover.*

*His smile sparked fire into the room,
Warming the hearts of anyone
Lucky enough to hold his memories for
A moment or two.*

*He left this world as he came,
Quietly,
Yet his breathing crackled now
Clay in a kiln that would never fully cool.
In the end there was no difference,
No degree of separation between
Him
And his beautiful creations.*

Poetry: 3rd Place



What Colour is a Broken Bee?

• Jiwoo Ho •

*There was a girl whose body was made
of paper.
Her body was a blank page free of any
litter.
On the front side.*

*The girl who's made of paper grew up
perched
In a nice pocket that was coloured after
rain
Like the shade she felt inside.*

*One day, the girl saw a bee joy by.
The bee was coloured a vibrant pride.
She adored it, so she spied all night
Until it trustingly rested its head on her
thigh.*

*Then, the paper girl smiled too wide
Like the bee's wings split aside.
And the paper girl drew on her page
All that made the bee so brave.
So, the paper girl sat with a bogus story
A smile dyed dry over her closeted body.
Feeling worthy in her seat of normalcy.*

Memorial Service

• Charlene Chan •

*After the white flash,
their grainy films muddle with the
Earth's skin,
waxes groove to fit an old thumbprint,
glares soften in the waning gray of a
setting sun,
ashen with the plumes of distant fires.*

*Some sway to the gentle current,
disintegrated in the clouded company
of lakes
dotting the surface of the withered
grounds,
agonising in their return to the soil.*

*Others burrow deep,
powder themselves in the melting rot,
crumble to the tune of mortar
and scurries,
muffled by the sounds of flesh gasping
after death.*

*The rusted tin and scraps of
ribbon echo as they clatter on beaten
countertops
and weathered dressers:
blue-painted rooms are the first to
raise dust.*

*A laminate print is a silent reunion we
dare not claim,
As sixteen hundred photos decay.*

Poetry Honorable Mentions

|

Mother Phantasm

• Athena Berting •

*In the new house, you are almost
alone.*

*Save for the woman in the yard—
Now in the window
Now by the keyhole
Crossing the threshold*

*A vicious god you are still trying to
disown
The presence peripheral, and trapped
in the mundanity
you once thought impossible:
The washed plates, like neutral mirrors,
unbroken
The bedroom door you lock, and then,
remembering, unlock*

*She inhabits the space like her own
body, tethered
by that one sane morning,
years past*

*The memory is what always
does the killing.*

*And now, her hand,
or yours, in the altered light,
a phantom limb you still feel
reaching through walls
pushing open doors that lead
from empty room
to empty room.*

Poetry Honorable Mentions

|

Epilogue

• Alex Kreuzkamp •

*The pain will go away
You will become unlost
Hope will sink into the creases of
your palms
And lines of your face
Love will become a part of you
No one can steal this
If you give it so freely*

*The pain will stop, one day
It will seep out of you
Like motor oil from a leaking engine
Slowly but definite
And light will once again brighten
your insides
Like someone taking a picture
Of your heart with the flash on*

*You will remember the pain still
You know what it feels like
To have someone stomp on you
It makes you kinder
And less forgiving*

*When the weapon blows finally stop
The pain lasts for a season
But the mouth is quickest to healing
So you speak up and up and up
Until no one cannot hear your voice*

*You become the speaker for the
lost
A golden glow to walk home to
A candle in the infinite
A voice for those whose tongues still
bleed*

*When the pain stops
And all that is left are the faint white
lines
Of where they hurt you
You will remember to love too much
And how to hope too hard
And how to stop running*

*You will remember the hurting
But it will not be all you are
Anymore*

Poetry Honorable Mentions

|

A Midnight Snack

• Jiwoo Ho •

*Away from the solitary runners,
Behind the streets of the city of Seocho
Clubs are a jukebox for a small pub
Dimly lit and resting.*

*A piece of fried squid and beer:
Beer that's gone to sleep to the
Chatter of a father and his daughters,
Dried squid abandoned by the quarter of time
which they share before the summer ends.*

*A daughter who's earned her first flight home
Buys nothing for the table to share.
Cans lined up by the father 's end,
Dare not disturb their childhood spent
At a small pub for a midnight snack*





Mildew Mornings

- Charlene Chan

*The flowers still grow in the
front of the house,
but I have not seen them watered.
The sun is beating down on me
in a tempered rage that does
nothing to quell its thirst
as I step out of the underbrush
from last night.*

*It is odd, chilling almost, that
its gaze seems to permeate
the back of my skull as I skulk
through the leaves
of fallen drifters and broken twigs
that were nothing more than
collateral damage in the fire I
started yesterday.*

*Why do I keep returning to
this place?
The ashes have yet to grow cold
and my body, more than numb,
knows there is no sanctity in my
presence
of what soiled this holy ground I
dared call home.*

*I poke and prod at the mounds
of rubble
that threaten to say I've conquered it,
as I breathe the heavy smoke of
clear skies –
fumes of what I've done –
in the little space I have left to spare.*

*There it is, in the brightness of day,
a hint of a white petal
peeking through the dirt.
It blooms angrily through the clouds
as it taunts the heavens from which
it is cursed to drown.*

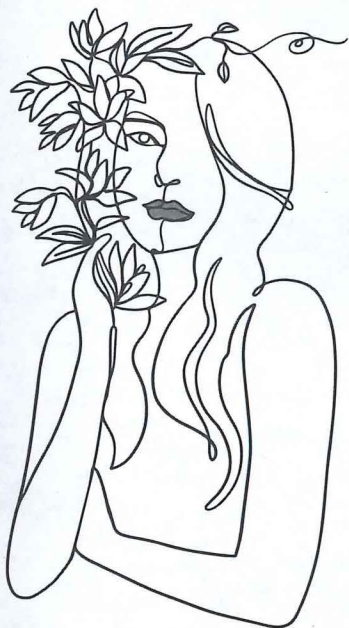
*It occurs to me that an aisle is
nothing without flowers;
and I am struck by lightning.*

Poetry Honorable Mentions

|

In Pictures

- Tristan Loncar



*In pictures
You look older.
To me
You are young
and alive
and you thrive
with every breath
I notice you take
without noticing you
take them.
like a picture
Or like
Taxidermy
You're breathlessly
alive.*

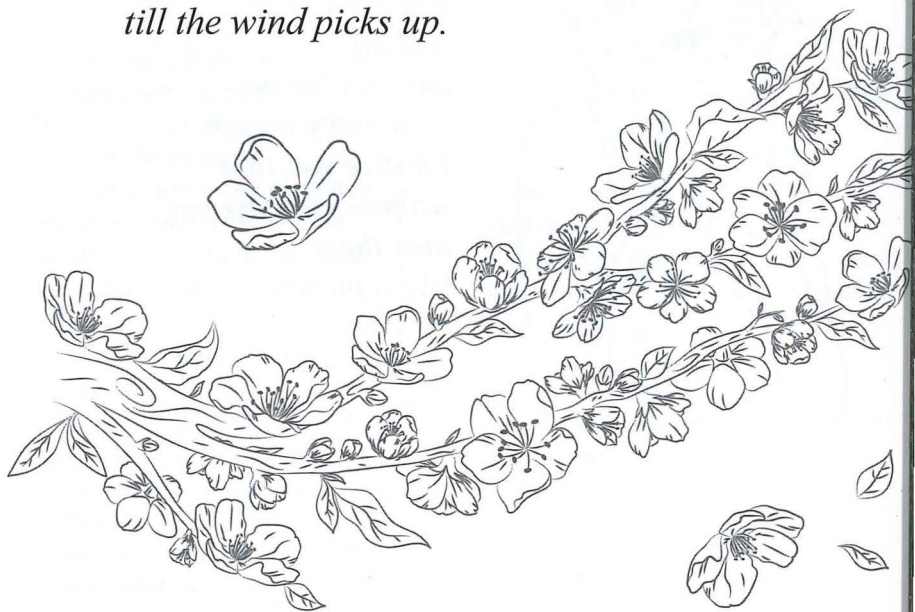
Poetry Honorable Mentions

|

Floating World: A Haiku

• Lucas Hames Siquehara •

*Floating world, you are
lilies and cherry blossoms—
till the wind picks up.*



W49 MAGAZINE 2023

POSTCARD STORY

04

Guilty

• Reese Rinas-Blais •

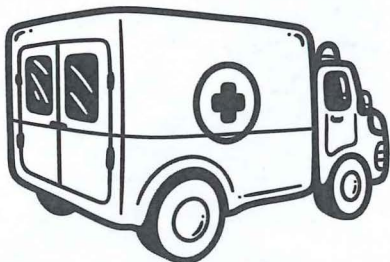
It started at work. The graze of a hand, or a compliment under the breath. Then it became something outside of work hours. A drive home or a home-made dinner. Then it started getting uncomfortable. Then it became “I don’t want to do this”. Suddenly it became very angry. It started at work again. The graze of a hand or an insult under the breath. Am I the only one seeing this? Then it became harassing phone calls, cruel text messages, twisted mind games, manipulations, and abusive remarks. Then there was the strength to tell HR. Then HR said, “you’ll just have to get over it”. Then there was regret I said anything. Then it became gossip. Then it became my fault. My fault I didn’t block, my fault I didn’t quit, my fault I didn’t ask for help, my fault they didn’t believe me, my fault I was so naive, my fault I didn’t see it coming, my fault I was 18 and he was 25. Then it became my thoughts. It became every other word out of my mouth, my nightmares, my anxiety, my music, my clothes, the air I would breathe, my entire life. It wouldn’t go away. Maybe this is all my fault. I didn’t know it would turn out this way I swear I didn’t. I was so alone, and he was there. How do you tell a bright-eyed child that most people are bad? But it’s my fault for falling in the trap.

Postcard Story : 2nd Place

Ambulance

• Christina Nakhla •

At eight or nine years old I still held my dad's hand. I was only just starting to sour on him. But, if he'd buy me an ice-cream, I could muster my spare hand for him to hold. A mutually satisfactory transaction. The state of our relationship was highly changeable. I largely focused on juggling his emotions to allow for optimal resource extraction. A tricky dance, but lovely when it worked out. This one Sunday afternoon it was pretty lovely. Just us two, walking home, making a pact to not tell the others we'd had ice-cream before dinner. I felt special. Safe under his attention. It was a last moment of peace and like the naive child I was, I didn't think to appreciate it. Sirens got louder and louder as the peace began to disperse and neither of us flinched because there were always sirens everywhere. Then they got very loud. Tearing past us. Then quiet again. I wondered aloud who the big van was destined for. Who was in trouble today? As we reached the corner of our street, we realized it was us. A young, limp, familiar body was being half carried, half walking, out of our house into the back of the big van by two older, ridged, un-familiar bodies. My dad dropped my hand and sprinted down the street. Away from me and towards chaos.



Butterfly

• Aliya Klughammer •



It was something about that house, I was sure. It was built by my grandfather's callused hands.

In the room where my father had slept as a child, there was a bed shrouded in cobwebs. It was safe, my grandmother told me, once. The bed didn't sit apart from the wall, but instead was a part of it. Smooth wood peeked out from the wall, sinewy and slimy with years of neglect.

The bones of the house protruding from its insides, like teeth.

I lay cradled inside that mossy cavity, and my dreams warped.

There was a butterfly, resting on a leaf. I had searched for it everywhere, in my dreamland - through empty shopping malls, and vacant parking lots. It had led me to the woods, where the trees stretched like fingers overhead. Knuckles knocked together, beckoning me deeper.

I was afraid that if I came too close, I would scare the butterfly away, so I remained frozen in agonizing stillness. I longed to kneel among the flowers and scrutinize the butterfly's beautiful wings. I balanced on the edge of the world - should I move forward and risk losing the butterfly, or remain where I was?

In the end, I sprang forwards out of the underbrush, cupping my hands so I could catch the creature if I was quick enough. Wings bent beneath my hands, snapping.

The butterfly had been dead, all along. A peaceful death - but a death all the same.

The fractures in my palms were brittle.

Created by :
Surbhi Kataria

W49 MAGAZINE 2023

Editorial

*A*fter 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