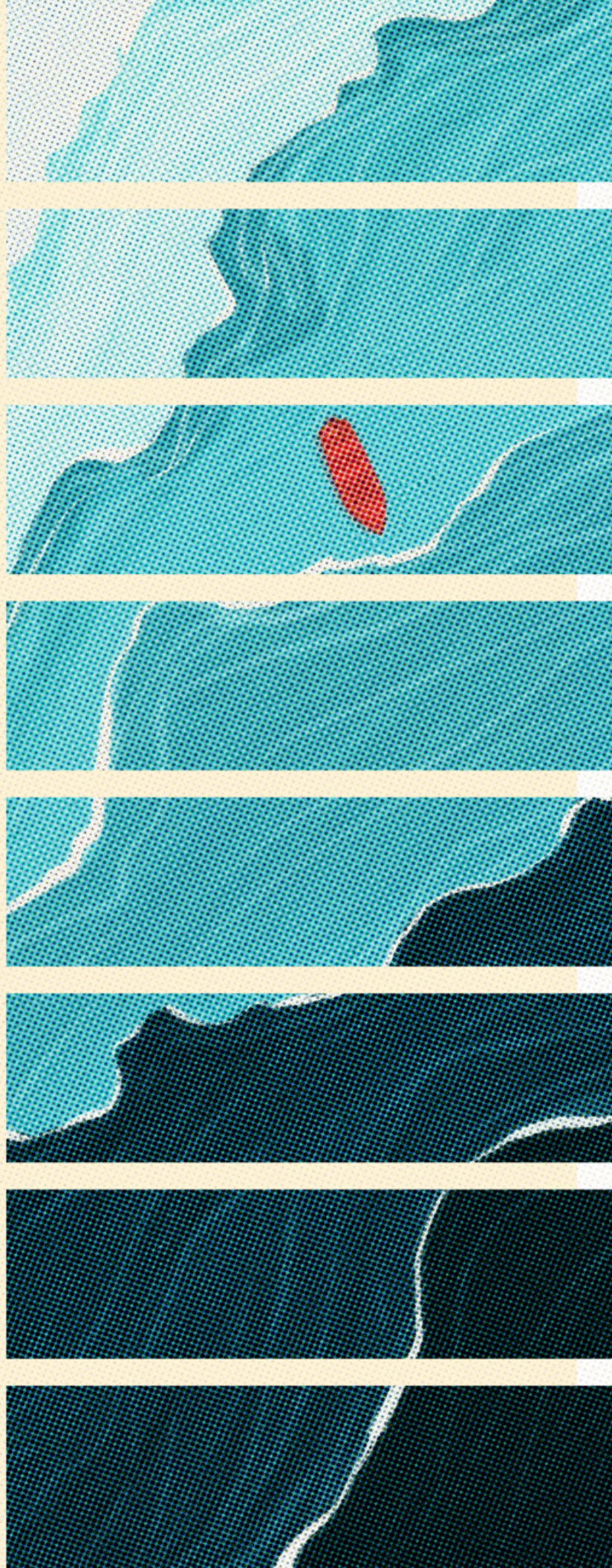


**W49**  
magazine





# Editorial

Welcome to the 2025 edition of Langara College’s W49, a magazine of award-winning poetry, fiction, creative non-fiction, and postcard stories written by current and former Langara students. I would like to express my gratitude to all the authors of the submissions for their enthusiasm and patience. As always, W49’s judges had difficult decisions to make in selecting the winning entries – proof again of the quality of literary talent that exists at Langara College!

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

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

*Guy Wilkinson*  
*Editor*

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Fiction



# 1<sup>st</sup> Place

## **Paraiso**

*Morris Arroyo*

It was a sentence of death. Kyle stood there transfixed by the piece of paper he was holding. “A new beginning,” they had said. That envelope – a call to leave, to escape, abandon. Hope against what? The bright white paper was stark against his suntanned skin. Looking out the window, he dreamt of the time he played with the neighbourhood kids and grew up with them. Hopscotch, dodgeball, tag, and more. They didn’t do that anymore, though. A little piece of paper won’t bring that back. He closed eyes and walked out of his home as a stay of execution. The door creaked of a thousand summers waiting to fall down. Tomorrow, he’ll finish that university application, tomorrow.

Kyle silently walked through the decaying village as he carried his father’s lunch. The road danced in the sweltering summer heat. Everyone had hung fish to dry outside in front of their homes. A tradition going back generations. The only thing different was no one laughing and smiling on the street anymore. Only a few ghostly eyes peeked through the windows, haunting, while distant deep echoes pounded through their feet. The village was secluded by green, nature threatening to swallow it whole. Waiting for its time to strike as it slowly became more hollowed out, as people left and moved on somewhere else. Revenge,



perhaps, but not today. Unlike the other houses, there were no fish hanging in front of his.

He walked towards the beach. A simple straight shot down from his home. The other end went on towards the school, the city. A road trodden down by all the other people who had left. He had worked hard, too. Distinction had a nice ring to it, apparently. Something about it helped guarantee scholarships or some such. But he couldn't leave, wouldn't leave. The beach in front of him, beautiful white sand as far as the eye could see. It was his paradise. He couldn't let go. It was dotted with white flecks that gleamed in the noonday sun, white as marble. Bleached clean, nothing could compare. His eyes took in the deathly beauty of it all. Once, he would have marked that beach with a stick, drawing his name, images of his father, his mother, his friends and his home. It hadn't always been like this. Better had a way of destroying everything after all.

Kyle had liked the sea, the waves, hadn't minded when the others were fishing, the engines, the vibrations and the noise, without the deep bass in the distance. His father had always respected the ocean, and he was the same. His father hadn't been like them. No matter how much harder it was, he had still used cast nets, like his father before him. He had continued to toil away and bake under the sun, even if he hadn't caught as much as before. That way had been passed down through their family like their boat, after all. Kyle still liked the sea. The shifting blue in the distance rippled in concert with the wind. The translucent view into the pristine sea floor underfoot, its warm wet embrace as you wade deeper and deeper. The natural glittering of the water as the sunlight shines upon the bay. On the beach was his father's boat, only half on the beach, ready to cast off again at a moment's notice. The cast nets were neatly piled beside the bow of the ship on the

sand. A large Styrofoam box on the other side. His father was arranging the boat, making space for Kyle as he moved a box underneath the plank that functioned as an extra seat. The boat was nearly empty now, except for the box and two long poles with netted loops on one end. Catching sight of Kyle, his father stops his work, smiles, and calls out to him.

"Perfect timing! I finished offloading the fish this morning. We'll have time to get more before the sunset."

Kyle smiled as he helped push the boat into the water. His lean body strained against the wood, he jumped quickly into the boat. He paused, balanced his footing, stared at his seat and demurely sat down. He wordlessly passed some lunch to his father, who took it and put it to the side indifferently as he pulled on the cord to start the engine. The unpleasant smell of gasoline still lingered; his father had probably just finished refilling the gas. Yamaha. It was new, he had just got it last year. He said it would help him catch more fish; after all, they were becoming fewer and farther between. The fishermen have to go to them now, rather than just waiting. Kyle stared into the horizon like he always did. Blue on blue, only the faint change in shade demarcated the line between. The clouds were rolling in from behind towards the horizon, different, breaking apart the perfect mirror of the sky and the sea.

He remembered how he and his father would have fished near the village, just off the beach, the crystal blue water revealing the beautiful formations underneath the waves. The endless and colourful schools of fish whirling through their forests of corals and anemones. He had swam to them from the beach, bright oranges that would dance and sting, hard reds that would flower and scrape, slippery purples that would hypnotize and poison. Mesmerizing but dangerous

living beauty that begets more life. Only truly visible under the dry summer sun.

It changed.

He hadn't bothered to look down. Couldn't look down. The weather. No longer the sunshine of May. The clouds had quickly rolled in. Blocking sunlight, nothing to reflect, not enough light to see. Nothing good could be seen. It was too late now anyway. They've gone further away, deeper into the sea, to the mounds people seldom touched.

"We're here"

His father had stopped them above a protruding line of corals barely visible under the waves, under the scant light of the sun. He slowed the engine to a choked sputtering. Kyle could barely see the coral's. It appeared to be a shade of red, crimson, he thought. The darkness of the depth was making it hard to figure out. He was prodded out of his reverie by the long pole his father held in his left hand, his net. He apprehensively put the net down beside him. Making an animal noise, he pushed out his jaw. He was pointing at the box under Kyle's seat while still holding the steering rod of the engine in his right hand.

Kyle pulled out the box. It was a simple but sturdy wooden box, unpainted and unmarked. Four holes in the corners where the nails that used to hold the lid in place once were. Nothing was remarkable about it except for its weight. Heavy. Kyle hesitantly opened the lid. Inside were reused glass bottles and a box of matches. Coca-Cola. He gingerly picked up a bottle from the bunch. It was half filled with grey clay-like material with a powdery red twine protruding through a cork-like cap. A fuse for a bomb. He looked up to see his father expectantly looking at him. A cold smile formed on his lips.

"Light it."

The bottle felt cold to the touch, so unlike the searing sun. Kyle looked down into the water. He identified the colours underneath now, flowering sculptures of pink carnation, vivid yellows swimming about in between stems, and iridescent blues prowling just above. A home. A whole world not unlike his own. He closed his eyes. His heavy hand moved slowly to return the bottle back into its cage. He was stopped by the voice and his father's gaze.

"This is for the better. We'll be able to pay for your tuition with this."

Time stretched. A silent breath. Without looking, he took the matches from the wooden box and started to light one with practiced hands. Like all the times he had lit a candle in the dead of night, to be able to read and write on a piece of paper. He stared at the fuse and lit. The red rope glowed and gave off sparks as it slowly burned. Under the darkness of the clouds overhead, its red glow marked him. He held on to it even as the fuse passed through the stopper.

"Throw it!"

He threw the bottle into the sea as hard as he could. As far away from that thing he saw under the water. To that home, that he wouldn't have anymore, didn't have anymore. It was still not far enough. It was never enough. He did not look into his father's eyes, he only stared down into the water. A thundering boom. A violent cloud. An angry spray. Stillness. The water returned to its original blue as if nothing had happened. A momentary dream. The sky and sea could be perfectly symmetric once again. A nightmare one can wake from. In rebuff, an insistent wave rocked the boat and woke him from his stupor. Kyle was forced to watch. The water turned red, that dark crimson he thought he saw. Dead fish rising to the surface with clouded eyes, mottled pale scales no longer as vibrant as they should have been. He closed his eyes and looked away.



He woke to the whoops and cheers of his father. Kyle picked up his net and proceeded to fish the souls from the water like Charon from the river Styx, dead eyes staring at him condemningly. He mechanically moved his arms, again and again. Again. The boat slowly filled with their carcasses. He didn't look below the waves, he couldn't. Catching sight of a stem of carnation amidst the floating death, he already knew. Unthinking, he swung his net over and grabbed that piece bobbing on the surface. Still pink and new like a newborn baby. He hoped beyond hope that at least it would keep its colour when he took it away.

Having completed their business, the man turned the boat around towards the house. The sky, mourning what he had wrought, painted the bay grey and cried. The sea in front of their village was dark, devoid of colour, of life, only mangled skeletons of coral, dead under explosions wrought by human hands. Sacrificed for a thousand tomorrows. The beach was no longer glowing white sand, but wet grey peppered with the sickly white of shattered fragments of corals. A cemetery of bones. Bleached dead. Upon landing, they filled their Styrofoam box. Glassy eyes stared back as limp, lifeless bodies slipped into the void. Finishing, they walked barefoot across the sand, hauling their casket out of that graveyard. Kyle winced as he took each step forward holding tightly to that piece of home he carried. Through the shards, each pinprick an incomplete penance for their sacrilege. His father, numb and uncaring, held most of the box's weight, bringing up the rear.

As they walked down the dirt road, people exited their houses and stared at them with knowing eyes. Arriving in front of the house, his father began hanging the fish they blasted proudly outside, under their rusting tin roof. Inside, Kyle stopped by the table where he had left that university application. He dug out a pen from his worn backpack. At the bottom of the page was a blank line, his

name already clearly typed below, waiting only for his writing, a signature to death for the murders he had committed. He was no different now. For the better, the man would have said. He held that piece of bleaching coral as he marked the paper as he had once marked the beach. This time, though, only with his name.

# 2<sup>nd</sup> Place

## Miracle

*Damien*

### *Preface*

Queer spaces are vital sanctuaries for self-expression, particularly for gay men, whose bold, unapologetic creativity—often fueled by what's known as "lavender rage"—challenges societal norms and reclaims identity. However, even in these spaces, "quieting effects" can emerge: subtle, often unintentional pressures that temper this raw expression in favor of emotional comfort or perceived appropriateness. For gay men, these quieting effects can be especially painful, as they often intersect with feelings of internalized homophobia—those deep-seated doubts, fears, and self-censuring instincts instilled by a lifetime of societal rejection. Lavender rage is not just an act of defiance against external forces; it is a way of confronting these internal struggles, reclaiming power from a world that teaches shame and invisibility. Yet, when queer spaces prioritize comfort over authenticity, it can send a message that even within these communities, their anger or pain is too much to bear.

These dynamics arise when discomfort with anger or defiance redirects focus from the message to managing feelings, gradually narrowing the space for authenticity. For gay men battling internalized homophobia, this subtle silencing can feel like a reinforcement of the very rejection they have fought so hard to overcome. It is not just about quieting their



voices—it's about invalidating their right to feel, to express, to exist fully and freely.

This is not about blame but awareness—recognizing how such effects can unintentionally stifle the voices these spaces are meant to amplify. True inclusivity means embracing the full spectrum of gay male expression, even when it challenges or unsettles. By holding space for discomfort rather than silencing it, queer spaces can honor their purpose: fostering liberation, connection, and unfiltered truth while creating a refuge where gay men can finally feel whole—free from both external judgment and the internal echoes of homophobia.

*Miracle*

The fields were mine, the wind mine, the earth under my hooves mine—and yet, to her, I was not enough. I saw it in her eyes, my owner, the woman who watched me not with affection but with ambition.

She wasn't like the others who came to the stables, cooing and admiring, petting my coat with idle hands. She was sharp, exacting, her gaze appraising me as though I were a puzzle she was determined to solve.

"You're too clever for this life," she said one day, her voice soft and cutting. She stood at the edge of my stall, her hand brushing my flank in a way that made my skin crawl. Her other hand held the riding crop, its black leather surface glinting in the low light.

When I didn't respond the way she wanted—when I didn't bow my head or move to her satisfaction—she struck me. The sharp snap of the crop against my side echoed through

the stall, leaving a sting that burned into my memory.

"You'll learn," she said, her tone almost gentle. "In time, you'll learn."

Her obsession grew quickly. She began to train me differently, tightening my bridle with a bearing rein that forced my head into an unnatural arch. The discomfort was constant, the strain biting into my neck and back.

"You look beautiful like this," she told me one day, after yanking the reins to jerk my head higher. Her smile was cold but triumphant.

When I resisted, when I tried to shake off the reins or pull away, she used the crop. A snap: sharp against my legs, my sides, my chest. Her strikes: always calculated. Her authority: unyielding.

The other stable hands stayed silent. They averted their eyes when she worked me too hard, when the welts from the crop lingered too long.

"He belongs to them," they whispered among themselves. "They can do whatever they want."

The bearing rein became a symbol of her control, but it wasn't enough for her. She wanted more.

The tests began under the guise of care. At first, it was just strange machines and needles—pricking my skin, drawing my blood. But soon the stable was no longer a stable. It became a laboratory, filled with the smell of chemicals and the hum of machines I couldn't understand.

"You're special," she told me, stroking my muzzle with one hand while holding the crop in the other. "You're destined for something greater than this."

The men and women in white coats obeyed her without question. They spoke in terms I dared not comprehend, but I could sense their unease.

"Is this ethical?" one of them asked, glancing at her nervously.

For someone to even pose the question seemed foreign to me.

She smiled, a tight, sharp smile that silenced any dissent. "This isn't about ethics. It's about possibility."

The process began with injections. The pain was immediate and overwhelming, my body convulsing as the chemicals coursed through me. My muscles burned, my legs twisted, my hooves splintered and bled as they dissolved into malformed shapes.

The crop was always there, a reminder of authority. When I tried to resist the white coats, she used it—not with anger, but with precision.

"Behave, Dorian," she said one day, using my new name for the first time. "You're better than this."

The surgeries followed, each one more invasive than the last. My body was broken and rebuilt, piece by piece, until I no longer recognized myself. The bearing rein was replaced with machines, wires and straps holding me in place as they forced my body into its new form.

When the transformation was nearly complete, she gave me the name.

"Miracle was a horse's name," she said, standing over me as I lay on the cold metal table. "But you're not a horse anymore. You're Dorian."

I tried to speak, my new mouth clumsy and

alien. "Dor...ian," I rasped, the word scraping out like a broken whisper.

She smiled, running her fingers along my jawline. "Good. You're learning."

I hated her more than I thought possible. I hated the way she looked at me, not as a being but as her creation. I hated the way the crop still hung at her side, a constant reminder of who I had been—and who she had forced me to become.

When she unveiled me to the world, she was radiant, basking in the attention of cameras and reporters.

"This is the future," she declared, one hand resting possessively on my shoulder. "The ultimate evolution of identity and biology." The reporters gasped and murmured as I stumbled into the light; my malformed body, to them, a grotesque parody of humanity. My legs, once strong and sure, trembled under my weight. My hands, awkward and uncoordinated, twitched at my sides.

Some called her work a miracle. Others... called me an abomination. But no one saw the pain. No one saw the way my body ached with every movement, the way my mind screamed in protest.

One night, I confronted her in the lab.

My voice was hoarse, barely more than a growl.

"Why?"

She looked at me with a mix of pity and disdain.

"Because I could."

Her words cut deeper than any blade. I lunged at her then, my incapable hands closing around her throat. In that moment, I felt



power—a fleeting sense of freedom. But she laughed, as my grip loosened.

“You think you’re strong?” she hissed, her eyes gleaming with cruelty. “You’re mine, Dorian. You’ll always be mine.”

The stable hands pulled me away, dragging me back to my glass-walled prison. She stood there, untouched, her hand absently petting the crop at her side.

She still visits me, her presence suffocating. She speaks to me as though I should be grateful, as though I should thank her for taking everything from me.

“You’re extraordinary, Dorian,” she says, her voice dripping with pride. “You’re my proudest achievement.”

I don’t respond. I can’t. I spend my days staring at the walls, my mind filled with memories of what I’ve lost: the wind, the fields, the freedom of running without reins or crop.

But, those memories feel like they belong to someone else. I am not Miracle. I am not even Dorian.

I am nothing.

And she, my creator, my master...

She still holds the reins.

# Honorable Mentions

## Mr. Inkblot

*Matt Daniel Sinlao*

“Now tell me: what do you see? There are no right or wrong answers.”

I was simply passing by. I look across the hallway, and there’s people. Better not to be caught staring, so my sight is on the floor. Today—yes—today, I was thinking—

No one cares.

“Hey, hey, haven’t you heard? Human rights don’t technically exist. Since it’s a social construct, and all.”

“That test the other day sucked ass. I was thinking the teacher doesn’t care. At least, they don’t seem to. You’d think they’d have taken this job for a reason. You’d think they’d at least be able to speak good English. Instead, half the class is failing and we’re shitters eating dirt.”

“I would like to acknowledge and thank the Musqueam Nation, ‘The people of the river grass’ and all other Hul’qumi’num speaking language groups on whose unceded and traditional territory we live, learn, and teach.”

“Each day is its own trouble. Why worry about the future? I can’t think of anything anymore. Nothing’s new, I guess. One of these days, some mistake will be made, some war will start, and



soon enough we're dropping bombs on each other. I'm asking you. Tell me: why should I worry? And didn't you hear? Humanity is done for."

Suddenly, I passed through the middle of the hallway. Passing glances. Passing faces. Feeling feelings. Strange feelings. Sickly feelings. I feel sick.

"That girl the other day—damn. You saw her too right, what'd you think? Right? I'd totally—"

"It's important to respect one another. It's important to care for one another. I was thinking, that's all there is to it, isn't there? I might be missing a few things, and maybe there is more to it. But together, we'll get through things. Together. Of this, I'm sure. At least, we should be vulnerable to one another. At least—"

"When will we be meeting up?"

"Okay—"

"Great."

The floor looked great, great, as I glanced at pieces of lint, dust, and the like. I've got a hole in my shoe; I shouldn't use these anymore, although I couldn't be bothered. Thoughts parading about. I have something I'd like to tell you about. I'd like to tell you all about it. I'd like to tell you all about it. 'Cause all in all, the world looks great, great; another day to sully.

"Yes—if I must state presently, my opinion so—certainly, some disease of unruly kind has afflicted them. For why would one wear black—all black—black from the base of the neck—black to the bottom of the shoe? Yes, you see—pouring out of their very soul—a disease has ridden them—a disease of the mind, and of the flesh. Their shoulders droop low. Their face is an unwelcoming scowl,

a greeting to their friends, the demons. Their presence is like hot coals—you feel as though the fire—the fire of hell—the unending, unquenching, untenable, hellflame—is ever raging within them. Yet—their heart is cold—yes—cold as the pale of Winter—cold as a frozen river—for in their soul, rivers run no longer—you feel the deathly cold—like the freeze of a spinal shiver—for cold is their love—and cold is their world."

"Yes, you see it—don't you see? Look, look." For their eyes—yes, those eyes—when one meets those eyes—instantly, an affliction, a kind of curse, a malevolent curse; from their companion—the devil—is thrust straight upon you. For whenever one meets those eyes—those deep, dark, eyes—you must wonder—how truly deep—of that deep darkness—that deepening, darkening, darkness—how deep has this one stared—so deeply—into that deep dark darkness." "Yes—you see, that one—that one is no longer human—that one is simply a corpse. A walking, talking, bleeding corpse—their heart beats, but there is no rhyme—there is no rhythm. Only the spilling, decaying, guts of a death-black corpse—and a slouching walk—and the dizzying stride of one who is forever lost—that one, I tell you, is no longer with us—we lost them long ago."

...Not.

A friend—said hi—passing by.

Happiness is simple—isn't it? I wonder what happened along the way. I must've been deceived.

But, we're all human. Whatever that means. "We're all human." But that's just a bunch of bullshit. Cause that's all this is. All of this. My head is killing me. I hate it. I think I should stop thinking anymore. It's like—it's like a thorn is stuck inside my head. I hate it. I hate it, I hate it— Yes, that's it. I was walking by—that's all. I was simply walking along, that's

it. I was simply walking along, watching—with shame in my heart, and death by my side—at tall cedar trees of deep green, that stand firm to winds of melancholy—at birds overhead that fly forever and ever, near silk-white clouds that water the corners of the earth—and at that beautiful, transient, yet everlasting golden-blue sky through that narrow corner window.

Yes, that is it—that is all. I will let them think whatever they want of me; that's who I am.

"That's all I really am," I tell myself.

And at that moment, I made a face—yes—a face—a face no one will ever see.

## Beautiful

*Naomi Peyret*

Iris had a voice that made you think of ribbons, wax stamped envelopes and white satin nightgowns. She sang as if she wrote in cursive ink, pouring thought into every word with her lips stained with red wine. And her verses flowed like honey. I could not carry a tune; I sang like nails scratching a chalkboard. I was fascinated by her. Men stopped to watch as she breezed on by, a hot knife through butter. She knew the effect she had on them and played along. She swayed her hips, dancing to invisible music. She sang for them, knowing they'd throw roses if they could. She was a charismatic young woman who worked as an in-house jazz singer at an upscale restaurant downtown. She wore elegant gowns every night. She was a siren, and everyone there was hooked. I was the one she reeled in. I cannot tell you why. "You simply must come for tea," she said to me one day. I told her I'd love to, secretly dying to know her. In retrospect, it should have seemed strange to me that she would invite a total stranger to her home. We set a date, and I waited a week with bated breath. When the day came I dressed as fancy as I could. I knew I would be nothing compared to Iris, always. My stomach sank. She would have fresh flowers in every room. A wonderful garden. A grand piano.

I took a taxi to the address she had given me. The house was exactly as I had imagined: impeccable, a front garden in which she grew lily-of-the valleys, an arch entwined in roses and thorns. The house itself was enormous, a palace. White pillars like the Pantheon guarded two magnificent wooden doors. The house was a classic, much like its owner. I knocked hesitantly, unsure she would be able to hear me in such a large house. She answered immediately, with a pearly smile.



“Please, come in!” So I did. I followed her in. The doors shut behind us and as I took in my surroundings I looked back at the entrance longingly. I could tell I was the only visitor she’d ever had, in that moment as I breathed it all in.

There were roaches, rats, and maggots on rotten food. Half-eaten fruit littered the floor. Trash covered every inch. It was a sea of decay. The house smelled of rot. I was frozen in my disgust, rooted to the floor. Iris had moved to another room.

“How do you take your tea?” She called. I did not want tea. I did not want to see her kitchen. I wanted to go home.

“Nothing in my tea please,” I replied, a silent plea. Please. Nothing, nothing. Nothing. “Alright, dear.” I remembered who it was. This was Iris. Perhaps I was hallucinating. Reluctantly, I followed her voice.

I wanted to cry. Rats had taken over her kitchen, too. Rats and roaches and insects I could not name for the life of me, they had stayed hidden to my eyes until this moment. I felt bile rise in my throat and swallowed it back down, feeling its sting. Among the rats, the rot, the roaches, there she sat. Like a flower. I could not understand what I was seeing. She set the tea down on a table occupied by two large rodents. They sniffed at my tea. I sat down, polite and uncomfortable.

She went back to the counter for an apple. Took a bite. I could see from where she bit that it was writhing with maggots. She chewed and swallowed, seemingly uncaring. At that moment I excused myself, said I had to go. I got up and ran out the door, then threw up in a hedge in her front garden as passers-by stopped to watch. I felt humiliated. I felt as disgusting as the house I had left behind.

I was sick the whole night. I came back home and did not sleep for the three days that followed.

The next time I saw my Iris she was dead, holding her beautiful, poisonous flowers. It was a very public affair and had everyone’s attention. All over the news. She looked so alluring, so serene in that photo; that image of her corpse would circulate for years to come. She would have loved it.

The night I read about her, I wept uncontrollably. And I couldn’t tell you why, but I had the sudden urge to look in the mirror as I did so. My breathing slowed, I felt a sudden calm as I sat there, admiring myself: lips wet, eyes glistening, cheeks flushed red. I look very pretty, I thought, as lone crystalline tears caressed the sides of my face. I only wish there was someone there to see.

## The Watchers of Wisteria Manor

*Justine Mah*

When Jamie entered the hotel perched beneath the mist drifting over Salem, the air felt heavy in her lungs. The manor was a labyrinth laced with mystique, withholding secrets between the boughs of ivy cascading from the ceiling. Before Evangeline Roberts fell from the penthouse suite and collided head-first with the concrete edge of the pool, Wisteria Manor had gained notoriety for its alleged recurrences of roofies and larceny. Victims were hesitant to disclose what had happened to them; they couldn’t remember anything, DNA was absent, security footage had erased its memory of the truth. Although the pattern had seemed to pause, the tabloids remained flooded with gossip. Rumours surrounding the CEO’s unfortunate demise, the idiosyncratic woman behind the hotel, and the circulating idea of a curse plagued the town.

As she looked down at a nearby armchair, Jamie scanned over an article titled: “GET ROOFIED AND RAIDED AT WISTERIA MANOR.” She flipped the cover back to its original position, revealing a photo of her Aunt Ruth attempting to block a camera with an outstretched hand. “Is Ruth Marsden a Witch?” it read. “Here’s What We Know About Her ‘Cursed’ Hotel.” Jamie sighed. She’d travelled from Hartford to write her next novel – to explore the same crime she’d fallen victim to at a frat party freshman year. A death was more than what she’d bargained for. Could they be connected?

The silence in the dark foyer was broken as two detectives exited the central beaded archway. When the front door shut, a tall

woman in a long black dress emerged. She shrieked excitedly and ran up to hug Jamie. Aunt Ruth shared the same toothy smile as her father, and her wild curls had turned grey. Her smoky purple eyeshadow matched the amethyst pendant around her neck.

“I’m so glad you’re here!” she exclaimed. “Let me show you to your room!”

Jamie wheeled her suitcase down the dim corridor, admiring the ornate frames decorating the midnight-green interior. Warm-toned fairy lights draped down its surface, while a floral chandelier shimmered overhead. When they reached the second floor of the hotel, they walked until meeting an ebony door with a star engraved on the glass partition. Aunt Ruth pressed a small card against the key scanner to open it.

“You’ll need this to unlock both sides of the door,” she explained. “There aren’t any cameras in the hallways, so it’s just an extra safety precaution.”

The suite was like her apartment, equipped with a bedroom, living area, and a kitchen. A bouquet of dried flowers sat on the side table, accompanied by a jewel-toned Tiffany-style lamp. Black lace curtains surrounded the rear window, softly illuminating a plum couch and two celestial throw pillows.

Despite spending the day driving and exploring the town with her aunt, Jamie found herself unable to sleep that night. She flicked on the string of lights above the bed and stared at the rose-printed wallpaper. She couldn’t stop thinking about Evangeline: why she jumped, the company she left behind, how her husband must have felt when he received the news. A paternity test had confirmed that she was pregnant with their first child when she died. She’d reportedly been in town for a business trip and had planned to stay until the second week of December. She’d barely made it through the first.



Jamie lifted her phone off the nightstand. She hadn't checked it since arriving at the hotel. A new article popped up: Evangeline's handprints revealed that she likely didn't jump; she was pushed. Jamie's face grew pale as a lump formed in her throat. She began to scroll through photos of Evangeline. The thirty-five-year-old was regularly photographed in cream blazers with her blonde hair twisted into an updo. The dangling leaves on her lily-of-the-valley earrings accentuated her hazel eyes. People made all kinds of comments about her death, stating what would have happened had the circumstances been different. Jamie rolled her eyes. Saying "would've, could've, should've" wouldn't change anything. She's dead.

When she woke the next day, it was half-past twelve. Still somewhat unsettled from last night's discovery, Jamie had lunch at a cafe before returning to the hotel to write. She traced her fingers along the sill of the stained-glass windows and inhaled the faint scent of lavender in the lounge, settling into a seat where she could see the nearby bar. The bright light emitting from her laptop juxtaposed the onyx walls and the velvet stools. Small tealights rested beneath the standing drink menus, the shadows concealing ceramic owl statues. She had written for awhile before walking to Ruth's office to see if she wanted to grab dinner.

The wooden door was left ajar. Her computer was off, and a stack of papers lay beside the tasselled lamp. A bottom desk drawer was open – the silver key still stuck in the lock. In its corner, two iridescent flower beads caught Jamie's eye. She edged closer to the desk and squinted, recognizing the sage leaf and golden hook almost immediately.

"Whatcha doing?" Aunt Ruth asked with a wide grin, shocking Jamie. She was standing by the door with her hands stuffed into the pockets of her navy peacoat. When she

removed them, Jamie's eyes darted to the leather gloves she'd been wearing.

"Oh! Just wanted to... ask if you had an extension cord?"

After thanking her aunt she ran out of the room, heart pounding. Her throat felt tight and her mind spiralled. She found herself in the corner of the bar drinking shots of tequila. She would know how to cover it up, Jamie thought, slightly tipsy. She knows this hotel better than anyone. Her palms were sweaty. The kooky owl figurine beside her stared intently with its giant eyeballs. Jamie tried to flip it over, but it wouldn't budge. The countertop trembled as a tall man took a seat next to her.

"Do I know you from somewhere?" he asked, leaning in. "You look familiar."

She brushed her hair out of her face and turned towards him. He was good-looking, with chestnut hair and a charming smile. His blue eyes had distracted her from the small scar on his left cheek. She figured he'd just come from work, as he was dressed in a collared shirt and tie.

"You do too, but I can't seem to place it," she smiled. "I'm Jamie."

"Cam," he replied, peering into her grey eyes. "You've got good taste. Tequila's my favourite, too."

From the shadows, Ruth's gaze narrowed in on the two. She didn't doubt Cam was interested in Jamie; the way he looked at her and tilted his head while listening said it all. Her stomach turned as Jamie reciprocated, mirroring his actions, playfully brushing her hand against his, and biting her lip ever so slightly when she giggled. They were sitting so close that the edge of her jeans were touching his ankles. She let it go on for about two hours before pulling her phone out of

her pocket. She dialed Jamie's number and watched as she stepped away from the bar. "Come to my office right now," Ruth said.

"Don't let him see you."

When Jamie opened the office door, Ruth immediately shut it behind her. "I can see you watching, you know," Jamie said in a hushed whisper. "What's going on?"

"You need to stay away from Detective Whitley," Ruth declared. "I don't trust him." "Cam?" she asked with a furrowed brow. She suddenly recalled the two men she'd seen in the lobby yesterday. "First of all, I don't trust anyone. He didn't even mention being a detective."

"Well, you need to trust me. He's dangerous." Jamie let out an exasperated laugh and crossed her arms over her chest. "I know you have that earring in your drawer. Soon enough, the police are gonna start looking for it."

"That?" She unlocked the drawer and pointed to the earring. "I picked that up by the entrance."

"It's Evangeline's." Jamie pulled out her phone and zoomed in on a photo.

Ruth's eyes widened. She began typing aimlessly on her keyboard and clicked on different tabs with her mouse. "Son of a bitch," she muttered. "He came in here to retrieve footage from that night. Must've altered the tape." Security footage had shown the earring magically appear on the ground, and the moment she'd retrieved it. She explained that the cameras had recently been changed to reset every two weeks instead of one; he'd probably assumed the settings were the same based on previous cases.

"Why would Cam do that, though?"

She rubbed her eyes. "I think he's behind all of the criminal activity in this hotel. I just can't prove it." Ruth believed that Cam and Evangeline were having an affair. She'd seen Evangeline approach him at the bar back in August and had spotted them together ever since. Cam was a regular customer and a heavy drinker. Before Evangeline, Ruth had seen him with many girls; he'd sit in the corner of the bar, buy them a drink, they'd talk, and go upstairs. From afar things looked consensual because they were conscious when they'd left. But the timeline was strange – too coincidental. The assault claims had stopped that summer, once he took a liking to Evangeline; she was different. But there was no evidence to back her intuition. "Are you saying you think he killed her?"

Ruth nodded. "I have a plan. I've set up hidden cameras to see behind the menus. Whatever you do, don't drink anything. Just get him to your room."

Jamie could hear her heart beating in her ears as she returned to the bar. "Sorry about that!" she apologized, brushing her hand against Cam's shoulder before sitting down. There were two salt-rimmed shots on the counter filled with amber liquor. A lime wedge balanced on each glass. "Gosh, I'm flattered, but I think I've had enough to drink tonight," she said, breaking eye contact.

"Totally understand," Cam grinned. "Would you at least do a lime with me?"

Jamie smirked and nodded. After Cam drank the shot, they bit into the sour fruit and winced simultaneously. They laughed and were silent for a moment. Jamie leaned in and glanced at his lips before looking up at him again. "I had a great time tonight. Did you... want to continue this elsewhere?"

Cam placed his palm on her lower back as they walked upstairs to her room. When they arrived at the door, Jamie took a shaky breath



as he moved in to kiss her. For a second she was tempted; but as she pictured him pushing Evangeline off the balcony, her blood ran cold. She lightly tugged on his tie and pulled him closer. “So, tell me,” she breathed.

“Why’d you do it?”

“Do what, darling?” he whispered back.

With her other hand, she scanned the card and twisted the doorknob, revealing Aunt Ruth on the couch. She dropped the key into her purse when he wasn’t looking.

“What is this?” he scoffed.

“We know about Evangeline,” Jamie said, guarding the door. “And the roofies.”

“I know you’ve been sneaking drugs behind the drink menus – editing the footage like you’re some kind of slick guy. What kind of vendetta do you have against women to do something like this?” Ruth questioned, standing up.

“Woah!” he exclaimed, putting his hands up. “Better watch what you say, Ruth. You know what this town thinks of you.”

She spied a cigarette burn on his wrist as his sleeves shifted down. “Mommy do that to you?” Ruth gestured.

He looked away and flinched a little. “You don’t know fuck about my family,” he spat. “So why’d you do it?”

Jamie’s vision became blurry. This didn’t feel like anxiety – something was wrong. The waves in her stomach were as aggressive as her pulse. She wiped beads of cold sweat from her forehead and leaned against the doorframe. As the lights flashed, she was taken back to that night in college – the crowd, the deafening silence when the world went dark. She was just as scared now as she

was in that basement twelve years ago. Ruth noticed Jamie’s limp frame in the corner of her eye and laughed with disbelief. “You drugged my niece? I told you not to drink anything!” she yelled.

“The limes,” Jamie mustered.

Ruth reached into her pocket and pulled out a gun, pressing it to Cam’s temple. Rage swept through her like lava. “I’m not gonna ask you again. Why’d you do it?”

He held his breath with a locked jaw, a vein pulsating in his forehead. “She was supposed to leave him,” he snarled, catching Ruth recoil slightly. He quickly knocked the gun to the floor before grabbing her by the throat. “God,” he laughed as Ruth gasped for air. “Kids ruin everything.”

The room went dim as Jamie pulled the lamp from the plug. With all her strength, she bashed the mosaic lampshade against Cam’s skull. He fell to the ground, blood pooling from his head. Jamie’s hands jittered as her back slid down the door. Ruth coughed as she crawled towards her.

“Don’t worry,” she murmured, hugging Jamie. “The owls captured everything.”





Poetry



# 1<sup>st</sup> Place

## Scotch Tape

*Evan Marklinger*

I grab clear scotch tape and lay it against the railing of my college stairwell.

I let it sit for a moment like food freshly out of the microwave, as if a minute will make a difference.



And when I finally work up the nerve to rip it off, I am met with thousands upon thousands of fingerprints.

At first glance, perhaps the tape is just covered in a million curved lines.

But the closer I look, the more it makes sense to me, the more the curved lines become a story.



And running my fingers over the sticky braille, I learn a new language:

A language of a thousand hands.

Hands who forgave the ones they shouldn't have,

hands who held their loved ones before they took their last breath,



and the ones who took their firsts together.

The ones when they kissed over the stairwell,  
leaned against the cold metal railing as if  
to grasp

that this moment was real.

When love felt like a fantasy,

and they had to use another sense just to  
remind themselves that

love wasn't a dream.

That the freezing metal was a taste of reality,  
a taste of true love.



And as I analyze these prints, I think of the  
fingers that stood as shields to the sun when  
it tried to

peek its way through the windowpanes in  
attempt to blind the seeing.

I think of the fingers that brushed against  
the prickled chins, and the soft ones that  
met their ever so forgiving lips.

I think of the fingers who still bled of ink from  
the poems they wrote in class,

all the calluses caused by pressing too hard.



And then I wonder if they thought of this too,  
I find this thought romantic as I walk across  
the tape with a flashlight.

My pink nail polish reflecting against the  
light, dying all the prints a sheer fuchsia.

I am oddly intimidated by this timeline  
of prints.

For there are thousands of people who  
once leaned against this railing, thousands  
of curious

minds who became something when they  
left this stairwell.



And as I reach the end, I stick my finger against  
the tape, leaving my mark on this timeline.

For like a line of a thousand fingers prints,  
this poem too, is to be continued.

# 2<sup>nd</sup> Place

## The Great Big scarCity

*Iris Honey*

There's a stench that lingers on the palm of  
my hand

my hand in greeting

the scent w a f t s to my nose.

Itnevergoesaway.



I recall the copper scent of blood and

How my mother would crawl on the

streets of the G R E A T B I G C I T Y

Searching for them

Scraping her knees on the concrete

Dragging her fingers through liquid red

To see what copper penny

she could find to spend

No, the desperation never went away



And the smell of copper blood always stays in  
my mind

and in my hand

As I buy my groceries at the street corner

and I eat pineapples on 5th avenue.

Streets blur as the scent steams my vision

Especially on hot summer days

When the honeylight shines on my palm

Exposing the rotten flesh that pains

My little hand, crippling into itself

Like my mother crawling on the concrete

Begging for anyone in the G R E A T B I G C I T Y

To spare her a single penny

I still remember it

It's a scent you can't wash away

# Honorable Mentions

## He Was Talking About Us

*Evan Marklinger*

We sat under the willow tree and we spoke while the world stood behind us watching, the way people do when there is a movie being filmed in their neighborhood. Only this film isn't a romance but a coming of age. This movie has a boy and a girl and maybe they are in love, maybe she knows the notes of his cologne like the backs of her scratched hands, but their story doesn't end there.

And we sit here like summers don't go bad, like nothing ever expires, not the berry stains on his denim jeans or the scar at the corner of my right eye. Our lips curling over beer cans like dollar bills crumpled up between fists, the beer we claimed we'd never drink but picked up the habit, like it was just something to do. I hang my limbs over his, as if the scent of blackberries mixed with the sweetness of his sweat was something I would've bathed in if I could. And I listen to his heart sing some kind of song I only ever heard when he spoke. Each verb held a beat, each vibration in his throat held two. His hair picking each thread of the sun-up and placing it back down like a hand brushing over guitar strings.

We knew we were growing old; we knew that nothing ever did last forever, but it was more the fact that none of us, nor him or I, cared enough to talk about it. There was power in



our silence, a little unspoken rule to never talk of expiration dates unless it was about milk, because that was gross.

And I know what I said, but I couldn't stop myself from telling him that I wish to never give up on this. On holding the calluses of his rough hands and forcing some sort of softness out of them without strength. On finding weaknesses within his tough chest and weaving my way into them so they may never crack.

“Okay” he says.

And just this once, my chin turning upwards in hope, this coming-of-age film turned into a romance. Not a cheesy one, not one that makes throwing popcorn sound appealing, I mean the kind that jerks a little tear from your eye. For when I investigated his, I knew that he was agreeing to both. To give me the power to ruin this as fast as it came, but to also let me love him without an apology roaming in the air between our lips. I grab his hand and pull mine back giggling to find a blackberry smashed in my palm. Wiping it on my jeans, he laughs “blackberry stains never really expire, do they? Not on denim anyway.”

## Greyscale

*Justine Mah*

Shrouded by the overcast sky,

the concrete city watches echoes of humanity with its fairy light windows:

cigarette smoke,

storm clouds on skin,

silhouettes of shadows and reflections in puddles.



The SkyTrain is a shield from the downpour carrying strangers with faded tattoos and bleeding mascara.

One fiddles with the runs in her tights

while another tries to viciously rub graphite off the sides of his palms

– the metallic sheen stationary,

spreading like fog on a bleak winter morning.



Everyone shares the same crescents under their eyes

and probably own some sort of Polaroid covered in dust.

We are ghosts of people we once knew.

Something in the solitude unravels all of it.

## Fruit

*Rachel Litt*

Under the fluorescents

the fruit sits

In the chilled air of the supermarket

Patiently on display

Every day they are sized up

A comparison catwalk of which is worthy to take home

Grapes are sampled

Bananas are cradled

The melons are tapped

Lemons are shown the most love seasonally

And strawberries in their clear cartons are tipped and turned every which way

But gentler creatures

An apple or a nectarine

Their bruises are for others to poke at

Are they shallow enough to cut off?

Or are they too far gone?

Their flesh is for others to grasp at  
Is it firm?

Or yielding?

Is there enough to sink your teeth into?

Ripe enough

Juicy enough

Good enough

And today

As a peach

All I wanted was to roll off the pile

Tumble to the floor

And hide in a corner

To be bruised and battered in peace



Dried Plum

Ewan McNeil

Your little plum heart ,  
  
dried by time  
  
Reminds in small bursts of a fructose breath  
  
Which lingers still on my longing tongue  
  
Each bite of you like  
  
small fruit slices entering in  
  
and out of a bottomless cup mind  
  
Reminding me of how you danced  
  
Such a happy, bouncing mess always  
  
Stressed out but with a smile on that  
  
Slipped out like bouts of summer in the snow  
  
And I wonder how long until I forget that too  
  
I brush your hair, squeeze your shoulder, your  
thighs, I wrap you in my arms yet you still  
don't move

Cut me a blood orange  
while you talk about the  
things you care about

Evan Marklinger

He stood there and watched me like there  
was lipstick on my chin, like there was some-  
thing he knew that I didn't. The ginger in  
his hair pulling the blood out of a thousand  
oranges and wearing it proudly while doing  
so. He held that kind of power, the power to  
turn acidic things into something sweet. His  
freckles unbuttoning like a polo-shirt on the  
bridge of his nose, the kind a girl would want  
to make poetry out of.

And there I was, my big blues eyes forcing a  
confession out of those lips of his, but not the  
kind that would deem him guilty, just inno-  
cent. Innocent of looking at a girl, watching  
the way she spoke softly, and noting that  
she hates yellers. Listening intently, to catch  
the little rasps in her throat, and reminding  
himself that all the roughest parts of her still  
manage to come out gently.

I'm not sure what it was or what I saw when  
I looked at him, when my blue eyes paired  
up with his brown, but I was sure that it was  
silent. I mean his existence was loud, I noticed  
him, sure I did. But I also knew that the two  
blue birds in our hearts, the kind Charles  
Bukowski spoke about, escaped when we  
exchanged words. That was something I was  
sure of.

And the sweetness of a blood orange existed  
on my tongue for the rest of the day.

Memory Threads

Justine Mah

Endless piles of iridescent glitter cover the  
floor.

Layers of silk and tulle drape down the walls  
full of constellations,

embroidered flowers, and beads of sweat.

◆

I lace the backs of dresses like a madwoman  
as girls weave in and out of dressing rooms,  
simultaneously memorize a dozen names,  
and codes, and colours

while scurrying around on my tiptoes.

◆

My feet ache, and I can't help but think about  
Claire

and the last night we ever spoke

– the picture they took of us at prom with our  
wistful smiles and watercolour eyes,

Claire with her stilettos and me in my Docs:  
swore I'd never wear high heels again.

◆

We were always made for fractured promises.

In my mind, we fight one more time

and I tell her I felt just as used as the  
mannequin

Susan rips an arm off of.

I pick sparkles out of my hair

and secretly scribble these thoughts on a  
Post-it,

lulled by the monotonous hum of the seam-  
stress' sewing machine.

I think about Claire and wonder what she'd  
think if she saw me now,

happy, happier, without her.





**Nonfiction**



# 1<sup>st</sup> Place

## Lost and Found

*Rachel Litt*

Do you feel listless? Burnt Out? On auto pilot? Like you are moving through the world as a shell of yourself? Like a valley of unimaginable depth is sitting at the pit of your stomach every waking hour? Lucky for you, I have compiled an easy-to-follow 13 step plan to get you feeling some semblance of self again! Happy reflecting!

- Notice you are lost

This looks different for everyone, but common signs include: Staring aimlessly out at the world. Life feeling like the fields out a car window, whizzing by without the chance to pick out any details. The landscapes you are most familiar with are the rolling hills of dirty clothes on your bedroom floor, and the mysterious greenery beginning to grow in the neglected containers of your fridge. Your most intimate relationship is the one with your pillow and your toothbrush and shower barely deserve the label of acquaintance.

- Wallow

This is a step which comes naturally to many. It is most effectively done in bed with the



covers pulled over your head. See child hiding from monsters for a visual aid. Let the darkness and warmth pull at those strings that were holding you together and feel yourself begin to unfurl. Release your hold on the chasm that you carry in your gut and relax the whirring machine of your mind. Give your heart a gentle hug as you dig through your chest for the culprit of concealed sadness and self-inadequacy, shame. You will find it buried deep and realize that the all-consuming feeling is actually a pebble, the size of a pea. Stay there, open and wounded, in defiance of that pebble and the lies that it has tricked you into believing about yourself. You won't know when this step is truly over, but when you begin to wonder what day, or what time it is. That is your sign. Gather yourself up again as best you can and tie your strings into pretty bows.

- Emerge from your cocoon

Look at the rest of this list and feel overwhelmed by how many steps you have left. Go back to step 2, then skip to 4. You will feel yourself slip back to step 2 in different ways throughout; that is ok. This journey is not a race, it is a puzzle.

- Take a bath

First, cover the shower head. You do not need his many eyes staring down at you in that judgemental way he has developed since you've been visiting less. Then tenderly lather your limbs the way you would for a child. Use a plastic cup to scoop up the water and rinse the bubbles away. Notice how it relieves you of what has built up that you could not previously see. Before you drain the tub, submerge your head and torso. Listen to the quiet stillness, and the sound in your ears that has changed from a ringing to a gentle

hum. Keep this as a reminder that there is still peace to be found in this world.

- Step outside

You do not need to go anywhere. Just notice how the spring air kisses your face, see if you can hear any bird song, then go back inside. Do this every day, each time you notice something new write it down on a list posted on your fridge. The grass that springs from a crack in the sidewalk, a bee with pollen covered legs flying by you. Test how far past the door your feet are willing to take you. Let them show you that you can climb mountains, without ever leaving your neighbourhood.

- Write a letter to your younger self

Do not apologize for what you have done, or things you have not yet accomplished. They will understand. Instead, write down all the things that make you grateful you didn't kill yourself in high school. No matter how small, how insignificant, write it down. Do not feel bad if you can't think of many things. More will come.

- Stare at the moon

Go searching for an unobstructed view of her one night. Lay in the grass basking in her glow, admiring her willingness to change and her reliability amongst uncertainty. Whisper a secret to her and wait till she gives you one back. Leave an offering of lavender and stones as thanks; add this to your letter.

- Buy flowers for yourself

Admire their delicate petals and thorny stems, their brilliant colours and unruly

foliage. In spite of their shortcomings, they are still beautiful, something to marvel at. Look over at them when you feel yourself slipping into sadness, they will be smiling at you. Once they begin to wilt, hanging their heads low, do not fret. Gently place them in the compost so they can return to the earth. Take from them the lesson that, though joy can be fleeting, it is still a worthy thing to revel in.

- Call a friend

Let their voice wash over you. How they still can't roll their r's, how they pronounce aluminum like the British do. Store the laughter you share deep in your chest; it will rumble and echo within you for days afterwards. When they say "we should meet up for coffee sometime" believe they mean it. Remember, there is love and care in this world just waiting to embrace you.

- Revisit your letter

Add the last of your gratitude to the letter addressed to your younger self, sign it off with I am proud of you. Decorate an envelope with hearts and smiles and stars, then mail it to yourself. When it arrives, do not open it right away, tuck it between the crinkly pages of your baby photo album. Save it for a day when you can barely name a thing in that letter. When that day comes, read it out loud to the pictures of your wide-eyed chubby-cheeked self.

- Watch

People on the bus, in a café, on the street, at the grocery store, in their cars, anywhere but a screen. Their vacant stares, posture, sighs, all call to something of

the same nature inside of you. You will realize that familiarity is because they too are lost. Teach yourself to whistle like the sullen man at the hardware store. Do your hair like the teenager with the slumped shoulders at ICBC. Dress in muted flowy fabrics like your weary neighbour. Try on the glimpses of these strangers, notice how your sadness doesn't change to look like theirs. When you settle back into your own body, find comfort in knowing your despair is your own but others have their definitions as well.

- Bake

Take your time with each step and cherish each ingredient. Rock the bag of flour like a baby, hold each egg gently to your chest for a moment, kiss the butter before unraveling it's foil wrapper. Hum as you mix, dance as you move around the kitchen, whisper well wishes to the batter before you close the oven door. When it's done indulge in your creation while it's still warm. Nourish yourself with the love that is nestled between the chocolate chips and the fluffy confection. Self-love is not always simple, but when it tastes this good it feels a bit easier to manage.

- Draw a map

Detail all the places you have gone and people you have been. Appreciate all the different phases you have made it through and the new one you feel on the precipice of. Identify all the parts of the many versions of yourself that surfaced to help you get here today and thank them. You will probably get lost again, we all lose our way sometimes, but now you have the beginnings of a scrap book that you can piece together the next time you need to be found.

# 2<sup>nd</sup> Place

## **Band-Aid**

*Elaine Araujo-Oliveira*

You want so badly to find any similarities between me and the others so you can finally put me in a box with a label. You don't want to accept that I'm different and unique. You want to label me, so it's easier for you.

Band-Aid. You're always trying to put a Band-Aid on everything.

Last month we moved to a new apartment. Same neighbourhood, one-bedroom, ground floor, a nice private garden. That's what sold us: the garden. The idea of having a private garden where we could put some chairs and relax sounded amazing. After all, we lived in a small studio apartment for two years. We needed an upgrade, and I desperately needed a bedroom.

We found this cute apartment and we got the keys three days in advance. During those three days, I was coming back and forth, bringing stuff, organizing the closet, and checking if everything was working.

Everything was working... apparently. However, I noticed that a few things needed to be fixed, and therefore, I called the manager company. First, it was the vanity mirror in the bathroom. There was a crack on it. Not a big one, but it was a crack and obviously that crack would



bug me every day I looked in the mirror; and besides, it could hurt someone.

When I called the manager, they asked me how bad the crack was. I immediately took some pictures, focusing on the sharp details, and sent them, explaining that it could be dangerous. I imagined that if I didn't mention that I was worried about my safety, they would only brush it off and promise to fix it one day. Or they would probably say, well, it's not that bad, put a tape on it and move on.

I don't know, but I wanted to avoid looking at a cracked mirror every single day for the next year. They came and changed the vanity mirror. The new one was not exactly new; they probably took it from another apartment. It was quite dirty, and I had to clean it thoroughly.

Later that day, I was checking the kitchen cabinets when a strong smell caught my attention. The cabinet under the sink was terribly covered with mold. I immediately took a bunch of pictures and sent them to the manager. I imagine their face when they got another message from me. They told me they would send someone to fix it the day after.

The guy came and painted the mold. I didn't know that there was a special paint for that. In the beginning, I found it interesting, but I was worried that the problem was only being fixed externally. I mean, the mold was caused by the humidity that was probably coming from the bathroom, where the bathtub is. So, I thought that the best way to fix it would be, obviously, removing the cabinet, and then inspecting the wall between the kitchen and the bathroom, possibly breaking the wall to fix whatever is broken inside of it and it's causing the leaking, and then cleaning everything before painting.

The guy just painted it. The strong smell is still there.

Back to the bathroom, the corner of the bathtub is visibly damaged by humidity, which is clearly connected to the sink problem. The bathtub and the kitchen sink are in the same direction, basically sharing the same wall. I don't know anything about plumbing, but something tells me that one of those things is broken, or not properly sealed, and one of them (or both of them) is slowly leaking and causing this entire mold situation.

The manager sent a guy to simply apply some sort of glue in the junction between the tiles and the bathtub. The glue didn't last a week.

Meanwhile, in the kitchen... Together with the cabinet situation, I noticed that one of the floor tiles was uneven and sounded weird when I stepped on it. I mentioned that to the manager, and they said they would fix it. They didn't. Fixing something on the floor requires more than glue, paint, or replacing something from one apartment to another. I told them that my detective feelings were sensing a connection between the loose tile and the kitchen sink problem.

It's the humidity. Something is broken inside the wall between the kitchen and the bathroom, which caused the leaking, which caused the mold, and now it's invading from under the kitchen floor. That loose tile is screaming on the kitchen floor every time we step on it, reminding us that some real fixing is needed in this apartment.

They should have done all the fixing while the apartment was empty, because now that we're in it, it's going to be impossible to manage it. They can only do quick fixes, little stuff, easy stuff, put a Band-Aid here and there.

Even our lovely private garden has some issues. First, it's not exactly private, because the apartments on the upper levels can see it. They even throw things there (or let them

fall purposefully?) But the weirdest thing is that the other day, we saw a shopping cart thrown at the fence, making it possible for someone to access the garden from behind. I immediately took some pictures and made a video showing what happened, and I sent it to the manager, asking someone to please fix the fence.

There is a wall behind the fence, and there is a hole in this wall. Someone probably entered through that hole, tried to break the fence with the shopping cart, but couldn't go any further for any reason, and left the cart there. Analyzing the gap between the fence and the wall, it could be a place for some homeless people to hide their stuff. There was even an old mattress there.

I made a video showing everything: the hole in the wall, the mattress, the shopping cart, the broken fence, and sent it to the manager, pointing out my safety concerns. They promised they would take care of it, so we waited. I was leaving home for school when I saw the maintenance guy in the hall. I asked him if the manager got my message about the fence, and I immediately invited him to enter the apartment to see it with his own eyes. He said it would be fixed.

A few days passed, and we kept seeing the shopping cart on the fence. I went to the back of the building, where I could see the fence and the wall from behind, and to my surprise, I saw that they simply covered the hole in the wall with a board. The shopping cart is still there, and the fence remains broken.

Maybe any other person in my situation would just let it go and try to live their lives without even thinking about those details. But not me. I'm not like everyone else. If things make me feel uncomfortable, I try to change them, even if it's my last mission on Earth. I won't accept Band-Aids when what I need is a full treatment.

I won't accept less than I deserve or pay for. I won't accept food on my plate if my plate is still dirty from the previous meal. And I won't accept a new person in my life if I'm not emotionally cleaned, fixed, and fully available for this.

Band-Aids are just a temporary thing. If you leave them for too long, they won't work anymore. They'll get soaked, smelly, glueless, and useless. And the problem will still be there (and maybe get worse), reminding us of what we need to fix. Not only the crappy apartments we just moved in, but everything else around us, including relationships, including ourselves.

# Honorable Mention

## Lessons from the Kill List

*Xuan Wang*

I used to kill dragonflies when I was nine years old. I'd patiently wait for them to land on a flat surface, then trap them with my insect net. Adrenaline surged through me as they frantically flapped their wings beneath the nylon mesh, searching for an escape. There was something about their scaly bodies and glassy, pupil-less eyes that filled me with revulsion. My skin would prickle at the buzzing of their thin wings, and I'd begin sweating profusely. It wasn't just disgust that I felt, it was fear. Every time they landed close to me, my heart would race, and every nerve screamed for me to run. Instead, I stayed, to prove to myself that I could conquer that fear by killing them, hoping that somehow it would erase the terror inside me. Once they were caught, I would stab their fragile bodies with a twig, watching their wings tremble as black ink gushed out. A sense of peace settled in as the net lifted, revealing the damage I'd done. Sometimes, I'd take the extra step and stomp on their wings—just to reassure myself that they couldn't fly again.

I'd transport their lifeless bodies with a leaf into a jar filled with water, and watch the liquid turn a murky brown colour. It was like dipping a dirty paintbrush into water and watching all the colours swirl away, becoming clean for the next use.



Lastly, I'd pull out my notepad and add a tally, noting the date, time, and location of each kill. It was a simple act that gave me a sense of order, as if marking it down could make it all feel purposeful. It was beautiful to be the one in control. By the time my dragonfly kill list hit double digits, so did I.

For my tenth birthday, my mom and I went on a trip to Chicago. I sat on a white couch in the hotel lobby, playing Subway Surfers while she checked in at the front desk. The sound of rolling suitcase wheels, crying babies, and distant voices filled the lobby all before the sun had risen. The fluorescent lighting felt too harsh, making my eyes sting and my head swell. My nose felt runny, so I wiped it with the sleeve of my black sweater, not thinking much of it until a red droplet landed on my iPad. Then another one. Soon, tiny crimson specks began to fill the screen.

I tilted my head back, pinched my nose, and breathed through my mouth. I'd frequently get light nosebleeds, so this routine was nothing new. My heart pounded against my ribs as my breath quickened. The floor felt like water beneath my numb legs and the walls began to cave in. Everything blurred into a red haze.

My mom rushed to me with a box of tissues, urgently stuffing them in my nostrils while pinching the bridge of my nose. Every time we thought it had stopped, it would start again, staining my clothes, my hair, and the pristine white couch.

I don't remember how I ended up lying on the floor, but when I opened my eyes, a crowd of unfamiliar faces hovered above me. The ceiling spun, and my tears mixed with the blood, making the faces of strangers resemble a watercolour painting. The front desk workers noticed the commotion and brought me a glass of water. A few strangers handed me more boxes of tissues, but nothing could stop the relentless burgundy rush.

A wave of panic hit me when the buildup of saliva in my mouth felt suffocating, and a sinking feeling settled in my stomach. I tried to hold my breath as I ran to the nearest garbage can, but before I could make it, I coughed violently, causing the blood to spray across the carpeted floor and onto the wall. My mom quickly moved the garbage can closer to me.

A woman approached us and spoke to my mom in Mandarin as I continued to cough up blood. She didn't introduce herself— she just crouched down next to me, her voice calm but firm.

"Breathe," she said, placing her hands on my shoulders.

I sucked in a deep breath, feeling it burn my throat and exhaled sharply with blood still trickling from my nose.

The bathrooms were locked for cleaning, so she led me to a water fountain. My mom held my hair back while the woman splashed cold water against my nostrils. The sharp sensation sent chills down my body, causing me to shiver uncontrollably.

"Breathe," she reminded me. My mouth trembled with each breath.

Thirty minutes passed by, but the bleeding hadn't stopped. I stared at my distorted reflection in the bloody fountain water, and thought to myself, This is it. I'm going to die. I thought about the people I loved, the things I still wanted to experience, and wondered, Why me?

The woman's voice interrupted my spiraling thoughts: "I have to do something that's going to be a bit uncomfortable."

Before I could ask what she meant, her fingers pressed into my right nostril. Her index finger and thumb dug deep, pulling at something inside me, while her other thumb

pressed against my left nostril. I screamed in shock and clenched my eyes shut as a sharp pain pierced through my skull. I wanted to scream "STOP," but my body jerked back, and I couldn't breathe.

For a split second, I pictured the dragonflies I killed. I thought about how scared they must've felt trapped underneath that net. I imagined how vulnerable they felt floating in that glass jar with their bodies exposed for the world to see. At that moment, I realized that I was a powerless dragonfly in the arms of a stranger.

After a few seconds, she pulled her fingers away, and the pressure in my chest finally eased, allowing me to breathe again. I let out a jagged cough and opened my eyes to a massive blood clot in the fountain. "It's over," she said, stepping back with blood-stained hands.

My mom rubbed my back as the people around us applauded. Their faces were a mixture of concern and awe. A man hugged me with teary eyes, calling me brave. I was exhausted and overwhelmed by the chaos. The crowd slowly returned to their routines, leaving the three of us in the empty hallway, collecting our breaths. I looked at the woman and hugged her tightly, knowing that without her, I could've bled to death. My nose stopped bleeding, but the guilt I felt poured out. I remembered how tightly I'd gripped those sticks, and how much force I used to crush the delicate bodies of the dragonflies. I felt evil for taking their innocent lives, just to feel fearless for a moment.

Back then, I thrived on the power I felt, knowing those innocent dragonflies had no control over my actions. And there I was, for the first time, experiencing what it felt like to be out of control. It was terrifying, but the woman held me in a way I'd never felt before. That's when I realized that power isn't always about control. Sometimes, it's about being cared for;

about seeing someone in a vulnerable state and choosing to help. Maybe she had known what it felt like to be helpless. And maybe, in helping me, she was healing a part of herself.

After the mess was cleaned, my mom and I thanked the stranger, and we went our separate ways. We had planned to go shopping that day, but all I wanted was to be alone in a quiet space. I told her to go without me and that I'd be okay.

Back in the hotel room, I pulled out a pen and paper. My hand shook as I wrote about the blood, the chaos, and the lessons I learned. Tears dripped onto the page of ink, bleeding through the paper as I continued. At the end of the page, I wrote a list of reminders:

Next time I get a nosebleed, do not panic.

Breathe.

Pull out the clot.

Will feel scary, but relief comes when you do it.

Rinse.

Breathe.

When you see a dragonfly, do not kill it.

Breathe.

Slowly walk towards it.

It's okay to be scared.

Observe.

Breathe.

Let it fly away.

To this day, I haven't had another nosebleed. I also haven't felt the urge to kill a dragonfly.





# Postcard Story



# 1<sup>st</sup> Place

## Care

*Harman Burns*

The first time she cut herself making his breakfast, it was an accident. Six stitches across the thumb and palm, cutting frozen bread with a blunt knife. The pain had been dull, somehow distant as he drove her to the ER, dull while he waited in the parking lot, smoking, dull as she sat in the clean hum of fluorescent light.

When the doctor first called her in, he didn't seem remarkable. She laid back in the chair, her mind elsewhere. But when he gently took her hand, an unfamiliar feeling writhed inside her. He peeled off the ruined dish towel and spoke to her reassuringly as he cleaned the places where the flesh had been opened. She expected pain when the doctor began to stitch—she'd braced for it. Instead, a strange shiver ran up her body from the places where the needle touched. Her head swam, her stomach nauseous with butterflies. A rising sensation climbed her ribcage and her thighs clenched tight together. She shuddered as the last stitch was pulled tight, firm. The doctor misread her reaction as pain, and so as he finished cleaning her hand, he apologized.

Afterwards, as she walked back to her boyfriend's truck, she felt any sense of embarrassment fall away. Her involuntary moan had startled the doctor, but she didn't mind. The pall of cigarette smoke enclosed her as she climbed into the passenger seat, but she rolled down the window. And as she looked out into the bright morning, she smiled.

# 2<sup>nd</sup> Place

## Morning

Aymee Brock

*How do I take my coffee again?*

She doesn't remember. She wants to ask you, but telephones that communicate with The Other Side don't exist yet. This morning, her hand reached for the bedside table, only to be met with empty air. Her hand remained cold without the usual spot of steam from the coffee you always left for her. You always timed it perfectly so that when she woke up, there it was, cool enough not to burn but hot enough to comfort. She was never sure how you did that.

She dragged herself from the bed. Your half looked like a still life. She went to the coffee machine, but didn't know what half of the buttons did. This was your territory, not hers. She always thought it took up too much space and wanted a bread maker instead. The "gross" instant stuff was fine with her, but you insisted on being a snob about it. She had to consult the manual to figure out how to even turn the damn thing on. But it was no use. How did I take my coffee again? She hadn't made it herself for eight years. How many shots of espresso? Was the milk frothy or smooth? How much sugar? Overwhelmed, she cried over some tea instead. All those years, if she had just woken up a little earlier, she could have joined you for your morning ritual. She could have made you coffee. She wished she made you coffee.

# 3<sup>rd</sup> Place

## Life Lines

Letitia Lim

You were once told by a palm reader that you have a strong life line. She knew you would marry your husband from a deep, elegant curve to your love line. She counted the lines of your fate like the rings of a great oak, splaying out the soft bark of your flesh. Long fingers and broad palms. Hands fit for a wife and mother. She told you that you would have multiple children and a long marriage. So you followed that line across the sea, to Canada, where you would give birth to me.

I am left to trace your maternal lines, wondering why she failed to see that your hands are also those of an artist's. I am sorry she failed to warn you of the bruises to come, or the dreams under your nails from clawing out of a marriage that buried you under a lifetime.

I am now the same age as you were back then. I have the same soft, wood palms. Willow fingers. The broken skin of a daughter. But whenever you take my hand in yours, you tell me that I have the hands of a writer.







