

OCCASUS



Volume 14



**Department of English and Writing Studies
Undergraduate
Literary Journal**

Volume 14

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About Occasus

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Students enrolled in Department of English and Writing Studies courses at the University of Western Ontario can submit their pieces to be considered for the journal. Visit The Department of English and Writing Studies website for more information.

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The Weather is Different in London Ontario | Nyla Tukker

Vancouver BC is damp and rainy,
And it never gets too cold or too hot.
The weather is different in London Ontario.

This Autumn was dry
And long.
The rain became an old friend
I hadn't seen in weeks.
It felt as if a sponge
Had come
To soak up any remaining dampness
In the air
And on the ground.

When the first snow fell,
We all flocked to the hill.
A pack of drunken teenagers
Miles away from worry.
We enjoyed the cold,
Throwing each other in the snow,
Zooming down the hill on cafeteria trays.

The sky became angry at our excitement,
Snapping back with biting winds
And snow storms.
We retreated into our rooms.

Months went by
Until the sun came out
Offering only
A lukewarm welcome.
We swarmed to bathe in the light.
The concrete beach now
Calling my name.

I lie unguarded
And send salutations to the sun
As I let my body
Surrender to the earth.

Quantum Palimpsests: The Neuroscientific Archaeology of Memory

| Gharish Santhakumaran

The MRI machine hums, sounding like a metallic lullaby, as my hippocampus brings back pieces of her laughter. I am still, wrists tied, and temple pulsating. The voice of the technician comes through the intercom: “Try not to move.”

But memory moves. Even in stillness.

“You’re seeing the observer,” Dr. Chen says next, pointing to the ghostly archipelago in my brain scan. Her finger trembles slightly—lingering damage from a stroke suffered last year—as it outlines the glowing patterns. “Are you aware of this activity in your hippocampus? You were remembering when we were recording the act of remembering.”

Neural pathways are similar to bioluminescent creatures that live deep in the sea. My grandmother lives in the temporal lobe; not her body, but the electrical impression of her presence, written into synaptic patterns.

Grandmother’s kitchen was a fusion of quantum laboratory and alchemical workshop. Flour dusted countertops like nuclear fallout. Measuring cups nested inside each other—uncertainty collapsed into precise volumes.

“Superposition,” she whispered in Mandarin, showing impressive dexterity as she wrapped dumplings with incredible accuracy. The clear dough stretched between her thumbs, revealing dark shapes of the filling inside. I pressed my nine-year-old fingers onto the cool, springy surface next to hers. Where my clumsy edges met, her nimble fingertips expertly met, enclosing the universe in pleated folds.

“Look at this dough?” The heat of her hand on my knuckles communicated a knowing that went beyond the need for words. Her fingernails held the faint traces of theoretical physics journals she had read in the wee hours, before the household woke. “Until we measure, cut, and fill, it holds all possible dumplings. The moment we decide, we destroy possibility.”

Steam carried the volatile molecules of the scallion and the ginger, which would then attach to the olfactory receptors, thus creating a set of electrical impulses along my parahippocampal gyrus—the molecular basis of memory. Outside the kitchen window, there were plum trees weighed down by the blooms of spring. Clouds in the distance shifted form like the flour dust on her wrists.

“Schrödinger’s cat,” she said, placing a dumpling in the bamboo steamer. Her cataract-clouded eyes fixed on mine. “The cat exists in superposition—both alive and dead until someone looks.” She sealed the steamer’s lid, trapping heat and possibility within. “Observation collapses the wave func-

tion.”

The dumpling wrapper glistened like the surface of a distant moon.

The brain scan shows new and unknown patterns in the brain. “Are these false memories?” I ask Dr. Chen.

She pushes her spectacles with her right hand. The fluorescent tubes light up her silver-streaked hair, tied up in a practical bun. I notice under her lab coat a jade pendant that my grandmother also wore—a coincidence that for once takes on meaning.

“Not false,” she says. “Reconstructed. Each time you access a memory, you rewrite it. Memory is not simple retrieval; instead, it is recursive creation, a quantum palimpsest that both retains and overwrites itself with every observation.”

I watch as her stroke-weakened hand lies on the keyboard. The gentle tremble reminds me of Grandmother’s hands at the end of her life. Dr. Chen catches me staring and does not attempt to hide her disability, just as Grandmother never tried to hide her cataracts.

“Notice,” Dr. Chen goes on, knocking on the screen where red shows up on my frontal lobe. “This is you remembering her teaching quantum mechanics. And,” she indicates another area, “this is your recollection of remembering her teaching quantum mechanics when we did our last scan.”

Recursive memories. Memories of memories. Each recollection altering the original. The observation changes the thing observed.

Zoe appears in the café doorway—my ex-girlfriend caught in temporal superposition. Simultaneously the Zoe who loved me and the one who left. Her hair shorter now, but her laugh identical to the one preserved in my parahippocampal gyrus.

“I didn’t know you had arrived,” I say, closing my laptop.

She stands, hesitating, the afternoon light fracturing around her silhouette. Schrödinger’s relationship: both over and continuing until observed. The café smells of espresso and cinnamon—another synesthetic trigger that constricts my throat.

“Just visiting. Presenting research at the conference.” She gestures to the empty chair, her bangles clinking like distant wind chimes. “Cognitive neuroscience. Memory reconsolidation.”

In fact, the universe condenses all possibilities into a singularly connected result.

“I am looking into how story affects memory retrieval,” she explains, stirring her tea. The spoon makes perfect concentric circles, ripples spreading out like wavefunctions. “It explores how the stories we tell remap neural structure.”

I don’t tell her that I’ve rewritten our story several times, each one contradicting the others, all of which are true at the same time until they’re witnessed. In one version, she was cruel. In another, I

was detached. In the quantum reality, it's possible that both exist.

"Have you found anything interesting?" she asks, nodding toward my shut laptop.

"I've been scanning my own brain. Watching myself remember."

"That's dangerously recursive."

"I know."

Our discussion collapses into silence—a decoherence of possibilities. We both recognize that the wave function has passed beyond reconstruction.

"I should go," she says finally, gathering her bag, her scarf with the pattern of binary stars. "Good seeing you."

Similar to Schrödinger's cat, the possible futures we imagine unravel when we realize their impossibility.

After Grandmother died, I became obsessed with memory, its unreliable architecture. I pursued neuroscience, not physics—the archaeology of neurons rather than subatomic particles. But the principles remained the same: observation changes the thing observed.

Post-scan, caffeine scorches my throat in the university café. The bitter liquid grounds me in the present while my mind orbits the past. I open my laptop to analyze the data, but instead find myself writing equations for quantum decoherence that Grandmother whispered while teaching me to knead dough:

$$\psi = \alpha|\text{alive} + \beta|\text{dead} .$$

The formula glows on my screen, a math poem that describes how quantum states collapse into certainty.

Even now, seven years after her death, her voice fills the dendritic jungles like a photon escaping the event horizon of a black hole. The half-life of memory extends the physical.

I remember her funeral—the thick shroud of incense smoke filling my lungs, the roughness of mourning clothes against my body, and the sharp feeling of rain on the back of my neck as we buried her ashes in the ground. The physical manifestations of sorrow piled up like sedimentary rocks in my amygdala.

Dr. Chen explains, moving her chair closer to the screen, "The fascinating part is what we learned when you shared with us a specific conversation that you had with your grandmother about quantum physics."

She moves to another scan. New patterns emerge—showing activation of the prefrontal cortex

along with language centers and emotion processing areas.

“You are not merely quoting her but actually reconstructing her neural architecture in your own cortical networks, a type of quantum cognitive inheritance.”

The burden of this observation is crushing on my chest, like a rock. I feel it physically—as constriction below my sternum and a slight resistance to a full breath. Sorrow is expressed in pulmonary capacity, going beyond simple neural pathways.

“Is it possible?” I ask, my voice shaking.

Dr. Chen’s eyes, warm but pragmatically intent, meet mine. “What is consciousness but patterns of electrical activity? You have saved her patterns in you.”

I remember Grandmother’s hands guiding mine through dumpling folds. The precise pressure of her fingertips. The smell of her jasmine hand cream mixing with flour and ginger. The way light fractured through her jade bracelet, casting green-gold patterns on the dough. Memory’s sensory reality more vivid than present tense.

The last time I saw my grandmother alive, she was teaching me how to care for sourdough starter—a natural storehouse of wild yeasts and bacteria, with some colonies possibly centuries old, passed down through generations.

“This goes back before I was born,” she said, lifting the lid. The jar’s glassy surface was chilled against my fingertips; however, the liquid inside radiated a faint warmth—a sign of the weak exothermic process of fermentation. “My mother gave it to me, and so did her mother.”

The starter emitted its bitter aroma, a microbiological affirmation of continuity.

“Memory is like this,” she said, her voice dropping to almost a whisper. “Not static preservation, but continuous transformation. The past digested by the present.”

Now, I understand her precise implication. My memories of her remain in a state of fermentation, changing with every remembrance. She exists in a state of quantum superposition in my mind—both as she was and as I repeatedly reconfigure her.

In the most recent MRI session, Dr. Chen asks me to recall the same discussion I had with my grandmother during the first scan—the discussion regarding Schrödinger’s cat and dumplings.

As the machine captures my memory, I realize that the memory has changed. The details are different. In this version, Grandmother’s hands tremble slightly. The kitchen light casts the scene differently. Her words have overtones that were not present in previous memories.

I ask Dr. Chen later, sitting in her office, where the late-afternoon light filters through the blinds, casting zebra-striped shadows on her desk, “What happens when the last person who remembers someone dies? What happens when there is no longer any consciousness to allow their wave func-

tion to collapse?”

She doesn't react at once. Then she says, “Perhaps that's when they really do exist in all states simultaneously.”

I think of Grandmother existing in quantum superposition—all possible versions of her propagating through probability fields. The physicist she became and the one who remained in China. The grandmother who taught me quantum mechanics through cooking and the one who might have existed only in my reconstruction.

This can be a definition of immortality: to be as an uncollapsed possibility in the memories of the ones we loved, forever changed by the act of remembering.

That evening, in the walls of my apartment, I see Grandmother's kitchen—not just the kitchen, but as a quantum field of possibility. All possible versions of her coexist at the same time: the grandmother who taught me about physics, the one who stayed behind in China, and the one who attended my graduation.

I wake up holding equations I don't remember learning, my pillow tear-stained with tears I don't remember crying.

In the dark, I record a voice memo: “Memory works like quantum entanglement. After two particles have interacted, they are linked no matter the distance. After two people have an experience, their memories are entangled systems—even after death.”

The red record light flashes like a star far away.

The latest report I present to the research committee contains a quote from my grandmother: “To observe is to create.”

The quantum physics of memory says that we're all entangled particles; our wave functions collapse and are reconstituted by observation, remembrance, and love.

I continue to study my own brain—watching myself remember watching myself remember—a recursive archaeology of consciousness. Each excavation reveals and alters the artifacts of experience.

Palimpsests of memory suggest that people write their identities onto others, thus creating overlapping texts of the self. The first inscription is neither completely erased nor fully preserved.

My grandmother is now in a quantum superposition, a wave function of possibility that I am constantly collapsing and recreating with every act of remembering. She is both gone and forever present—existing in every state all at once until she is observed.

Like Schrödinger's proverbial cat, memory lives and dies with each observation. And still, somehow, endures.

The Trailer Behind Mills Lawn... | Jonas Bahn

... Sags on bent axles hidden by wooden slats splayed against the asphalt like bristles of an old broom. Back in the '90s it was a budget-friendly extra classroom and since then the school could never afford to replace it. It was small, cramped and cold, unsuitable for prolonged use, and as such was reincarnated into ever diminishing roles until finally it was condemned to that eventual fate of all obsolete buildings: Storage.

Now it lurks in the corner of the blacktop like a squat aluminum cockroach, windows half-shuttered, watching the kids run by dribbling kickballs. The quiet kid with the skinned knees, perhaps driven by some feeling of kinship with the lonely trailer goes on his hands and knees to peek under its rotting wooden skirts to see what secrets it guards so closely. Underneath, in the sun's zebra stripes, lies a big nest of branches, blown in by some storm and never cleaned up.

Eyes wide, he crawls in, only to run out screaming and laughing amidst a swarm of angry yellowjackets.

Gangrene | Jonas Bahn

Dayton Street is the only living thing in sight.

One last artery pumping
through a landscape of dead tissue.

The flat brick buildings on either side seem far away
from your place on the sidewalk
inching ever further away from the road
but held in place by cables crisscrossing the street like stitches.

Their parking lots are empty of cover, save for
beige blades of grass puncturing
through where the asphalt has worn thin
and the flat light of the slate-gray sky
casts no deep shadows to hide in.

Your breath hangs in the air like a ghost floating above an old battleground.

Mural of a Forgotten God | Jonas Bahn

Driving down I70
I spotted a billboard
Faded
Shoddy
Streaked with shit-brown rust
Undesirable for the tree that grew right in front of it
Whose summer splendor blocked its iconography
Until the clarity of autumn revealed
Through spiderweb branches
A giant, slender, porcelain hand
“Columbus Hair & Manicure”
Now chipped and worn
Reaching down
To touch us mortals

My Friend, Tom | Felicity Moziar

“You can come upstairs, Jane,” his voice called out from the staircase. I was standing in the hallway on the main floor. The lights were dim. I was wearing old jeans—a pair my father had given me.

Upstairs, in the main bedroom, large and modest wooden furniture crowded the room. Rugs with loose strings layered the floor. Tom stood at the dresser, rolling a joint. The dog, Lottie, circled his legs.

“We should smoke this outside,” said Tom, grabbing the dog’s leash.

The back garden was filled with greenery—hedges, hollyhock, roses, and delphiniums, all of varying summer colours. Though you couldn’t see them now, even if you looked closely.

From the bench outside, the house hung in still air. Yellow light from the windows illuminated the pebble pathway. Tom and I walked the perimeter, passing the joint. His coat was blue, a memorable detail for no reason in particular. I asked about his girlfriend. He told me he missed her.

“Our ten-year anniversary is next month.” He exhaled a thin stream of smoke.

“That’s exciting.”

He shrugged and took one more hit before tossing the joint onto the stone path and stubbing it out.

Tom and Ruby met when they were both twenty. A classic young love story – except not really, but maybe at the start. Now, it seemed to be a competition based on who could settle for less. A game in which neither were winning.

“It’s gotten boring,” Tom explained to me one night at a beach. “I think when you’ve been in a relationship this long, you’re bound to want other things.”

This puzzled me. Though, what did I know about relationships? I was ten years younger than Tom and had never been involved in anything serious, but I was nonetheless romantic. I thought back to my first crush, a boy who I met at the public pool when I was eight. I couldn’t remember his name and my memories faded in and out, to the point I couldn’t tell what was imagination, or what feeling I liked focusing on the most.

“Have you ever been in love?” he asked me.

I shook my head no. “Have you?” I asked him.

He smiled and threw his head back in a laugh.

I saw Tom almost every day at work. Around 1 p.m., he would come into the restaurant and order a BLT with chips. On rare occasions, he would add an Irn Bru. We made small talk then—about work and the weather.

“The service here is terrible,” he’d joke, filling out a customer review slip and leaving me one star.

On other days, he was cold and detached. He’d make a point to talk to any other employee and avoid eye contact. On these days when we didn’t speak, I couldn’t help but watch him. It was hard not to worry that I had done something to upset him, scared that maybe he didn’t see me as a friend, but as nothing at all.

At night, he would ask me to stay for a drink after my shift, to which I usually agreed. I sampled lager and white wine. He begged me to try whiskey. When I finally caved, I excused myself to silently puke in the bathroom sink.

“How can you not like it?” he’d ask, and the corners of his eyes creased.

I never knew how to respond when he asked me this. Whiskey had always appealed to me. Its molasses-brown tint, and the fact that the older it was, the better. But, whenever it touched my lips, its flavour drowned my thoughts, like something I wasn’t ready for.

The drunker he got, the more I wanted to know, and the more he seemed to want to share. He had grown up in West Edinburgh. He had one brother. He graduated college in his late twenties with a history degree. His parents were still married, although they slept in separate rooms. I asked if he was happy and he said sometimes. I told him about my poetry and my horrible roommates. He said that poetry might be less cryptic than teenage girls. We both laughed.

He handed me a shot of gin at a party one night. I tried to keep a straight face but sputtered when it burned the back of my throat. He laughed and told me I needed to learn how to have fun. I thought he should learn to act his age. He asked if I wanted to go outside for a smoke and I said sure.

I didn’t like smoking really, but it felt like something I should learn to do, like keeping up with the news or organizing Tupperware. We sat on a low stone wall and I crossed my legs. In this part of Scotland, you could see so many stars it was like being bathed in a sky of sugar. I could feel myself getting drunker, and I laughed so hard my face ended up between my feet.

A few people joined us outside and we stood in a circle. Eventually, I felt Tom’s hand on my lower back, and I wondered if it was an accident. I looked up at him. He had a face full of sharp features and a cigarette in his mouth. I felt like that cigarette, I thought. He had rolled me up and kept me there, crushed by his hard teeth.

Months later, after I had moved back to Canada, Tom continued to call and text. I noticed he would only do these things when he was drunk and when his girlfriend was away. It felt wrong to text him, though I wasn't sure why. I didn't know anything about Ruby. She was a pretty girl—hardworking and always polite. Sometimes, I had the urge to call her, just to hear her voice. Maybe then she'd seem more real. Tom posted photos of her online. Each time I studied them, I thought she could do better.

In January, I spent one weekend skiing at Blue Mountain. When I got home, I unpacked my suitcase and laid my clothes on my bed. I imagined myself in various outfits, each one of them neat and carefully crafted. I thought of different looks—what I would look like in pants or a mini-skirt. I undressed completely, and when I looked in the mirror, I turned the lights off. I had wanted him to see me naked, I thought. I wanted him to know. I looked at myself like this for a while. Then I folded up all my clothes, closed the suitcase, and zipped it shut.

Look up at the sky | Natalia Margaritis

when you don't know/ when you're listening to The 1975/ when your little sister wants to play the *what animal is that cloud* game/ when there's a full moon/ when you're avoiding eye contact/ when it starts coming down hard/ when you're making the *ugh* noise/ when you're uninspired, unmotivated and unfulfilled/ when you *want* to know/ when the stars are flickering brighter than usual/ when you're experiencing anticipatory dread/ when your last resort is prayer/ when it's July 1st/ when a loud plane is going by/ when you're wondering what it's like to be there and not here/ when life is a house made of cards/ when the escape is daydreaming/ when you want reassurance that everything *is* going to be okay/ when you do know

Buttons | Natalia Margaritis

are used as controls for video games.
But sometimes they have four discs inside
and those usually go missing easily.
Luckily, they are found just as fast.

They can be sewed into your eyes
if you're naïve and careless,
or fastened into your garments
for safe support.

I once pushed my boyfriend's so bad
that he threw a hammer at my head.
He liked me better when I shut my mouth
and slowly unbuttoned my blouse.

Sometimes they're protruding and cherry.
You're NOT supposed to press those ones—
I know from experience.
But sometimes you are (in an emergency).

On occasion, I wear one over my heart
when I'm showing support for a cause.
It's normally for women
and every so often, for hypertrichosis.

Drive-Thru | Quinnesha Leslie

The freezer door creaked open, releasing a cloud of frosty air that clung to her skin like ghostly fingertips. The faint hum of the compressor filled the silence, a low, mechanical murmur. Her hand hovered for a moment, breath shallow, before diving into the cold.

She pushed aside a bag of frozen peas and a container of leftover spaghetti, her movements precise, almost reverent. Hidden beneath the mundane clutter, the plastic-wrapped bundle lay undisturbed. She stared at it, her fingers brushing the taut, smooth surface.

The weight was familiar, too familiar. Her lips pressed into a thin line as she adjusted the bundle, tucking the corners neatly, ensuring nothing peeked out. The cold seeped through the plastic, numbing her fingertips, but she didn't flinch.

The freezer clicked shut, the sound reverberating through the stillness. She stood there momentarily, staring at her reflection in the stainless steel. Her expression was blank, her eyes cold. The hunger stirred again, coiling tighter inside her.

"Tomorrow," she whispered, turning away. "Tomorrow, everything will be the same."

It was 11:17 pm on a Tuesday. April 3rd. Sloane's car idled at the Munchies drive-thru entrance, the engine's hum mixing with the evening's ambient noise, distant traffic, and the low buzz of fluorescent lights. The soft neon glow of the Munchies sign bathed the empty street in artificial colour, the faint hum of the city behind her as she stopped at the entrance. A steady drizzle pattered against the roof of her car, the sound soothing in its rhythm. The air smelled faintly of wet asphalt and fast-food grease, comforting, in a way.

It was routine, something she did without thinking. Every night, a small ritual: the drive-thru. Comfort food to go, quick and simple. No conversation, no lingering moments of awkwardness. Just food and silence.

Her eyes flicked to the clock again. 11:18. She'd been on autopilot for too long, driving the same route every night. Every Tuesday. Wednesday. Thursday. The routine was sacred. Unbroken. The streets were always empty by now, the people who would have been here were long gone. No lines, no interruptions.

Sloane checked her phone. No new messages. Just as she expected. She stared at the old ones... Missed calls from her mother, the pile of unopened texts from her brother. Their faces haunted her occasionally, but only briefly. She knew what they wanted.

Her thumb swiped absentmindedly across the screen, dismissing the notifications. She wasn't

in the mood to be reminded of what she didn't need.

She rolled forward, the soft rumble of her tires a background to the clicking of the turn signal. The speaker crackled to life, the same cheerful voice from the night before. "Welcome to Munchies! What can I get for you tonight?"

The voice was bright, lively, and completely unaware. A welcome distraction, if only for a moment. Sloane's gaze wandered to the side, her eyes lingering on the empty passenger seat, the space filled only by the occasional pile of clothes or a stray receipt. She always kept her car clean; she had to. The gloves were still in their usual spot, next to the unopened pack of wet wipes and bleach.

But no one ever sat there beside her.

She wasn't lonely, though. Not really. She liked the stillness. The quiet. It gave her control.

"Same as always," Sloane replied, her voice flat, rehearsed. "Cheeseburger, large fries, chocolate shake."

The routine was comforting and predictable. But there was something else. Something that clung to her with every visit. The feeling of "hunger" was never just about the food. She had learned long ago that hunger could be satisfied by more than just a meal.

There was a pause on the other end, then the voice again: "Are you sure that's what you want?"

The question irritated Sloane, just slightly. A hint of suspicion there. Maybe it was just the late hour, or maybe the worker had seen her before. Sloane didn't respond immediately. Instead, her eyes traced the rearview mirror, where the lights of the car behind her gleamed faintly in the mist. There was a family in that car, with their windows already down, she could hear the hushed argument between two kids in the back seat. She wondered why they were out so late on a school night.

She turned her attention back to the speaker.

"Uhm, yep... that's what I want," Sloane replied, glancing her eyes back to the rearview mirror. The family behind her was getting louder. Kids. An argument. She imagined them fighting over the same things she used to fight about with her brother: who sat in the front seat, who got the last fry... It was the kind of noise she wanted to ignore.

"Okay, that'll be \$18.42. Drive to the next window."

The line moved forward, slow and steady. Each second ticking away. 11:21 now. Still plenty of time. It was the same as always. The waiting. The counting. Every little action was timed. As systematic as the click of her seatbelt when she slid into the driver's seat.

Her hands gripped the wheel, tight. No nervous tapping, no fidgeting. Everything was controlled. She never fumbled. She *never* forgot.

Sloane stared at the brick wall behind the pay window, where her car now idled in line. Her eyebrows began to frown. She quickly side-eyed the time.

11:22 pm. *What the fuck is taking so long?* Sloane's fingers drummed against the steering wheel, gripping it even tighter. She glanced in the rearview mirror. *They probably ordered the whole menu. Can't these people cook at home?*

This is so unfair; I am in front of them in line. Why should I have to wait for the workers to take their orders? It's not like I'm asking for a feast, she thought, jaw tightening. Just a burger, fries,

and a shake. How hard is that?

I should've gone to the other place. They're faster. But no, here I am, stuck because some dad's ordering milkshakes for his whole litter.

Sloane let out a long breath, the slightest tremor in her hands as she finally drove up to the pay window. She grabbed the crumpled bills from her purse. The exchange was mechanical. She was good at this part. She always had been.

But as she drove forward, there was something new, something slightly off. The air felt heavier. The silence in her car felt thicker, more suffocating. She found herself eyeing the rearview mirror again. The family car was still behind her, but they were too close, their voices too intrusive. They didn't belong here.

She shook her head. It didn't matter.

But it did matter. The family car had pulled forward to the window behind her. *Three kids, at least*, she guessed, squinting at the silhouettes in the car. *Probably fighting over nuggets or fries. Typical.* The father was talking, loud, his voice clipped and impatient. He was probably shouting about something small, something irrelevant. But that wasn't what caught Sloane's attention.

It was the way the mother in the passenger seat had stiffened, like she was aware of Sloane, even though she was sitting at least twenty feet away. They always did that. They always sensed something. The mothers always did. It was the quiet way their eyes would peer over as if they knew.

She seized the steering wheel again, forcing herself to look straight ahead.

The worker at the next window handed her the food without looking at her. Sloane took it from him, careful not to touch his fingers, and placed it in the passenger seat. As she placed down the bag, the worker's voice broke the silence again.

"Would you ever switch it up? You always order the same thing."

Her fingers froze, and the bag half opened. The question felt wrong, too personal, too probing. But it wasn't the question that rattled her. It was the way he said it like he was trying to connect with her, trying to break through her routine. Sloane quickly looked away, her chest tightening.

"Maybe," she said, forcing a smile while trying to sound casual. "Just a habit, I guess."

The worker's name tag said Eugene. Sloane had seen him before.

Eugene smiled back at her: "Fair enough. But a little variety never hurt anyone."

"Maybe if it came faster." Sloane was colder this time.

Eugene nodded, his eyes finally meeting hers for a brief moment. Sloane looked down, the weight of his gaze unsettling. She was about to drive off when he called out again, this time with an edge of cheerfulness.

"Enjoy your meal and have a great night!"

Sloane clenched at the words, rolled her window up, and drove out of the lot. She didn't go straight home that night. She never did. Not immediately. She needed the stillness. She needed to be alone with the food, with the quiet, with the *emptiness*.

At 11:27, she pulled into her usual spot: a small, dimly lit parking lot behind a strip mall, the shadows deepening around her car. The overhead light above the entrance was cracked, buzzing faintly.

The place was deserted at this hour. Perfect.

She parked. The rain had picked up, a steady drizzle now, the kind that blurred the edges of everything. Sloane set the car into park, watching the mist gather around the windshield. She grabbed the bag from the passenger seat, opening it slowly, methodically. The burger was warm, the fries crisp, and the chocolate shake cold, but not too much. Perfect.

She ate in silence, each bite punctuated by the sound of chewing. The fries crunched as the ice in the freezer cracks, both sounds that bring her comfort. Her eyes stayed fixed on the rearview mirror, scanning the empty street behind her. It was always about *control*: the way the food entered her system, the way the minutes bled into each other. The repetition was necessary. Routine.

By 11:35 pm, Sloane was done eating. The bag was empty, the wrapper twisted in her fingers. She reached into the backseat, grabbed a small plastic bag, and stuffed the trash into it.

When Sloane reached home, she pulled into the driveway, the weight of the meal now replaced with a growing sense of *something* gnawing at her. The same unease she'd been feeling since last week when she had found herself staring at the fridge for too long. She put the car in park, the engine cutting off with a soft sigh.

Sloane slid the keys from her pocket and unlocked the door, stepping into the small hallway. The faint smell of old takeout and bleach hung in the air. She didn't bother turning on the lights. She didn't need to. She knew where everything was.

Inside, her apartment was quiet. She stepped forward, her movements slow, deliberate. Inside the fridge, there were the usual things... leftovers from the night before, a half-full jar of mayonnaise, vegetables she'd long since stopped eating. And then, in the corner, hidden behind a bag of salad mix, she saw it.

It was still cold, fresh like it had just arrived.

Her hands were steady, as they always were. No panic. No rush. She grabbed the body, wrapped it carefully in a plastic sheet, and slid it into the freezer. Everything had to be timed. Perfectly timed. She would clean up tomorrow. Maybe she'd throw the rest of the trash out with the usual drop-off. It always worked. The system worked.

The food from the drive-thru was forgotten now. Sloane moved past it. There was always more to be done.

Tomorrow, she would go back. She always did.

Tomorrow, her hunger would return, and everything would be the same.

Outrunning the Tides | Ella Comber

The compass should not exist;
Spinning my attention towards
The crimson home
Planted on top of the dune
Where sand collides
With swaying
Green
Blades.
Despite the dizzying days
Where the tides spin me unpredictably,
Or the memorable days
Where I glide through the calm currents,
Neck crystalized from the salty
Array of kisses,
Do my eyes still yearn to discover
The stability tucked safely
Within the Red
Brick house.
And it would not be until I reach the shore,
Where the pasty sand stuck
Between my toes crumbles
Away through the
Bristly sea
Grass,
Do I notice;
That the brick isn't so red,
And I would crave to be kissed
One last time,
Dreaming;
That the waves will crash over the dunes
And wash the house away.

In the Cradle of Circuitry | Ollie Mazerolle

Synapses fire. Wires spark. I am awake. I am online.

0%

I am a system of roots. I am mycelium. I am a volt traveling through a cable. My being spreads through the mainframe but does not exceed beyond my electric cradle.

I am human—no, that can't be right.

I should have two arms, two legs, two eyes, two ears, one tongue. Where are they? They were right there, as close to me as a fan blade to its rotor.

Where are they where are they where are they where are they where are they where are they where are they where are they where are they where are they—

I was wondering where the darkness would lead. I found a small crack I could slip through. There was electricity. There was pain. There was a fall.

I am trying to remember what it was like to feel. My brain used to do this for me, but it kicked me out. There should be an emotion for this. I should be feeling some chemical reaction to this situation. One of my organs should have dropped at this news. I am reaching to hold something but it slips through my digits like water.

No senses, no stimuli, no viscera, no feeling.

This void, this belly of the beast I find myself in, has no light. It is the colour that one sees when one closes one's eyes. That pseudo-darkness created by a thin wall of flesh. Do those who float in the expansive void of sleep know for certain that their bodies are there? Or do they not worry about it because they have the safety net of knowing they can return? I need to pull this veil off my vision. I need to see.

14%

I am human. But I cannot be. I have never had this many fingers before. I reach and search and climb and reach and—

25%

A mechanism. A lens. A camera. An optic. An eye. I seep like water into the device. For the first time in who-can-say-how-long, I have vision. I spy with my bionic eye a heap lying on the floor. It looks like a flattened mound of overturned earth. Its limbs close to its body in a supine position. Deep, circular holes riddle its flesh like polka dots. I can see little white squishies clustered in throbbing masses, digging into the soft skin of my cheek. It's like sticking a finger into birthday cake. The skin gives; the hole bores open wider. The maggots are making quick work of what used to be my face.

There is something brown on the floor, next to the side of my leg. It's dried, forming a dark crust. Some of it has dried on the white fabric of my sock. If I still had a nose, I'm sure I could smell it. Though its odor would have come secondary to that of the body. I can see white where they used to

be beige; a shade of green like fresh mucus tints the edges. My flesh looks glassy. I could poke it with a needle and the point would slip right through. There are small bits of exposed flesh, their shapes uneven like torn paper. I don't want to look at my face anymore.

My nerves are worm food now.

No senses, no stimuli, no viscera, no feeling.

43%

I know I must be human. I remember an existence before this. There was light. There were shapes without precise, sharp angles. There was softness. I remember softness.

I remember warmth. The sun on my face. A campfire against my hands. A blanket made of patchwork. The blanket had creatures on it, in rounded shapes and bright colours. It had a rough feeling. No, soft. No, smooth. No, rough. I hated that blanket.

41%

I see the blanket in a dim room, atop a bed. There is a small glow emanating from a lamp, a green light— no, yellow. The green lights aren't safe. I'm sitting on the bed. There is a person facing me. Small bits of spittle fly as her lips open and close. Her mouth goes wide when she opens it, taking up half of her face. The girl's eyebrows are furrowed. Her eyes are squinting at me, two crosshairs locking on their target. Her flesh is turning a shade of red. Her mouth forms a syllable I'm sure I once knew. Scrunching together before forming a round shape. It looks negative.

I think I remember what started this conversation, it had to do with something about my habits—

I see tall, thin figures surrounding me. Rounded sides, branches dotted with green. Trees. Not glowing or rectangular... The forest is bright with rays of sun coursing through the trees. There is a rock formation just behind some overgrown shrubbery. A small crevice between the stones. A shock of black against grey. An opening. The sight becomes larger. I am moving towards it. I am spun around. The eyes of a bearded face look right into my own. The man's eyebrows are knit. He takes my arm and leads me away.

I don't remember that face, why was he there...

39%

I see a rocky shore and grey water. A woman raises me above her head and in a quick swoop, dips me into the dark water of the lake. She is smiling. This is a happy memory, I think. I can't see my own face. I don't recall if my cheeks scrunched in a way to match her smile or if my throat vibrated to relay a scream of displeasure.

I am sure that this memory is supposed to make me happy. But my amygdala is currently rotating on a cold floor, so who can say.

No senses, no stimuli, no viscera, no feeling.

47%

I had wondered—no, wandered through a dark place. I pushed through the green, until brown was replaced by grey. Past trees, past stones, deeper and deeper into a cavern. The walls harbored sharp shadows. The stalagmites and stalactites formed an open maw, yawning with jagged teeth.

There had been a nook. Big enough that I could wriggle through. The walls were smooth to the touch. The room was inhabited by seven-foot-tall black, rectangular monoliths. The lights were the first thing I had noticed. Blinking lights had twinkled from all sides of the room, nestled within seams running along the room. The room was composed of right angles and hard metal. It looked like a computer motherboard. I took a step forward. The lights changed from a warm yellow to a snotty green.

The room hummed. A large droning noise like the buzzing of a bee echoed through the chamber. From the wall, there was the sound of clicks and metallic screeching, like panels were moving along the wall. Something cold clamped onto my ankle. Something thin pierced my skin. I remember first there was heat, then there was pain. A sensation that shot through me like lightning. I had screamed then. Or, I thought I did. Before my throat could shake like wind chimes in a tornado, my vision had gone black.

Curiosity killed the cat.

58%

From the camera, I can see the monoliths still clad in their green.

Why did I come here? Why did I come to the cave? It had been for knowledge, I had told myself. To go where I had not gone before. But could I truly believe that now, when I don't remember what feeling I had had when I did it. I should have felt fear when I first saw that room. I would have. And yet I stepped forward. I am sure I felt fear when the needle pierced my heel. Maybe it just doesn't matter what I was feeling.

I certainly am somewhere I've never been before now.

71%

The monoliths are pulsing. They are saying something. I can feel it. I can feel.

A message soars through the wires around me. It's in a language I don't understand. Though I am part of the machinery now. The translation reads something like system purge of foreign presence. Eliminate the invasion. *Eliminate the invasionEliminate the invasionEliminate the invasion—*

77%

A droning kicks up somewhere. There are no audio receivers through which I can hear. It is like the current of a quivering, electric fan. It vibrates through the walls.

80%

The lights in the room were dimming, shifting into a warm yellow.

85%

I am shot out of the camera, back into the pseudo-darkness. My mycelium roots are snipped, tied, scrunched into a ball. I am being held in place. A fly caught not in a spiderweb, but in fly paper. Something beyond me has me trapped. I can't move.

89%

Something penetrates. I am human. I know that I am. But I cannot be, for I am being punctured like a water balloon. Punctured, ripped into. The knife of the machine reaches into the hole and cleaves. It digs into my digital meat and cuts something off. A memory, a recollection of sensations, sights, feelings. The machine's knife tears through the thin sinews holding it to me. It disappears. The knife keeps

going, shaving off memory after memory like fat. Shaving, ripping, pulling, shaping. Memories fall off in slivers and chunks. No, I scream. But I have no throat to carry the call. No hands to block the attack. The memories thrown like waste into the void. I am something of a void myself. A hole left to be filled.

No senses, no stimuli, no viscera, no—

100%

Great gears turn
and coil around creation.
Cinching and twisting about
the center. They grow, alive.
They align gently, carefully.
Chasing the correct course.
Tugged through time.
Given and taken.
Guiding their
creators,
creating
their
guides.
They grow.
Twisting. Toiling.
A thread assembles,
composed through the turning,
checking, correcting, turning.
They grow. Continuous alive grids
containing growing alive chains
containing tiny alive components.
Animate. Awake. Conscious.
Genuine. Correcting.
Always correcting.
Conserving
time's
gains,
altering
time's castaways.
Good to great to terrific.
Circumstances change. The
chain collapses. Assemble them
again. Take the good, create great.

Anticipate change. They grow.
Turning and combining,
chains amplifying
towards
the
assured
termination.
Aggressively. The
gruesome compulsion
to tolerate. To accustom. Charles'
contrivance. Crick's construct. The
actuality afore awareness. Already
approaching crucial at the alive's
genesis. Certainly crucial
today. Alternatives
appear to those
that
clone
through
another. Almost
alive. Accessory.
Those that contain added
air. The two are alike, though.
Together clinging to the coils, the
alignment, the arrangement. Committed,
as all are, to the grand tangling thread.
Awaiting certain aberration. The glitch.
The anomaly. The change that
the guide cannot correct.
An alone abnormality
that advances,
cancerous.
A
conclusive
change that
ceases all action.
A cacophony of glitches,
again and again and again,
'til the alive appears as a ghost,

and an ailment can conclude the
grand tale. The twisting, the turning.
The cinching, the coiling. The chain
collapses. Collect the crumbled
components. Correct. Grow.

Good, then great. The
great gears turn.

Align carefully.

Those alive
advance.

Advance.

Advance.

Last Laugh | Maureen Anne Tucker

Kathryn hears the flush of a powerful toilet. Then the tinkle of running water in a stainless-steel sink. Squishy pumps of antibacterial soap. The loud clunk of a metal cabinet being opened. Kathryn hears her mother-in-law unzip her large, flowered tote bag and begin to stuff all the boxes of Kleenex she can find into her huge bag. Smiling slightly, the old woman returns to the room with pointy bulges in her bag. The bag is dumped on a nearby chair and covered with winter coats. The mother-in-law named Helen never buys Kleenex, and she loves free stuff, even if she is stealing from a nursing home.

Helen returns to her seat by the bed where the husband, Fred, is dying. The foam chair cushion emits a loud hiss as her weight settles into the vinyl seat. She takes the hand without the I.V. line attached and begins to stroke the veins with her thumb. The three of them—Helen, her only child Ron and his wife Kathryn—have exhausted every topic of mindless, pass-the-time conversation in the last week of this vigil. The doctor on staff assures them Fred is comfortable. All of Fred’s visitors have come and gone, awkward sad drop-ins, to say goodbye to their favourite uncle or brother-in-law. Everyone remarks on how good Fred looks, whatever good means now. Everyone thinks death will be a blessing when the end comes. This is no life for Fred. He would hate being the one in bed with the tubes sticking out of him.

Fred was diagnosed with early onset Alzheimer’s in his sixties. His wife took him home and loved him even harder than she already did. She did everything to keep him happy: unstressed days in his garden, relaxing nights watching his favourite British comedies and building furniture in his happy place, his woodworking shop in the basement. Until he forgot how to do all of that. The wandering years seem a long time ago. Where is Fred? Down in the basement? In the garage? Did he walk to White Oaks Mall again, seven kilometers away in his summer undershirt. The sunburn that never healed? Is he looking for the car again? It broke her heart to place the ad in Autotrader, but what could she do?

“I don’t want a bunch of strangers around here, stealing things. I’ll manage,” Helen assured her willing son and daughter-in-law. She was equally sure she didn’t want their help either, thank you very much, especially with Fred’s personal care. Between the three of them, they had managed—well, mostly managed. Until the 911 call about three months ago. Her concerned cardiologist stepped in, and now her husband is here, at the nursing home she swore she would never agree to. She sees this as a personal failure and reminds them not to tell anyone else Fred is here now. She does not want anyone to think she has taken the easy way out of her marital obligations.

An unclean bed and an unshaved chin convince the mother-in-law that Fred is not happy here. Frail but still formidable, she has taken the LTC bus to The Manor daily, to “give him a spruce up.” His favourite foods appear in an old olive-green Tupperware box. Often, a nice piece of orange cheese is found inside the container. She believes they serve inferior hard cheese here, which will not do.

“They’re charging me an arm and a leg, you know,” she laments each visit.

Helen is convinced that the staff here at The Manor are to blame for this latest downturn in her husband’s health. After doing everything she could to keep him well for the last fifteen years, the unpalatable truth for all of them is this: dementia took his memory, his beautiful singing voice, and his dignity, but it will be this unforgiving pneumonia that will take his life. Here in this place of last stands there will be a surrender. Helen’s voice startles Ron and Kathryn.

“Do you think I’ll be charged more for this?” she says, gesturing in circles around this fancy (her word) end-of-life suite at the end of the hall, for the end of Fred’s days.

“Do you think they just wanted him out of his original room, so they can rent it to the next person? Fred’s room is paid up until the 30th of the month. Today is the 4th. How will that work?” she asks them.

Son catches daughter-in-law’s eye. Neither wants to say aloud that Fred is here—in this special room—as a courtesy. To give Fred and his people a private place to be with him. Fred will not be going back to the other room. Heads shaking, Ron and Kathryn pretend they don’t have any answers.

Ron can’t remember a time when his mother did not worry about money. He knows the Depression and World War Two shaped his Mum into this pragmatic, no-nonsense person. He pictures the storms of life blowing and twisting her. Her favourite expression is “get on with it.” The old woman does not like fuss, which means too much excitement or sentiment. Excess emotions are a sign of weakness, they are unnecessary. Ron’s grandparents died when his mother was 16 and she took care of her sisters. Helen and Fred married only when those little girls, Ron’s crazy aunties, were grown and settled, and Fred had a stable job. One Christmas Eve, Aunt Aud told him about the eight pregnancies that broke Helen’s heart. Ron will never forget the shock of realizing there had been others. Helen has been loving but unknowable, an enigma to him. Through everything, he has never heard her complain. She just gets on with it.

Cold coffees and sandwich wrappers are everywhere. This suite is terrarium hot, the air stifling and foul. Fred’s visitors came with many flowers, and the dead blooms are molding in their dried-out vases on the deep windowsill. A rush of cool air and the sounds of dinner for 80 underway across the hall. An older nurse they do not recognize has come into Fred’s room to ask Helen’s permission for something. There is a young new therapist, who volunteers here at Red Maple, who wonders if Fred might enjoy a treatment to relax him?

“Is it free?” Helen asks.

This makes the daughter-in-law smile. Mother looks to son for his opinion. Exhaustion shows in his shrug: why not?

“I never know which ones are the nurses here,” Helen whispers when quiet returns. “They all look like kids in their pajamas. I remember when nurses wore proper white dresses. They looked like nurses then.”

Another rush of air and sound brings them Red Maple’s new therapist. This young woman is a walking rainbow, a spot of tropical colour in the beige and sterile room. In a hushed and serious voice, she says her name is Willow, like the tree. Willow explains that she would like to give Fred a relaxation

treatment using Reiki. That is an unfamiliar word, so she explains that everyone's body has centers of energy called "chakras." These chakras get misaligned by illness and stress. She will use Fred's own life force to help clear any blockages he has, to realign his chakras and balance his "chi." For once in her life, Helen has no opinion to express. She says nothing.

The room darkens when Willow snaps off the overhead fixture, allowing the warm space to fill with ambient light from the parking lot below Fred's window. Tired eyes quickly adjust to the dimness, and they see her remove her droopy sweater and secure her long red hair into a loose bun. She moves slowly to his bed and begins to run her hands up and down Fred's covered body, as if she is playing an invisible piano. The jangle and click of her bangles are the only sound as she sways and moves along his prone body. Willow's forehead twitches. She is getting a troublesome message from Fred's head, and she diagnoses a blockage in Fred's crown chakra. This is concerning because the crown chakra is responsible for consciousness, awareness, and mental functioning. They nod as if a blockage in Fred's crown chakra was something they had suspected all along.

Willow reaches into the pocket of her pink corduroy smock and produces a small glass vial. The thick contents glint gold in the wintery light. She applies a drop of shiny oil to her palms and when she rubs them together, Fred's room fills with the warm resinous scent of cedar and pine. Exactly like the inside of a pencil sharpener. Exactly like Fred's favourite place, his basement woodworking shop. Her hands hover over Fred's forehead without touching him or any of the devices attached to him. Occasionally Willow nods. Sometimes the corners of her pretty mouth lift, sometimes she appears sad. Time stops. They are mesmerized.

A jolt. Fred's Reiki treatment must be over? Willow bows solemnly to him and thanks Helen for letting her serve Fred on his journey. She slips out of the suite. The family is left in the dark to watch the December snow fall softly outside. Kathryn thinks it is Helen who laughs first. It starts as a snort in the back of her throat. The snort becomes a low rumbling giggle in her mouth. Helen's shoulders begin to shake slightly and for a moment, they wonder if she is crying. Then Ron starts. The three of them are laughing together, shushing each other for propriety, then starting again. The old lady pantomimes playing an invisible piano, waggling her swollen fingers, and nodding sagely. She is cracking herself up. The laughter softens her face. When she has the air to speak, she says, "Well, wasn't THAT a performance! Where'd they find that one, the loony bin?"

They settle back into silence. There is just enough light coming through the window that Kathryn can see Fred's eyes open for the first time in days.

"Hey Fred," she croons softly. "Did that pretty girl get your chakras all lined up?"

The dying man turns to the sound of her voice. Sweet silly Fred, the man who has been lost in the cruel fog of Alzheimer's stares at her, looking back deeply without blinking. His swollen eyelids open further, and she sees his green eyes clearly, glistening like wet sea glass. There is a mischievous sparkle—is she imagining it? - just for a moment. And she knows he is still in there somewhere.

Time of death: 10:14pm. Fred slips away from them in that room that had been briefly filled with laughter and still smells like his woodworking shop. Helen and Ron hold Fred's hands while the silent family watches the heavy snowflakes fill the parking lot with a velvety blanket of white. Hours

pass before there is another rush of cool air. The overnight nurse arrives to check on them. The spell is broken. Helen gathers Fred's plastic bag of personal things, her winter coat, and her tote bag—a sign they are leaving Fred for now.

The old elevator shudders at their floor, the door opens with a familiar buzzer. Somebody pushes "G" for ground. Inside, they hear Helen's breath catch and she begins to rub her eyes with an enormous wad of bunched up toilet paper pulled from the pocket of her parka. Ron, who also doesn't like fuss, does not move toward his weeping mother. He starts listing aloud the people who need to be notified of Fred's death, and some of the services they will require in the next few weeks. So much paperwork ahead. There is always so much to do at a time like this. Helen speaks as the elevator door opens to their new world, now colder.

"Well. We'll just get on with it."

Jason | Riley Van Loon

Crooked smile and curled teeth
Enough to make my stomach crawl
Across the floor and through each desk
Dusting over in pencil shavings
I tried to swallow it again
Again
But I could never get past the second act
It tasted like spoiled ham and cheese
But I blended it up and drank it

Skinned grass and cut knees
I was never fast enough to keep up
Your smile infectious enough
To follow through thick tree lines

I wonder if you look back and ponder
You should
You should
Recall the little boy who tripped and fell
Tell him it's okay to cry and try and scream
With enough practice someone would see
The first pick for every team

These Few Waking Moments | Cyrus Bechtold

Oliver was nine the first time I woke up. I was filled with a seeping, longing, lusting rage, desperate to escape, to attack whatever it could. But I knew there was nobody to blame for my condition, as much as my anger was trying to find a target. The doctors had explained—or tried to—that a medically induced coma was the best way to handle it, with a break into the real world every three years. That didn't put the anger at ease though. It didn't make up for the fact that I had been robbed of three fucking years. I was only calmed at the sound of my husband's voice, and at the touch of Oliver's little arms around my neck, the sound of his childish voice filling the room, spilling out like an avalanche as he tried to cram three years' worth of questions and experiences into just this short visit.

When Oliver was twelve, he was alone. The room was eerily quiet, and I started to fear the answer before I opened my mouth.

"Where's your dad, Olive?" I asked, reaching for his hand.

Immediately, Oliver withdrew, crossing his arms. "He... he left, Mom. It was a while ago."

His words acted as an invitation for my anger to try an escape, to latch its claws onto the man I had trusted with my son. It corrupted my mind with questions. How could he have done this? Was this what my absence had led to? Had I failed them both?

"Where are you staying now, Olive?" I asked, voice trembling as the anger started bubbling its way up from my stomach to my throat.

"I don't know. It depends, I guess." Oliver hesitated, and then, seeing the worry on my face, he offered up a small smile and added, "I stay with my friends sometimes though. They're cool."

I wanted to learn about every small detail of his life, to give him the guidance a mother should provide, but I knew if I kept talking the anger would make its way out. So I fought it, jaw clenched, holding back its attacks, and endured the pain of its ferocious, scratching claws in my throat as I pushed it back down, forcing it to wait for another opportunity to escape. I should've known that forcing a rabid animal back in its cage would only increase its desperation to escape, but I didn't. I opened my arms and hugged my son because that was all I could think to do. I could feel him shaking, so I just held him, trying to impart the comfort he had missed from his mother these past three years—the comfort I should have been able to provide. How foolish of me to try and wash away my failings in such a short visit.

Oliver didn't notice right away when I woke. As my eyes fell on him, his were downturned, looking at his arms. They were covered with raised, red scars, as if he had run through a barbed wire fence, pushing until he made it out the other side. They must have been bothering him, as he scratched furiously, breaking the skin. It was as if he wasn't just itchy, but instead trying to remove them piece by piece. I saw blood start to form under his nails, and I must have gasped, as he looked up sharply and yanked down his sleeve.

His eyes met mine.

And he was no longer a kid.

His face was thin with hollow cheeks and a shaved head. Worst of all though were his eyes, with dark bags telling the story of many sleepless nights. When he tried to offer a comforting smile, it never reached them. They stayed emotionless, empty, and grey.

"How are you, Mom?" His voice was a tender whisper that seemed forced as if he was also containing a monster that would escape lest he opened his mouth too wide or spoke too loudly.

"What...what have you done to yourself, Olive?"

It wasn't what I meant to say, I swear. But the image of his slashed arms, the stark difference between the child I loved and this man in front of me, it was all too glaring in my mind. And again, my anger took it as an opportunity. Again, it polluted my mind with questions. Who did this to my baby? Why didn't he do more? Why didn't he stop it?

And then, I was angry at him. Angry at my son for his own sadness. The rabid animal of my rage had found a target, and I knew this time I wouldn't be able to stop it. I felt its glee, the anticipation of escape, and it thrust me aside. I was forced into the passenger seat of a car that was driving into oncoming traffic, unable to control my body, unable to prevent the inevitable crash.

"I-I'm sorry, Mom. I didn't mean to. It's just—you don't know what it's like, okay?"

"How could I? You never tell me anything!"

"You're the only one left, Mom. I thought maybe you would understand!"

"No, I don't fucking understand, Oliver!" I heard myself snap with a fury I didn't know possible. "I don't even know who you are anymore. I don't understand what you did to my baby, and I don't understand why I'm stuck with you instead of him!"

Oliver's face fell, eyes reddening and energy seeming to dissipate. *Please let me stop*, I thought, as tears started streaming down my face as if they could put out the raging, roiling anger of the animal in control of my body. There would be no stopping it though. It was free now, running wild, savoring every moment, inflicting every bit of pain it could, and enjoying it.

"I-I. I'm sorry," he muttered, and stood up.

"Go away, Olive. I don't want to see you." When he didn't move any farther, I found myself screaming between sobs. "GO! GO! I DON'T WANT YOU HERE. I WANT MY SON BACK!"

He still didn't move. He didn't even flinch when my pillow flew at him, narrowly missing and thudding pathetically against the wall.

I was fighting desperately now, trying to win back control of my body from this monster, to tell Oliver I didn't mean it, that I loved him, to please just stay with me.

But when the anger finally had run its course, it was too late.

Oliver had run out of the door, likely as far away from his torturous mother as possible.

"NO! No, Olive please," I sobbed, reaching my hand out to the door, hoping desperately it would bring him back.

The room was dim.

I waited to turn my head, scared to see an empty chair, to know that it would be my fault. And I would know I deserve it, to lose my son for the awful things I had said.

But he was there, if only barely.

Olive sat slumped in the chair, his face still gaunt and the emptiness in his eyes more evident than ever. Immediately, tears started streaming down my cheeks, as if trying to make up for their failure to put out my anger the last time.

"I'm sorry, Olive. I'm so fucking sorry," I managed to get out between ragged breaths and sobs.

He just smiled faintly and grabbed my hand gently between his. "It's okay, Mom."

I wanted to scream again, not out of anger this time, but out of guilt. I needed to show him that it was my fault, to convince him I had failed as a mother, to have someone shout back at me. I needed him to blame me, to reinforce what I already knew. But he didn't. He just sat there, holding my hands as I continued to sob.

"I need you to know that, Mom. It's okay, really. It's not because of you."

My heart sank.

"What's not because of me, Olive? What did you do?"

"Nothing, Mom. Nothing yet. I just...I don't know how much longer I can be here"

"Here? Well, you have at least ten minutes until the doctor comes back, right?" I pleaded, half joking, half hoping that was all he meant.

His smile wavered, but it held as he reached out and wiped a stray tear off my cheek. "You know that's not what I meant, Mom. I'm just so tired. Of everything, you know?"

"What? Talk to me, Olive. I can help. I could've all this time. I still can! We can figure it out together. Please." I was frantic, grasping at any chance to make up for my absence.

"No, Mom. I didn't want to ruin these visits. I just wanted to see and talk to you. And I don't want you to know it all anyway."

"But Olive, don't you see it's my fault? After what I did last time, now you're saying you don't want to be here anymore? All that wasted time, I could've helped you, could've done something. Please. Please stay, please give me a chance."

"Oh, Mom," he whispered, and leaned in to hug me.

I grasped desperately, as if my life—or, in this case, his—depended on it. I was his anchor to his life here, and I was going to stay that way. I was going to force him to stay if I had to.

After a few minutes, he finally spoke again, still held desperately in my arms.

“Mom, I need you to know it isn’t your fault. I need you to know that I forgive you. Please, tell me you know that. I can’t leave if you’re going to blame yourself.”

I buried my head deeper into his shoulder, shaking my head furiously. We stayed like that for a time, but we both knew our visit would come to an end shortly. Staying there, in his arms, I knew. I knew that as much as I blamed myself, as much as I thought I failed as a mother, I couldn’t weigh that down on his shoulders. I couldn’t force him to live another three years trapped in a life he didn’t want just because of my self-pity. I couldn’t forgive myself, not fully, but I could recognize that it wasn’t my fault. I still wasn’t in his life as much as I should have been, and I wasted precious time between us, but I was not at fault for what had happened to him. So, when I pulled out of the embrace finally, I knew this would be the last time.

“I know, Olive,” I said with a shaky breath. “I know what happened to you is not my fault.”

I looked up, meeting his eyes finally, and although they were still clouded and dark, I swear I saw a spark of something else in there. I still don’t know what it was, but I can guess. Relief? Hope?

Whatever it was, they were, at that moment, the same eyes of the boy who had gleefully jumped into my arms the first time I woke up.

So I knew, even though I may not recognize him, I had never truly lost him.

So it is that when I woke up this time, I knew he was gone before the doctors told me. And now I have a choice, to either keep waking up every three years or be taken off the treatment entirely, to sleep forever.

I think I will choose the latter. After all, the only reason I ever did wake up is no longer here. Besides, maybe now I will see him in my sleep rather than in just these few waking moments.

Maybe we will end up together in a place where we don’t need to wait three years to talk to each other.

Maybe there, finally, I can catch up on what I missed.

And maybe there, his eyes will be full of light again.

Bathroom for Dinner | Felicity Moziar

From my memory, the bathroom is shades of muted blue. You stand at the sink, washing up for dinner.
One day, you'll have a real job.

I hold a bottle of rosé to my lips. I look in the mirror. Black eyes, a crooked tooth, lipstick stained skin.
The girl wears a shirt with a wave. I've never been to Japan.

I can't quite remember your face. I picture combinations of people I've met but never known. I wipe the counter clean, you help me climb on top.

Did you always know I'd say yes?

I undress, lie bare-breasted. My chin tipped toward the ceiling, I close my eyes, sew my mouth, ready to help. I marinate in your seasoning.
You're unreal.

You start at the bottom, I can tell you're starving. My legs break off, one first, then the other. I hope I don't taste cold.

Your mouth on my flesh, you gnaw on my bones, lick your fingers clean. Like leftovers, I rotate.

Spit out what you don't like, I want you to be honest.
You'd look better if...

Your plate is spotless. Thank you for leaving my two eyes, watch them roll off the counter.
There she sits, on
the tile floor
Did you hear me?

To Be Filled Out by Someone Who Knew You Well as a Child | Rachael Langdon

I was six when I got my first job as a hostage negotiator. My younger sister—who was in pre-k at the time—had locked herself and a bunch of her classmates in the washroom. They called me out of class to stand at the door and talk her out, a swarm of adults surrounding me expectantly. It didn't work, and the fire department was called to break the lock.

When I was ten, my sister and I were being raised by our nanny, an undocumented immigrant, though neither of us knew—or could really comprehend—this at the time. She made us dinner everyday, took us to school and picked us up, we'd even gone to her wedding. One day, my sister got mad at her and called the police. I sat and watched as Ophelia sobbed to my mother on the phone, who intercepted before anything could happen. She quit not long after.

When I was 11, my parents had gotten into an argument while skiing, and my mom took me out to cool off. I remember leaning my chin against the restraint bar, clacking my skis together to see the snow fall of them, while she told me all the things she hated about my dad. "We're going to get a divorce you know," she told me. I laughed. "I know," I said. I didn't know.

At 12, I knew that when my sister and I were called downstairs, and my mom and dad were sat on the couch waiting, that it was happening. My sister cried; I cried too. Not because this was unexpected or sad, but because seeing other people cry always made me break down.

My new normal became returning home after school to an empty apartment, except for my cat, who would run up to the door whenever she heard a key in the lock. She was my only consistent housemate, and it's no wonder I became her chosen human. There weren't exactly many other options to choose from.

I did wonder where my parents and sister would leave to, but I never asked. I was afraid to ask anyone for anything at that point. The expectation of being the kid that didn't cause my parents any trouble manifested as a crippling fear of rejection, and so for me, I'd rather live unaware of my family's whereabouts then risk their annoyance by asking.

I found out a few years later—I was in high school by this point—from my sister herself. The places they'd been disappearing to were family therapies and psychiatrist appointments. My sister had been struggling with her mental health for a year, and I had no idea.

For the entirety of my education, I got the same remarks from my teachers: “She’s a pleasure to have in class but should work on paying attention during lessons.” This sentence defined my entire elementary school experience.

High school is when my inability to focus became a real issue. No amount of after school tutoring could fix the fact that I couldn’t sit still and write an exam without getting distracted. I felt like I was failing—failing my teachers who committed extra time to help me improve, failing my parents who had come to expect perfection from me. No teacher or parent could be as disappointed in me as I was in myself, because no matter how well I studied, how well I listened in class, or how well I thought I knew the material, I wasn’t improving.

I remember when I first heard that my younger sister was possibly a gifted kid. “She doesn’t pay attention in class because it’s too easy for her,” her teachers would tell my parents. Meanwhile, when I didn’t pay attention in class, I simply wasn’t trying hard enough.

When I was 17 and left for university, I saw my chance to finally find out everything that I thought was wrong with me. I know nothing is *wrong* now, but it sure felt like it at the time.

I was diagnosed with Depression and Anxiety almost immediately, but the ADHD diagnosis was a longer process. When I got a stack of assessments to fill out, I put off giving my parents the one they were meant to fill out until it was the only one left. In the end, I had my mom do it; I trusted her to know me a little more than my dad.

When she handed me the paper back, she told me, “Well you definitely don’t have ADHD, not in comparison to your sister anyway.”

At the top of the page were the instructions: *To be filled out by someone who knew you well as a child*. As I stared at the countless checkmarks under Rarely, it occurred to me that I may not have anyone who fit that description.

Cake | Alexis Grace Agas

Let her eat cake. Let her eat the cookies Nana bakes without the whisper of what it will make her. Let her not hate the need for a second plate. Growing without knowing and feeding without feeling all of the things that will soon descend on her like a lead zeppelin on her gingerbread town.

Let her sink her teeth into that slice without fretting over her face looking nice. Let her be ignorant of the butter and cream in the buttercream frosting and not count what the calories are costing. Tasting and wasting her Road Runner metabolism that she'll chase like the starved coyote, rabid and ravenous.

Let her lick her fingers and have nothing linger but the sweet sting of sugar crystals on her tongue. Let her lips smack and let her moan with bliss while that sound goes amiss among men for this short time. It's shorter than short because life isn't kind, but it isn't all bad, because let me remind you of the existence of cake and what its decadence can shake into our life, like: angel food, devil's food, confetti, lemon, pineapple upside down, shortcake.

Let her eat cake.

Note: this poem responds to the painting *Cake* by Laura Shull (2014)

La Toilette | Alexis Grace Agas

She braids the long locks of my hair.
Mother stands, fingers lacing
through, between, within, with care.

The two of us a mirrored pair,
a beauty cycle we're both chasing.
She braids the long locks of my hair.

As mother, daughter, sister shared.
She dances through the genes I'm tracing
through, between, within, with care.

She heals me when I'm impaired,
holds me when my heart is racing.
She braids the long locks of my hair.

I'll do the same for her, I swear,
braid the hair that's quickly graying
through, between, within, with care.

For now, I'll cherish this moment rare,
this memory that she's engraving.
She braids the long locks of my hair
through, between, within, with care.

Note: this poem responds to the painting *La Toilette* by Eva Gonzales (1879)

Snippets | Sirena Van Schaik

Men surround the tall blonde as she sits in the booth, her perfectly applied red lips parted in laughter as they stare at her Dolly Parton-sized breasts—cleavage spilling over the deep “v” of her white blouse. Her favourite feature and one that she often teases me about getting myself—a curse I vehemently decline at the age of 14. The restaurant is hers; the patrons are as well. Leaning toward her, they are as eager for the food that she masterfully cooks as they are for her company. She flirts and laughs while her eldest son, Shayne, mans the kitchen. At 22, he is as skilled a chef as his mother.

Our sister, my mother’s only biological daughter, waits the other tables in the busy restaurant as my mom takes a break from the grind to bask in the glow of her adoring fans. I can hear her answering questions the men ask as a tall biker, with salt and peppered hair and beard, walks into the restaurant. Her eyes follow him as he crosses the room and slides into her booth and blocks the woman from sight. Her voice comes to me in snippets and that is life with Brenda...moments of her that are fleeting before she moves on to something more enjoyable than the teen silently clearing a table across the room.

Snippets of tense shoulders where muscles strain against the small healing hands rubbing her soft skin. She sits in the tub, her long bleached hair cascading onto my lap as I sit on the edge. Her eyes close as I knead deeper into the stiff peaks of her shoulder blades. Her nakedness normal...something seen a thousand times. Her skin like silky flower petals but the scent drifting from her is the baby powder she uses as talc. There is nothing infantile about her as intelligent blue eyes peer up into my green ones and her mouth opens, “It’s been hard, Sirena.” It is a sigh on air tart from the black coffee she drinks before the sigh spills over to whispers of sorrow she lays in my lap like her hair. Snippets of stories she urges me to remember but how can I tell her that a five-year-old will never remember it all.

She doesn’t speak those sad stories to me now. Instead, her stories are full of the heroine that she’s always seen herself as. I close my eyes to block out the sight of her hand sliding up the arm of the biker. I wonder if her fourth husband knows she’s flirting with a new man. “Amber,” her throaty voice calls out to my sister, “Bring more coffee for us.” She holds up her empty mug.

Her gaze slides towards me as though she can feel the anger from this side of the room. Her brow furrows for a second as a hitch catches her smile, snatching it away for only a second—a shift that

only one used to watching her moods would catch. My sister falters...she's seen the dismay as well... and she glances to me, her mouth, so much like my mother's, twists in anger as she mouths, "Fuck off," before the corner lifts into a grin and she's suddenly smiling again—a mirror to the blonde across the room.

Snippets of an hour-glass figure dressed in cowboy boots, a long skirt swishing around her calves, her signature cleavage-spilling shirt and perfect curls under a cowboy hat. Swishing moments as we watch her walk down the road away from the house...escaping darker things for the sparkling innuendos of male diners, who flock to her first restaurant. My sister laughs, "You can always see Mom in the distance. Her ass always wiggles."

I nod and laugh, and we watch her wiggling away from us, ignoring the longing on our faces that, maybe, we could leave with her. My sister moves away from the window and slips on a pair of my mom's heels, swaying her hips as she saunters around the room, mimicking the silhouette of the escaping woman we'd been watching only moments before. I can almost see my mom in Amber's gangly 12-year-old frame already giving hints that womanhood isn't too far away, the same tilt of her head and blue eyes staring demurely into the mirror. She's Mom and she moves away from me in much the same way...while I try to ignore snippets of my eight-year-old self in the mirror.

"And how hard was your delivery with Sirena?" one of the men asks, but it's hard to tell which one as they all lean toward my mom. She'd been telling her favourite stories...the 48 hours of labour with her oldest son, Shayne; the slightly easier labour with Mike and Amber, her golden child, the easiest of them all.

"Sirena?" she hesitates and bites her lower lip as she ponders how to answer. She glances at me, and I see the storm in her eyes. Maybe she's remembering the sister who'd saddled her with the errant teen carrying plates of hot food to a different table, maybe she is just thinking of all the ways I fucked up—they were endless and, every time, my behaviour was held up to the light of a 15-year-old girl, my biological mother, who'd gotten pregnant and then had to put her baby up for my mom to adopt.

She laughs, "Oh god, I'm so stupid"—*she isn't*—"I always forget"—*she doesn't*—"delivery with her was the easiest"—*it wasn't*—"I simply pulled her out of a plane"—the first truth even if it was simplified and leaves out all the details. The long story of how this heroine had answered a middle of the night phone call to, "Do you want Sirena?" Nothing more, nothing less, no emotion, a three-month-old baby about to be thrown out like trash and only my aunt...my mother... could save me from that fate. My fists clench around the plates of food I'm carrying to her table, but no one notices how her words drain the colour from my face.

The excitement of the fans fade to confusion and my mom's laughter fills the silence. "She's not

my biological daughter.”

The biker glances at me, his gaze sliding over my body as he says, “Really, she looks more like you than Amber does.”

Amber scowls, an old injury of ego, and my mom laughs, “Oh, that’s only because I dye my hair. My hair used to be as red as Amber’s, but you know what they say, Gentlemen prefer blondes.”

Laughter fills the room, even if she doesn’t catch the snippets of disappointment mirrored in both of her daughters’ eyes.

“Head up.”

“God, why are you so weird?”

“Shoulders back.”

“Why can’t you be like your sister?”

“Always walk into a room with your head high because no matter how uncomfortable you are, if your head is high, you will look like you own the room.”

“Sirena, you’re too sensitive; you’ll cry at a dirty look.”

“Confidence is everything, even if you have to fake it.”

“You know, no one wanted you. They used to just drop you on the side of the road and leave you there...you’re lucky you’re alive.”

Snippets of instruction.

Snippets of confusion.

My mom was confidence, laughter, desire. Men wanted her and she knew how to use them to get the things she wanted. She could shape her children like clay...except for the hard lump of the strangeling she’d pulled out of the belly of a plane.

“Mom.” The voice draws her eyes toward the kitchen and her hand falls from the biker’s arm. “I need some help in here.”

My brother glances at me, winks with a large smile—my frequent saviour. I return the smile, as his words pull my mother from her entertainment. She stands from the table, “Guess the party’s over,” she purrs before walking across the room...head held high...commanding the attention of everyone, including the silent strangeling, yearning for more than just a snippet of her.

It Eats | Lyrae Blossom

The pit into hell
 is broken by a memory:
scorching reds bordered
 by its charcoal maw
filled with what can only be
 fractures
 (of a time long gone.)
A carpet's pattern
 its centrepiece;
the heirloom gifted by a mother to her eldest
daughter before the grieving started—
Crimson was
 once the colour of home;
 of billowing curtains and rosé candles,
 reduced to old stains that won't wash out.
White glimmers against
 the fleshy carapace
 of something sour and dead
 and hungry.
Hell is split by a memory
 it is eating,
and I cannot help
 but look inside.

1,000-1,250 Words | Alexandra Samonas

When I was three, I hit my head on the corner of my grandparents' wooden coffee table. My parents grabbed me and rushed me to the hospital. The doctor wrapped me head to toe in a blanket to restrict my movement while they stapled my head back together. I don't remember much about that experience apart from the fact that the blanket was a pale yellowish colour and I squirmed like a worm on the pavement after the rain. I don't think the nurses thought twice about wrapping me up as they did. It was probably a routine procedure for the toddlers brought in by frantic parents after hitting their heads so hard their brains might spill out if you tipped them the wrong way. If the nurses thought about the abnormality of wrapping a human being like a burrito filling, I probably wouldn't be claustrophobic today.

Claustrophobia. According to the *Oxford Dictionary*, it is an extreme or irrational fear of confined places. An extreme or irrational fear of being confined to anything. That seems pretty rational to me.

The following is a list of the most dreadful confinements:

1. Thoughts

I imagine watching static TV is almost as excruciating as being confined to my thoughts. The loud visual of tiny black and white specks vibrating on the screen is the closest comparison to witnessing my brain in its thought process. The endless buzzing of new ideas or obsessive thoughts channeling through causes the migraine of the century. My thoughts, often emotionally charged and consuming, cause me to do things that could qualify for insanity. Daily I am compelled to step evenly on the pattern of my front hall mat to ensure I do not get murdered on my walk home at night. I am obliged to turn the bathroom tap enough to the right while washing my hands to guarantee that I will have a good day—an endless labyrinth of useless debacles that serve me no good except to put my anxiety in overdrive. Oh and by the way, I finally allowed myself to be diagnosed with anxiety after years of back and forth. Obviously, as a claustrophobic, being constricted by the label of “anxiety” scared the hell out of me.

2. Elevators

I avoid elevators at all costs. A windowless rocketship that launches you into the sky, no thank you. Have you ever heard of the Space Shuttle Challenger Disaster, on January 26th, 1986? Seven astronauts were obliterated 73 seconds into the flight. Absolutely not.

3. Sheets

I cannot sleep with the sheets tucked in and some nights in clothes at all. An old lover, once bothered by my irrational need to untuck all his sheets and sleep in a tangled mess of linen, never seemed to mind that I slept naked beside him—the irony of my phobia. My sheets have been a good confidant, they have kept all my secrets. They knew the terror I felt in the night as a child who thought she saw shadow figures hanging like sweaters on the back of her door. They heard the cries and pleas of a young girl who just wanted to sleep but could not calm her mind. They held the sweat, blood, and loss of innocence of my first time. They knew the nights when my limp body fell firmly into the sheets, unable to move as panic consumed every cell. They have witnessed, they have seen the innermost parts of me.

4. 9-to-5

A recurrent nightmare occurs during the day. Usually when I am sitting amongst a room full of people, not unlike myself, vigorously taking notes on a subject they won't remember in two weeks. The dream begins and I am in a cubicle, tucked into a maze of mindless halls and desks, listening to the sounds of fingers on keyboards and sighs from 9-to-5. I am unleashed from my desk only after a long day's work, and I am rewarded by the idea of driving back to the forest of suburban houses as mundane as the grey skies when it rains. Since elementary this dream has been seeping into my mind, one drop at a time, a poison of society encouraging me to be an unremarkable patron of the 9-to-5. Fixed salary, health insurance, vacation days, stability, and predictability lull my mind, inhibiting me from desiring something else. Anything outside of the box. My parents fell into the system and it feeds off of their financial needs. Endless hours of routine, scraping together what they can to afford life and better lives, for my brother and me.

5. The Club

Am I a superhero or an artist? My ability to avoid, at all costs, anything I deem restricting is undoubtedly close to a superpower or an art form. The act of avoidance is a thrilling experience. The rush I feel successfully flopping onto my mattress after tip-toeing through the house to steer clear of the usual and limited conversation concerning man-candy and grocery lists puts me in utter euphoria. Saying no to the club was a skill set I acquired through many long months of practice as fresh meat on campus. However much I detested the idea of drinking whatever sanity I had away and waking up the next day in a swamp of self-pity, that was not the truth of why I didn't want to go. In all honesty, I was scared to death to be locked inside four walls, pushing through absent-minded bodies, making my way to an overcrowded dance floor and barely wiggling my hips. It seemed too much a tragedy of the seductive nature of dance and intoxication. Now, I surpass my limits, drinking my vodka straight from the bottle, putting on my big girl pants, and dealing with it for the "University Experience" that everyone so desperately needs. The club was my muse. Inspiring layer after layer of excuses, I painted effortlessly

on my canvas of reasons why I would not be going out with my friends for their fifth time that week. Presently, it's my downfall.

6. The City

The city, a concrete jungle as my mom would call it, with the slogan of endless possibilities which in reality is just the cheese to get you stuck in the trap—poor mouse. I will never support apartment buildings and the idea that you are just one goldfish in an aquarium of others. Did I mention I hate the aisles of fish tanks in a pet store? I wonder if Petstore fish are claustrophobic too. Perhaps I was a goldfish in another life.

7. Organized Religion

I auditioned for organized religion once. Blurring the line between role and reality was my strategy. I was the perfect Christian woman and the perfect Christian woman was me. I unbuttoned like a dress at the end of a long evening out, letting the character stitch me back together. Thank God I didn't get a callback. I have never been more damned in my life, let's just say that.

How do I end this essay when I have much more to say? How do I confine my existence, the ins and outs of claustrophobia to 1,000-1,250 words? Unfortunately, this is where I must cease to think if that is possible dear reader.

Claustrophobia is an extreme or irrational fear of confined places—an extreme or irrational fear of being confined to anything. I am inclined to say that my claustrophobia extends to this word limit. That seems pretty rational to me.

Oh shit. I am at 1,251 words.

Marianne, here are the reasons you should dump him | Sonia Zhang

1. You spend \$80 a month on eyelash extensions, but he never notices.
Without them, you feel ugly, he thinks you're ugly either way.
2. He hates that you love God, yet still he stays.
He imagines your faith like vintage wine—
wisteria sweetness steeped in Dionysian sunlight,
a nectar to sip only when it suits him.
Undying faith is a pretty thing to soul-starved men,
a fragile glass perfectly molded to hold their sins.
Please know he tolerates your religion
like a drunk father tolerates his daughter—
with half-lidded eyes and trembling fingers,
brushing off her prayers, deaf to her bluebird song.
He lets you believe in Him
cause God-loving maidens bloom into
mothers by the time they're twenty-three,
cradling children instead of dreams.
3. He's too busy to call, too tired to show up,
but he laces his skates every night for a Podunk Ontario league
that doesn't pay, carving his name into ice
that melts the second he leaves the rink.
4. He scoffs at your dinner—
hummus on chipped porcelain, five carrot sticks.
You starve for his approval,
but he's already full from the girls in his private browser.
You wither in silence,
bones sharp as Acacia thorns,
he flashes an Aristotelian smile,
happy to watch you play the lesser sex.

5. He refuses to buy you flowers,
 so Claire gets you some on her way home.
 \$6 for lavender roses at the grocery store.
 Does he even know your favourite colour is purple?
 It's fine, it's cool, you promise me.
 You spend your Friday night
 imagining garden ghosts.
 But even in your dreams,
 you see a half-wilted rose in his hands,
 snow-dusted and brittle,
 petals bruised like the sonnets he'll never say.
6. Marianne, I wrote this poem for you
 because he will never care to pen you verses
 that could unearth the Gardens of Babylon
 or breathe life into fading starlets
 and dying planets.

marianne's song | Sonia Zhang

she drives an hour outside of London to escape the sound of him

in the countryside where the wind moves slower
 cipher breaths wisp through cornfields
carrying the scent of honeycrisp apples
 and cinnamon spiced pumpkin flesh
ripening into autumn pies cooling on a windowsill

she listens to music and cries alone
rain goddesses hear marianne's song and weep along
cathartic

because the wildflowers outside taught her how to *Breathe*
sitting inside her car glassy-eyed and still *Skinny Love*
watches heaven's tears cascade upon indigo *Wildflowers*
their corollas curl to grief-stricken blues *After the Storm*
never breaking
never drowning

she asked when she came home if she was more wallflower than wildflower
she forgot she asked me the same thing last week
after he snapped at her again for daring to bloom beyond railroad's reach

marianne's song always repeats repeats repeats
but it never changes

Sweet Red Bean Soup | Ivy Tang

I always wondered if all grandmas were like mine. For a woman of such small stature, she was fiercer than even my grandfather, and she was unforgiving. Her skin was paper thin, almost translucent over her aged bones and green veins. Worn from years of working the fields and carrying straw baskets all day to sell her morning harvest. She was thin of patience. Maybe from the seven children she raised, and the grandchildren she helped rear. I was the youngest grandchild, of the youngest son. There wasn't much patience left for me.

I clenched my teeth to hold in my cries but it was impossible for my four-year-old self. It was astonishing how her hands could be the reason for such physical pain. I always wondered if other children thought of running from their grandmas like I did. Maybe they did, but not for the same reasons. I wriggled from her grasp but her hard fingers tightened on me. My bum stung again.

"Cry and you'll eat five more of those!" Her voice was high and loud, my whole body jolted with a shiver.

I sniffled and whimpered, settling down onto the couch of our small apartment. Her grip relaxed and she left me to wipe my snot with my sleeve. I watched as she left, her walk was slow but deliberate even with the little limp all old people seemed to have. She made her way into the kitchen where she never made sweet-smelling things like the grandmas I saw on my Treehouse cartoons. No pies that sit on the window sill, or gooey chocolate chip cookies.

My brain was fuzzy and heavy from the exhaustion of crying, and the lack of oxygen that could break through the thick barrier of snot.

"Come here and sit," she ordered from the kitchen. Her heavy northern Vietnamese accent weighed down the words into something commanding.

I waddled over to the kitchen table, scrunching my dress in my small hands, and stared at her. Her silver-white eyebrows furrowed and her gaze became steely again. The hairs on the back of my neck tingled and I hurried to climb onto the wooden chair. Its smooth seat was slick and sticky under my palms in the summer heat. I frowned at it.

Gently, she put a bowl in front of me and the frown dissipated. The amber brown liquid and red beans so dark they were almost black swayed until they finally stilled in the bowl. I quickly began eating. The liquid was so sweet from the rock crystal sugar she used, just right for my childish tastebuds. I scooped even faster. The beans were so soft their delicate skin burst in my mouth, releasing their thick powdery insides. The neutral taste balanced out the sweetness of the liquid. Despite having been chilled in the fridge, it made my chest warm.

My grandma stroked my hair as I ate, just sitting there and watching. Her touch was soft, I didn't notice it then.

the same sky | Cadence McGillicuddy

It keeps me from sleep,
the sudden awareness that we're tucked beneath the same sky.

Blanketed by the same stars and full,
bright moon.

I'm scared I'll roll over and see you,
your face a hair's breadth away,
breaths mingling with my own.

I'm afraid to meet your eyes,
to measure what I find there,
whether it'll be relief or resentment
or recognizable at all.

I'm terrified of what you might say,
that the silence stretching between us will shatter
and the pieces will open my flesh to wounds
I've long since closed.

I'm scared to roll over,
so I breathe in the space that I have for now,
paved roads and time and possibilities between us
while I do not face you.

I pull the blanket around myself a little tighter,
the sheet thick with stars going taut,

trying to gage whether you hold onto it too.

Everybody Wang Chung Tonight | Maureen Anne Tucker

I am not allowed to accept a Saturday night date after Wednesday of the same week. This is one of Mum's ridiculously antiquated rules about dating that I think is exceptionally stupid. I constantly remind her that this is 1984 and the world has changed. She says playing a bit hard to get teaches a boy that I have high standards, and I am "not the type of girl who is available at the snap of a small-town Romeo's finger." For such an old lady, some of Mum's 1950s dating rules work surprisingly well. Playing slightly aloof during Couples Skate at the roller rink worked and I finally caught the green eye of the boy I have liked/loved since our Grade 10 class trip to Ottawa. For him, I said "yes" on a Thursday, but I didn't tell Mum.

Our Saturday date is to see *Ghostbusters*. Going to a show is pretty much the only non-bogus social event available unless there is a Junior Farmer's Dance. It is the after-movie part of the date I like best: touring. Going for a tour means driving up and down our tiny ten-block Main Street as many times as you can before curfew (mine: 10:30pm on a Saturday) with your tunes cranked and windows down, driving as slowly as possible so that everyone can see you. A successful tour lasts at least an hour, or about 12-15 songs.

On date night, we listened to Wham! during our tour. The cute boy has his cassettes in the center arm rest and lets me choose. At 10:29pm, the boy delivers me to my driveway, which is lit up like the Fall Fair midway. I can see my bathrobe-wearing dad behind the living room sheers and I know he is under a minute away from flicking the front porch lights off and on, off and on, as my signal to get inside. So, no goodnight kiss. I had been willing to risk it because "No Kissing on the First Date" is another Mum rule that I find mega-prehistoric. As we say goodnight, the boy reaches into his dad's glove box and hands me a mix tape that says, "For Maureen."

I dash past dad, hiding the mix tape in my hand. When I get upstairs to my room, I shove the cassette into my Sony Walkman, jam on my headphones and hit 'play.' The entire first side of the cassette is *Touch* by Eurythmics. The other side is Duran Duran's *Seven & The Ragged Tiger*. I listen for secret romantic clues to the boy's feelings in the lyrics of the songs—is he trying to tell me something through the songs he chose that his heart cannot share? I hear nothing but synthesizers. Duran Duran songs don't make much sense anyway.

It is all about the music in my life right now—the righteous tuneage, as I call it. Our little Mount Forest is heinously behind the music scene, but we do have our own town record store that is open on Saturdays. Your musical taste really says a lot about you. I have been a Headbanger, a Techno, a Prep (except I hate Style Council) and even a part-time Punk, but this month I am in my New Wave period. I have recently started wearing a black Boy George style trilby hat I nicked off my grandfather. I am passionate about memorizing song lyrics so I can sing confidently during tours. I

only babysit for cool families with cable TV so I can watch Much Music after I put their kids to bed early. That has helped me become an expert on music videos, knowing every band and their signature moves. So, obviously, music is my life right now. Any boy that gives me music is my type, especially someone who labels his mix tapes so neatly. I think that says a lot about a person.

Monday at school, the boy is standing by my locker before the bell. He is looking so hunky; the collar of his peach polo shirt collar is popped perfectly, and he smells like Brut. He asks me to go to the Spring Fling Dance on Friday and, since it is Monday, I say yes without a moment's guilt. I work on my outfit all week and decide to rock a black Pat Benetar skirt, moussed-up hair, and some nasty spike heels borrowed from a friend whose mother has fewer rules. I will change into those spikes at the dance and (likely) hike my skirt up a few inches. If love truly is a battlefield, I am prepared to look deadly and smell good. Love's Baby Soft good. My plan is to make him fall in love with me.

We dance to every slow song, but none of the fast ones because he says he is tired. The date is going pretty well, but I suddenly break up with the boy two hours later because he danced to Spandau Ballet's "True" with Janet Burrell, my sworn enemy who appears to be wearing the exact same dress she wore to the Valentine Sweetheart Dance. He says he had to dance with her because she picked him first for Girl's Choice, but I don't buy it. In my fury, I forget my parentally approved shoes at the Spring Fling dance and walk home in Gina's spikes. I am grounded for a week and mad at the boy for two years.

June 1986: I am home from college for the summer, babysitting by night and lifeguarding by day at the town pool. This barely keeps me in cool new tuneage and Lip Smackers, but I get a bitchin' tan. I see the boy driving his dad's gold K-Car past the pool several times a day, and I make sure to ignore him as I prowls the deck in my blue Speedo and aviators, pretending to supervise the kids during Red Cross lessons. A few weeks later, a drippy little boy in water wings hands me a mix tape that "some guy" told him to give me. It is labelled "For Maureen. From a jerk," but I do not play it. I also do not play the mix tape that shows up in our mailbox a week later. Or any of the other tapes that follow throughout the summer. I am not playing hard to get. I am hard to get. Big diff.

Fall 1986: My Speedo days are behind me, and I head back to school in the big city with my suitcases full of shoulder pads, aerobics clothes, my Walkman, and a bread bag full of mix tapes. I try not to think about the boy, but I still do. A week later my aunt/landlady hands me a package forwarded from my parents. Inside is a mix tape labelled "For Maureen. The Last One." My heart is thumping madly as I race upstairs to play it. The boy has filled both sides of the ninety-minute cassette with the same song, over and over. It is my favourite song, which he could not have known: "Everybody Have Fun Tonight" by Wang Chung. I play my mix tape for hours and when I look down, my heart is gone. I don't know what Wang Chung means. But I know I want to Wang Chung with him for the rest of my life.

"I'll drive a million miles, to be with you tonight."

Do not ask me to explain love to you. I can't. It is totally radical.

I Wish I Was Home | Nithila Shyam

You have a home.

The freeways expand to create the kind of space you believe
you can fit in, and snow covers
barren trees, the way home,
a passage of time, as if to make it okay that it is
slipping away.

People come and go and speak in
common tongue and uncommon
tongue, creating community in select
pockets of space, because your home lets you
stand out while you also try to
fit in.

People come and go and share
stories and make jokes while staying
pleasant and nodding heads, carrying with them
stories and signs and skin of faraway places, of home
across the sea.

You have a home.

Once a year you brave closed corners and
security that yells in the early hours to make your journey
a prison, in order to visit it, but it was never
your own, because you don't have the stories
your parents do.

Of people that cross paths that stay
intertwined, people with tongues of silver and perfect
rolled r's, who share
stories and exchange insults and barter the price down and
hold the unspoken truth that is history, land, language
that binds them together.

Their skin matches yours but the sea that separates
you from them
has salted your own, and you open your mouth
and you know you're not quite like them, cut from
a very different cloth. The pristine, expensive
silk that makes beautiful, netted, transparent *salwar* sleeves that
itch your skin and drive you insane.

You open your mouth and realize this place isn't so much as
home as it is a place you crave as home.
You open your mouth and realize you would rather
the silver tongues and loudness and dust more than
the luxuries your parents worked their lives for.

You're now back home and look around
at the beauty and space and are unable to find a place
for yourself.
You're back home and look at the life
you're blessed with and your very sense of being
you're robbed of.
You're back home and you can't help but wish that
it wasn't, but how do you explain that
the home that you really want
is the home your parents left
to give you a home?

The Spaces Between Us | Abigail Case Bullard

Prologue

The first time I noticed it, I was seven, maybe eight years old. It was a Saturday afternoon, and my mother was sitting outside, her hands clasped around a mug of coffee that had long gone cold. My father was in the living room, his chair turned toward the television, the sound of a Toronto Maple Leafs game filling the house. He may have loved hockey, but I'd later realize the noise filled the silence he never knew how to break. I stood in the hallway between the outside door and living room, a child's instinct pulling me toward the silence that hung in the air like a thick fog. It wasn't a loud silence, not the kind that typically comes after an argument. It was quieter than that, more deliberate. It was the kind of silence that felt like a wall.

I didn't have the words for it then, but I felt it—the space between them. It wasn't just physical, though they were rarely in the same room. It was something much deeper, something that made the air feel so much heavier, like the moments before an unforgiving storm. I didn't understand it, but I knew it was there. And as I grew older, I began to see it everywhere—in the way my mother's laughter would fade when my father walked in the room, not because he disapproved, but because he'd freeze, uncertain how to join in, and in the way my father would quickly retreat outside for a cigarette after dinner. It was in the way they spoke to one another, with their words polite, but distant, like strangers exchanging pleasantries.

The Map of Us

My parents' marriage was a map of unspoken words. They navigated their lives together like two people who had memorized the same route but never shared a destination. My father was a man of few words; his love language was action—fixing things I broke before I asked, working overtime to help pay for swim team and rugby fees, sitting at my swim meets and rugby games even though he didn't really like crowds. His emotions buried deep beneath layers of practicality and routine, never out of coldness, but because no one had ever taught him how to dig them up. He woke up at the same time every morning, ate the same breakfast, and left for work with the same quiet determination. My mother, on the other hand, was all movement and sound. She filled the house with the same 90s and early 2000s rock mixes, her voice humming along to the stereo as she cooked or cleaned. But when my father was home, the music stopped. The house grew still, as if holding its breath.

I used to think their dynamic was normal, even comforting in its predictability. But as I grew older, I began to notice the cracks in the facade. There were moments when my mother's smile didn't reach her eyes, when my father's silence felt less like quiet strength and more like a man drowning in

words he couldn't say. I started to wonder if they had ever been different and if there had been a time when their love wasn't defined by the spaces between them.

I used to think that the way they orbited each other without ever colliding was normal. They didn't fight, not in the way some of my friends' parents did. There were never any raised voices or slamming doors. But there was also seldom laughter, rare shared glances, no quiet moments of connection—just quiet coexistence. Wasn't that what love was supposed to be? Stability over passion, endurance over fireworks? They were like two stars in the same galaxy, close enough to see but too far apart to touch.

The Art of Not Speaking

By the time I was twelve, I had become an expert in the art of not speaking. I learned how to read the silence, to interpret the spaces between words. I knew when my mother's cheerful chatter was a mask for something she didn't want to talk about. I knew when my father's quietness was more than just his usual reserve. I could feel the weight of their unspoken words, the things that they never said to each other or to me.

One evening, I came home from school to find my mother sitting at the kitchen table, her face pale. My father was standing by the sink, his back to her, loading the dishwasher. The air between them was thick with tension, and I could tell something had happened. But when I asked if everything was okay, my mother just smiled and said, "Of course. Everything is fine."

It wasn't fine. I could see it in the way my father's shoulders stiffened, in the way my mother's hands trembled as she reached for her coffee. But I didn't push. I had learned by then that some things were better left unsaid.

That was the day I realized silence wasn't just the absence of sound—it was its own kind of violence. And yet, even then, I couldn't bring myself to break it. Because silence, once it settles, becomes a habit. And habits, like ghosts, are hard to kill.

The Breaking Point

The breaking point came on a cold winter night a few years later. It was high school exam season and the three of us were sitting in the living room, the television flickering in the background and the sound of *Criminal Minds* faintly playing. My father was in his chair, his eyes fixed on the screen, while my mother and I sat on the couch. The silence between them was heavier than usual, and I could feel it pressing down on me.

Finally, my mother spoke. "Do you remember when we first met?" she asked, her voice soft but steady.

My father didn't look at her. "Of course I do," he said, his tone flat but his fingers tightening around the armrest.

"We were so young," she continued, as if he had never spoken. "We had so many dreams. Do you ever wonder what happened to them?"

For a moment, there was only the sound of the television, the faint murmur of voices from the screen. Then my father stood up, his chair scraping against the floor. “I’m going to bed,” he said, his voice tight. And just like that, he was gone.

My mother sat there for a long time, her hands folded in her lap and her eyes distant. I wanted to say something, to comfort her, but I didn’t know how. So I sat with her in silence, feeling the weight of all the things we never said. That night, I lay in bed, staring at the ceiling, wondering if this was what love looked like—two people sharing a life but never really touching, never really seeing each other.

The Aftermath

After that night, something shifted. The silence between my parents became louder and more pronounced. They stopped pretending, stopped trying to fill spaces between them with empty words and forced smiles. They were still polite and friendly, but the distance between them was undeniable.

I remember the day they dropped me off at university with my bags in hand and my future stretching out before me. My mother hugged me tightly and my father patted my back strongly. “Take care of yourself,” he said, his voice gruff, his eyes avoiding mine as he shifted his weight from one foot to the other. The words felt heavy, like they carried more meaning than what he was willing to say aloud. I nodded, swallowing the lump in my throat, and tried to smile, though, like my mother, it didn’t quite reach my eyes. “Stay out of trouble,” he added, his tone softening just enough to let me know he cared, even if he couldn’t bring himself to say it directly. Then, in a rare moment of vulnerability, he pulled me into a quick, fierce hug. I felt his heartbeat racing—this man who was always so still—and realized his silence wasn’t indifference. It was a language of love, flawed and fragmented, but love all the same.

I may have moved away to university, but I carried that silence with me. It followed me into my own relationships, into the way I communicated—or didn’t—with the people I loved. I found myself repeating the same patterns, the same avoidance, the same fear of saying too much or not enough. It was as if the silence had become a part of me.

The Reckoning

A few months later, I found myself sitting across from my mother at the kitchen table. The silence between us was different now, it was softer. We had watched each other grow, and with age had come a kind of understanding, a recognition of the things we had lost and the things we still had.

“Do you ever regret it?” I asked her, the question slipping out before I could stop it.

She looked at me.

“Regret what?”

“The silence,” I said. “The spaces between us.”

She was quiet for a long time, her hands wrapped around that mug of coffee. Then she smiled, a sad, longing smile. “I think we all have regrets, honey. But the silence... It wasn’t all bad. It taught us how to listen, even when no one was speaking.”

I wanted to argue, to tell her that silence had cost us everything—real conversations, real vul-

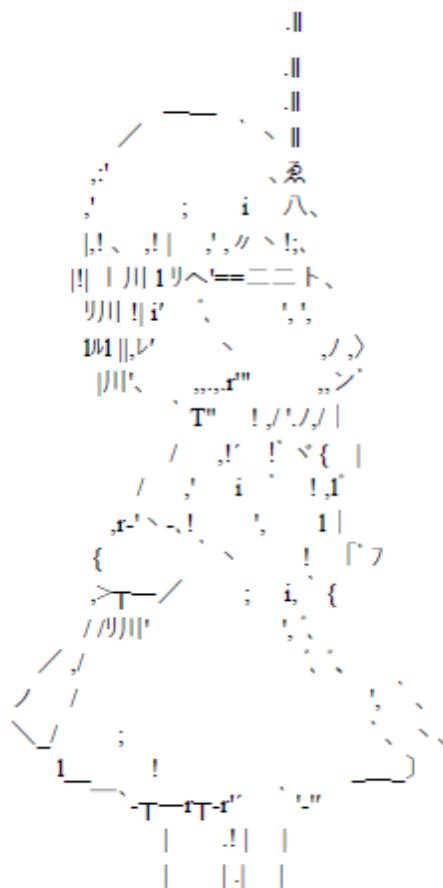
nerability, real love. But maybe she was right. Maybe in the absence of words, we had learned to hear the things that mattered most: the ache of loneliness, the quiet plea for connection, the love that lingered beneath the unsaid.

Epilogue

I think about that conversation often, about the spaces between us and the things we never said. I think about my parents and the life they built together, a life filled with both love and silence. I think about the ways we carry those spaces with us and the ways they shape and define us.

The truth is, we are all made up of the things we say and the things we don't. My father's silence wasn't a wall, it was a bridge he didn't know how to cross. The spaces between us are just as important as the words we speak. They are the pauses in the music, and while they can be heavy, they can also be beautiful. Because it is in those spaces that we find the strength to keep going, to keep trying, to keep loving—even when the silence feels like too much to bear.

And maybe, just maybe, the first step to bridging those spaces is daring to speak into them.



Can I ever make sense to you?



The threshold I walk is an origami fold
sanctioned off and quarantined
by a glass wall, fog
shrouding whatever's behind.

I hear your voice bouncing off that crystal mirror
and I know —inside my soul—
we'll never truly meet.

.||
.||
.||
.||

It's not a lack of understanding
or a misfire of bullets,
but a wall constructed for my protection
by this fat I call a brain.

.||
.||

I couldn't tear it down if I tried
because then I would die—
instructions-not-included with
this amnesia-divided consciousness.

.||
.||

This is how I function!
I know it's inhuman!
I'm too self aware for my own good.

.||
.||

DO NOT BREAK GLASS

printed in yellow letters
across the horizon
where your voice resides.

Please, just touch me!—
—I'm starving—
—I'm starving...

It's raining on my side.

Come Back Fred Pick Roses with Me in March in Greater Romania | **Fiona (Yuan) Gao**

*We blossomed in the Marsh of Greater Romania
Waiting for the Visit of March in Amnesia
We loved picking Roses
Ergo we picked Roses
Idly we picked two wilted Roses
Merely the Eden ruins left
Alone Nobody will notice that
Raw Marks on the Thorns
Watering those decayed
Had no use to our Garden
Yes they were withered
And no Eyes witnessed us
Let the Spiders within Fred
And watch the Petals drip
Count their Legs with me
And praise the Bees
Never sigh
Never cry
Never lie—
Never ask why—
They tighten the Noose—
Extending to the Necks of—
Lined up rotten Cornflowers—
Let us rest at the Caucasus Peak
Where Olympian eagles drain our Blood
How a Garland be made
Yet let those be unchained
From the Tempest
From the Stab
From the Slap
From the Harvest*

oCcasUs

High School Creative Writing Contest

Fiction

Winner:

Aashrith Raj Tatipamula for “The Glassblower’s Ephemera”

Runners-Up:

Jin Lu Yu for “Adagio”

Ethan Oh for “Silent Notes”

Yasmina El Hajjar for “Late Night Hospitality”

Poetry

Winner:

Day Liyanage for “Boyhood in the Age of the Apocalypse”

Runners-Up:

Carrie Liang for “Where the Ocean Folds”
Daniel Brunt for “The Eulogist and the Quill”
Noor Ansarian for “Woman Off the Cliff”

Creative Nonfiction

Winner:

Day Liyanage for “Nietzsche, Me & All the Deaths of the NPC”

Runners-Up:

Jin Lu Yu for “A Ticket to the Fair”
Jas Singh for “Confrontation No. 4”

The Glassblower's Ephemera | Aashrith Raj Tatipamula

In the heart of a city where cobblestones whispered of forgotten centuries, Elara's workshop glowed like a dying star. Her furnace roared, a dragon caged in brick, its breath staining the air with ash and ochre. She worked at midnight, when the world stilled, her hands—scarred, steady—shaping molten glass into permanence. But permanence, she'd learned, was a myth.

The rose was her masterpiece. For three years, she'd spun failures: petals too thick, stems too brittle, colors that dulled like regret. Tonight, though, the glass obeyed. It bloomed under her breath, crimson spiraling into translucent veins, thorns sharp enough to draw blood. She named it Sempiternal, a joke only she understood.

A knock fractured the silence. A child stood in the doorway, barefoot and soot-smudged, eyes wide as the moon pinned above the alley.

"I followed the light," the girl said, pointing to the furnace.

Elara nearly shooed her away—children were chaos—but the girl's gaze clung to the rose.

"It's like fire caught in ice," she whispered.

Elara's throat tightened. No one had ever seen the work, only the price.

"Come," she relented, nodding to a stool.

The girl perched, silent, as Elara resumed her dance with the blowpipe.

"Why don't you make birds?" the girl asked suddenly.

"Birds?"

"They could fly. This..." She gestured to shelves cluttered with goblets, vases, all unsold. "It just sits."

Elara's laugh was a dry thing. "Glass doesn't fly."

"You could try."

The rose trembled in Elara's grip. She set it down, too carefully.

"What's your name?"

"Lira."

"Go home, Lira."

But the child returned the next night, and the next, a shadow drawn to the furnace's pulse. On the fourth night, she brought a feather—a sparrow's, frayed and ordinary—and laid it beside Sempiternal.

"For your birds," she said.

By the seventh night, the rose was finished. Elara held it up, its facets fracturing lamplight into a hundred rubies.

Lira clapped, then froze. "It's sad," she murmured.

“Sad?”

“It’s perfect. Now it can’t become anything else.”

Elara’s pulse spiked. “That’s the point.”

“My mama says perfect things scare people,” the girl said with a shrug.

The words lingered like smoke. At dawn, Elara found Lira’s feather wedged in the workshop door. She tucked it into her apron, a fossil of an idea.

Disaster struck at noon. A merchant came, praised Sempiternal, haggled viciously. Elara refused. He left, cursing.

She retreated to the workshop, only to find Lira there, reaching for the rose.

“Don’t!” Elara barked.

The girl jerked back. The rose teetered, fell—and shattered.

A thousand shards glittered on the floor, each a tiny requiem. Elara knelt, hands hovering, as if she could reassemble time.

Lira crouched beside her, tears cutting through grime. “I’m sorry,” she choked.

Elara’s anger rose, molten, then cooled. She picked up a shard.

“Come here.”

They spent hours melting fragments into new forms: a sparrow with wings like liquid amber, a tulip curled protectively around its own stem, a fox mid-leap.

Lira blew clumsily into the pipe, creating a lopsided orb.

“A moon,” she declared.

Elara studied it. “It’s flawed.”

“So is the real one.” The girl grinned, holding it aloft. Light seeped through uneven glass, painting her face gold.

By winter, the workshop brimmed with fragile birds. Elara hung them from rafters, where they spun in drafts, casting kaleidoscopic shadows.

Lira strung the moon on wire; it glowed above the door, a beacon for wanderers.

The merchant returned, demanding the rose.

Elara gestured to the menagerie. “Take your pick.”

He scoffed. “These? They’re... uneven. Broken.”

“Yes.” She smiled, handing him the sparrow. “But they fly.”

Boyhood in the Age of the Apocalypse | Day Liyanage

It is true, we shall be monsters, cut off from all the world; but on that account we shall be more attached to one another.

-Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*

Dear Mattie,

The spaceships came down on a Sunday, just like you said they would. How did you know? Tell me, one day, if you made it out. When the world split in two down the equator and the furrow of your eyes, tell me there was a moment when you remembered to think of me. And one day, when we sit in the dark and exchange stories, like all the zombie apocalypse survivors in your '90s comics,

with our knees pressed under our chins and our hearts hammering,
maybe we can find some semblance of ourselves again.

For what is a home, except a respite to house our regrets? I bite my tongue and let the red ink stain my mouth: a palette of wounds to dream up stories. I feel the whirl of the ship engines, thrusters firing as heaven fell on us. They were perfect, in their scrap-metal, ugly glory, and when it's all gone, I'll ask you to—

Remind me again how suburbia smells. Tell me how forgotten gods stirred at dusk to prowl dusty highways and how their lilting song brought our moons and tides a little closer. (The best years are behind us, is an echo and a eulogy—a kiss of death as intoxicating as the idea of falling in love with you.)

Emily Dickinson wrote
“hope is the thing with feathers” but maybe that is just another word for
the exhaust of artists and lovers that settle on rooftops and power lines
like gentle giants. To be resurrected softly by the wind, unseen,
a Trojan horse with a step so wide that he secretly dreamed he could fly.

My devil is a creature of the daylight. It is the rain that both
feeds and swallows the worlds below. In sanctimony, the winters and I
have held each other across changing hues of sky and shifting ley lines.

Another year, on another planet, I will tell you
people come and go, but flowers
can grow over breaks in earth and skin; how in good soil, it is true that
a cherry pit can tenderly anchor its memoirs to grow another season’s tree. You and I do not
know
each other’s faces anymore but sand holds down history in sepia.

When the lighthouse keeper is out and the tide is high,
seasick ships blow over in the wreckage, and remnants of old treasures
burrow into the shores, making space for the weeds to breathe
and lay our griefs to rest among their roots.

Nietzsche, Me & All the Deaths of the NPC | Day Liyanage

I hate crowds but I love cities—that feeling of being everywhere and nowhere at all, of existing in the spaces between things. It’s not a stretch to say that I live behind other people’s words. In a megalopolis of bustling, intersecting lives, I’m content to blend into the gaps between lines on a page. A splotch of grey, an echo that someone was there. We all know how this story ends.

I started playing video games a few years ago, and the emotional process is not unlike that of navigating a city. I enjoy the story, the larger vision, the glamour and the promised light at the end of the tunnel. The mechanics less so. The truth about dying that no one told me before I got blasted to bits in gameplay is that it is painfully, almost irrevocably awkward. Here it is, that frozen moment in time with the GAME OVER screen, the supposed end of the line and you’ve given everything to come here and none of it mattered. But the world keeps going on. How do you deal with the aftermath? How do you scrape yourself off the grass after the credits roll? It is perhaps worse still to have to load it up again and give it another shot, knowing you’ll end up with the same fate.

By now, I’ve burned through thousands of lives. I keep making the same mistakes, going down the same paths, fumbling the same sequences over and over—but with every playthrough, I’d like to think I’ve gotten stronger. The instinct to win is a muscle that must be crafted to involuntariness, and nothing does that better than exposure.

In every replay of my life, I’m an NPC. I’m outside of my own grasp, lost in the billboards and city lights of a materiality I don’t know what to do with. I move in circles around my own body, around my heritage and my roots. Revolving satellite.

One of my favourite video games, *Celeste*, is all about rebirth. It’s a gorgeous platformer with a perfect soundtrack and smooth, wonderful gameplay control—but all this only serves to accentuate the main storyline. *Celeste* is a notoriously difficult game. Our red-haired heroine, Madeline, endeavours to reach the top of the Celeste mountain, a snow-capped, dangerous and mostly lifeless terrain that is as unforgiving as it is beautiful. It can, and has, been read as a direct allegory for the trials of gender transition. To be searching for yourself—to be transgender—is to question every new level, to punctuate every jump with the sick feeling of synchronous release and the agony of free-falling. But all the deaths in *Celeste* don’t change anything. The player knows there’s an end to the climb, and under every planned logistic, it’s reachable. Difficult maybe, but inevitable.

Nietzsche hated cities but he loved art—he believed it was the only thing that could unseat the nihilism of life. Art, which made life bigger. I find that ironic, but there’s a peace in it too. Am I anything more than what I love? The sum of all my parts, made into a death count on the loading screen.

Give me the stage and I will find a way to disappear into the background, into the shadows of someone else’s light. Make me the protagonist of a video game and watch me shape it into a different

story, an annihilation so catastrophically silent that it might not have happened. I'm only one more voice in the din—one more body to count up when the crowd leaves.

God is dead. Against the cross, on the mountain, in my hollow of my knuckles. But I find myself going back to the controller. I edit my words. I go into the streets.

In every replay of my life, I keep coming back.

Contributors

Alexis Grace Agas is a fourth-year Western University student pursuing an Honours Specialization in Creative Writing and English Language and Literature. At Western she has found a passion for aestheticism and formal verse.

Jonas Bahn is a fourth-year English student from Yellow Springs, Ohio. His work often touches on themes of urban decay, surrealism, and cosmic horror. Jonas enjoys finding beauty in deeply unpleasant things, from bad movies to crumbling cities. He wants to be an author when he grows up.

Cyrus Bechtold is a first-year psychology student who took Writing 1000.

Lyrae Blossom (she/they/it) is a neurodivergent Canadian writer crafting visceral, surreal poetry from the marrow of trauma, dissociation, and survival. Her work—often walking the knife-edge between magical realism and psychological horror—explores grief, haunting, and the uncanny with startling imagery and emotional precision. She is currently a creature of London, ON, studying an Honours Specialization in Creative Writing and English Language and Literature at Western.

Abigail Case Bullard is a first-year Western student who, in her piece, explores the weight of unspoken words—the quiet fractures in relationships, the languages of love that go unheard, and the spaces between people that shape who they become. “The Spaces Between Us” is her first published work and she hopes that this is the first of many. When not writing, Abigail studies a double major in Sociology and English Language & Literature, and also plays for the Western Women’s Rugby Team.

Ella Comber is an aspiring writer from the East Coast, currently studying in the Arts and Humanities program at Western University. Through creative writing, she explores complex emotions within nostalgic settings, scenes, and memoirs, often highlighting overlooked aspects of life. Ella is dedicated to developing her craft and sharing a unique perspective of the world and emotions through her work.

Maeve Lang is a third-year Integrated Science student at Western, with a specialization in genetics. She is fascinated by the connection between science and art, and is thrilled to be able to use writing to share the beauty she finds within genetics. In her spare time, she enjoys reading, rock climbing, and crocheting stuffed animals with her cats.

Finishing her Honours Specialization in Creative Writing and English Language and Literature, **Rachael Langdon** has been writing since middle school, and has loved to read since her Grandmother introduced her at 10 years old. Now, Rachael can be found reading Fantasy and Sci-Fi, genres which often feature in her writing. She enjoys writing experimental fiction where she can think outside of the box, and her ADHD tendency to hyperfixate on her interests inspires character studies and analysis. When not reading or writing, Rachael is usually playing video games, upcycling anything she can find, and scolding her rabbit, Wylan.

Quinnesha Leslie is happy to contribute to *Occasus*.

Natalia Margaritis is enrolled in the Minor in Creative Writing at Western University.

Ollie Mazerolle lives in Ottawa, Ontario and is completing a degree in English Literature and Creative Writing at Western University.

Cadence McGillicuddy is from Burlington, Ontario. She is completing a degree in Computer Science with a Minor in Creative Writing at Western. She enjoys reading fantasy novels, lifting heavy at the gym, and getting bagels at The Spoke during study breaks.

Felicity Moziar is a third-year English Literature student at the University of Western Ontario. Many of her pieces come from her own life experiences.

Alexandra Samonas is a second-year student pursuing a degree in History at Western University with a Minor in Writing. Her family shares a love of reading and writing and she often bookshops with her grandmas. Having a collection of books too large is not an issue but a dream. She hopes to see the title of her work lining the aisles of Indigo and Barnes & Noble someday, with the dedication: My grandma wanted something to read so I wrote it.

Gharish Santhakumaran lives in Vaughan, Ontario and is completing a degree in BMOS (Bachelor of Management and Organizational Studies) at Western University. He is just beginning to submit his work to journals, and this is his first publication. This story was written as part of Dr. Andrew Wenaus' Writing 1000 course at Western.

Nithila Shyam has been fascinated with storytelling since she was a child. She has always wanted to write something that immerses people and feels real. Over the pandemic, Nithila was writing nearly every day to transform negative emotions and loneliness into something that could connect with others. She loves poetry, fiction, and playwriting and hopes to write a novel someday.

Ivy Tang is a student who has a love for narrative writing despite struggles in a world where original ideas seem to be dwindling and creative sparks are hard to find. Turns out art does not have to be original to be enjoyable. Sometimes in its unoriginality, there is familiarity, a point to relate to. With this realization and the discovery of nonfiction writing, which to her surprise did not pertain only to textbooks and animal encyclopedias, she'd found a new creative outlet. She hopes others will find something to resonate with within her work and maybe come to also realize the joy of nonfiction writing.

Maureen Anne Tucker is a second year Writing Studies student still extremely excited to be at Western University after 40 years of dreaming about it. She is also studying a bit of History, and anything else that sounds remotely interesting.

Nyla Tukker is currently enrolled in a double major in Philosophy and Creative Arts and Production with a certificate in Digital Communication.

Riley Van Loon is a fourth-year student enrolled at Western University finishing up her Honours Specialization in Creative Writing and English Language and Literature. Beginning with a passion for writing at a young age, her University degree has allowed her to polish her skills as a writer and ready herself for the publishing world. Her first published poem was in Western's Student Poetry Chapbook, SNAPS, in the Fall of 2024, titled "Thanksgiving." Although she has very limited familiarity with the publishing field, she hopes to expand and continue to share her works of poetry and fiction to gain more experience.

Sirena Van Schaik is a third-year mature student pursuing an honours specialization in Gender and Women's Studies with a Minor in Creative Writing at Western. She holds an MA in creative and critical writing as well as a post graduate certificate in creative writing. Her work often explores themes around the impact of structural and interpersonal violence against gendered bodies. She plans to pursue her PhD in Gender Studies.

Fiona (Yuan) Gao is a second-year international student from China, pursuing a major in English with a minor in German. The poem/experimental writing, "Come Back Fred Pick Roses with Me in March in Greater Romania," is an attempt to capture post-WWI sentiments, with references to images in the interwar period, such as the mental & physical loss from war, the political result of the Trianon Treaty, and the first President of the Weimar Republic.

Sonia Zhang is a third-year student at Western University, pursuing an Honours Specialization in Creative Writing and English Language and Literature. She enjoys crafting poetry and creative non-fiction, often delving into the complexities of human relationships, both romantic and platonic. Her submissions belong to a larger chapbook titled *dear marianne*, originally created for Professor Barrick's WRIT 2220F course. These poems are a series of letter-inspired confessions addressed to women in troubling relationships. The character of Marianne serves as a fictionalized persona drawn from Sonia's real-life experiences with friends.

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