
The Artery 2021

the very beginning,
which had dry

From nothingness,

the first faint outlines begin to emerge.

Mighty Myth Born a Tiny Creature

changes do occur,
conscious."

Minds and Bodies *grow*

the unwanted growths cause permanent harm

the animal begins to take adult shape

The ditch to nowhere:

We do more than is humanly possible

a relentless tide of men and money

an appetite that knows no limit,

pigs chow down

Life Fraught With Peril

Man's Destruction

...had brought a

Still fishing at 82

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Some characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead is coincidental and not intended by the authors.

President's Address

Normally, I would start off *The Artery* with a message of hope and pride and celebration of our artists and writers, and a greeting to you, reader, welcoming you to this year's labour of love. However, this past year has been anything but normal. "Normal" and "new normal" are phrases that have been thrown around and out with the bathwater. We have seen so much pain and suffering this past year, we have felt so much pain and suffering this past year, but we are here.

We are here.

And so, we humbly offer up the works of our talented writers that have poured their hearts and minds and time into their craft, despite everything that has happened this past year. And this is why we are here. Creativity can often be an outlet for pain or a place to work out trauma, fear and sadness. In *The Artery*, we are glad to provide both a space for these works of healing and a community in which we can offer support and connection.

Normally, I would start off *The Artery* with a message of hope, but I think the very fact that this edition has been created - that there are artists, writers, and volunteers that participated in the creation of the 2021 edition of *The Artery* - is a message of hope within itself.

We are here to stay.

And I am both excited and proud to see what's in store for *The Artery* in the years to come.

We thank you, readers, writers, artists, and volunteers, for your continued support and interest in Lakehead University's literary magazine, and we hope you enjoy the 2021 edition of *The Artery*.

Take care and stay safe, readers,

Your ESA President,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Leandra Howald', written in a cursive style.

Leandra Howald

Letter from the Editor

To begin, I would like to thank everybody who submitted. We could not produce *The Artery* without you, and I appreciate all of the work you put into crafting pieces and confronting the occasionally terrifying prospect of having your work read. I know, especially during the pandemic, it can be difficult to put pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard) and produce a work with which you are satisfied. It is a problem I also struggle with in my own writing. For your courage and the immense talent you've displayed, thank you.

I would like to thank our associate editors: Madison Maki, Taylor Onski, Jo Mousseau-Krahn, and Sarah Whorpole. Without them, I would not have been able to produce this magazine. Their tireless work during the first round of edits vastly streamlined the work that I did later and many of the edits that are reflected in your work come from these talented and attentive folks. It has been a privilege to work with these brilliant women and I hope they will continue to contribute editorial commentary to many projects in the future.

Of course, I give my thanks to Rochelle Lamarche, our ESA Orillia Representative, who also served as our production designer. She was indispensable to the process of crafting the aesthetic of this edition of *The Artery*. Rochelle's experience and insight in design oozes from every page you read, and I thank her for all her guidance and support.

Last but certainly not least, I would like to thank our ESA president, Leandra. Her tireless work to coordinate and manage events this year gave me much more time to concentrate on *The Artery* and the difficulties the pandemic has placed on our project here. Beyond her work with the English Students' Association, Leandra has been a tireless advocate for all of our English students as the Student Representative on both the Departmental and Graduate English Committees. Leandra has been a pleasure to work with, and I know she will bring her tenacity, precocity, and vivacity to many projects in the future. May we all be so lucky as to see the fruits of her endeavours.

In Solidarity,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Matthew Benoit".

Matthew Benoit

Table of Contents

Winners of the 2021 *The Artery* Writing Contest

life as a prayer - Tina Munroe
inside-out boy - Austin Campbell
Gooseberries - Kelsey Douglas
Fleeting Funeral Flights - Samidha Kalia
Strange, New Beginnings - Sanjana Sharma

Times and Space Bleak and Terrible

Ivy League Student – Evalina Sachetti
The Story Holder – Andrew Brigham
We Will Sing songs - Sanjana Sharma
I Ought to be Thy Eve - Madison Maki
Tower of Bones - Sena Honke
Life Compromised - Kelsey Douglas
Musical Energy - Sarah Whorpole
Unmasking the Weeds - Marc Viherkoski
WHEN: A Four-Letter Word for A Long Four Years - Taylor O'Brien
Coughing, Chest Pain, and COVID - Kelsey Douglas
Reconvergence - Emma Maki

Pen to Paper (or Fingers to Keyboard)

An Amateur TedTalk about Writing - Taylor Onski
The Phone Call - Cristina Morriello
Endless Possibilities - Sanjana Sharma
Bloom - Taylor Onski
Growers Eyeder – Evalina Sachetti

Penning Lines on Your Skin

(After) Sunset #75 - Marc Viherkoski

“baby love child” - Austin Campbell

Unlearned Apathy - Sydney Kondreska

Hannah hannaH - Austin Campbell

Sunshine Walks Beside Her - Ryan McCulloch

Thing Called Love - Ashley Stewart

The Hearts Infidelity - Shanna Scarr

Perhaps... - Alexandra Dowhoszya

Coping with the Rainbow's Light - Ashley Stewart

Me, Myself, and Pie - Taylor Onski

A Love That's True - Marc Viherkoski

Confirmation and Apostasy - Matthew Benoit

Cum Passio - Matthew Benoit

Artery 2021 Writing Contest Winners

Grand Prize Winner:

life as a prayer

Tina Munroe

this body is *opwaagan*
when i join the stem
that is my flesh
with the bowl
that is my mind
my spirit comes alive
i am *gashpashizhistikwe*

like smoke i rise
up towards the sky
i do my work
where eagles fly
the highest

the words of these lips
the actions of these hands
the direction of these feet
are all meaningless
if not connected
if not constellated
to the chart in my mind

the knowledge i seek
becomes tobacco
for my mindbowl
i light fires of offering
with my beingness
to that grandmother
who lowered me
as i walk on
in grace
back to the stars

Runners Up:

inside-out boy

Austin Campbell

i'm still trying not to cry...

is that the magic of sadness?

the way it unravels like a snake

sunning itself

along the length of your spine

until it recoils

wrenches and writhes your body,

a sick sobbing messy dance?

bottled tears mean nothing

if they can't be filtered and sold

packaged and shipped

snorted and sliced and injected

scraped off of the ground

dirt gold money

with blood in the soil;

why not sell it or,

better, (better?)

yourself (sex)?

talent.

i turned myself inside out

for the world

like knives buried in my back

so deep i feel the hilt of each blade

then watch,

as angels in human clothes

melt knives like butter

with sweet sarcasm

and soft kisses

watch this inverted metamorphosis

and remember:

healing is not about forgetting.

because i used to crave attention

and isn't the world a stage?

i'll never quit acting:

it's my day-job -

even when greasepaint peels

and the better jokers of our nature

discover some violent self-indulgence

i resist the call to embrace

some inner unreality

that (probably) threatens us all

breathe

(don't breathe)

breathe

(the air is toxic)

don't breathe

(we're killing

ourselves)

i'm far too young

to have been alive this long.

Gooseberries

Kelsey Douglas

The monitors monotonous beeping
Echoes through the halls
As shoes shuffle slowly
And masks cover the calls.

You turn to me and mumble
“Gooseberries, please...”
I look at you,
You gaze at me
Expectantly.

“Gooseberries, please?”
Just moments ago
You were eating tomatoes.
Your mind plays tricks on you,
You play air bingo and expect us to play too.

“Gooseberries, please-”
Where did that come from?
We’ve never had gooseberries
Or masks
Or doctors in our kingdom.

Gooseberries, please.
If I were an archeologist,
Maybe,
I’d be able to find some for your next daily
Meal.

But I’m not,
And the stores are all closed
You don’t understand the germs
Or how a simple rub of the nose
Can hurt you.

Or how it hurts us,
Not able to kiss you.
Masks on, don’t touch,
But grandma we miss you.

We’re doctors apart
And together in spirit
But don’t ask for
“Gooseberries, please”
I can’t bear to hear it.

Fleeting Funeral Flights

Samidha Kalia

I attended a funeral once
of a close one who died.
It was heart wrenching; for everyone around.
People prayed for
the soul to rest in peace.
I, staring from the window, saw the eyelids flutter.
I pulled the sleeve of my mother,
pointing towards the eyes that were now open
And the corpse making its way towards the cremation ground.
No one listened.
I was ten.
They burned a living being.
Before they buried my relative, they closed his eyes—
then fog lifting off the ground, I saw him being cremated,
Within the fire; darkness was the landscape.

I attended a funeral again.
Seven years passed from the first encounter with death.
Crying silently into my white *dupatta*,
Mourning more from recognition of who would follow next
than who was being laid to rest.
Their body was lifting, my breath drifting.
I tried to hold my breath as they lowered them to the ground.
1,2,3...30 seconds passed.
Everyone was asking for peace.
I looked at the closed eyelids.
They fluttered and then opened.
Pale and yellow.

Pallor so sickly; the corpse scared of anonymity.

Taking a breath after 60 seconds, I looked at my mother; she shushed me.

They buried a living being again.

I am twenty something now;

Attending funerals and weddings in number alike,

Have seen open-closed flutters too many times to know that sometimes celebration and death can feel the same.

The graves are laid brick by brick, and fire on flesh grows quick.

There's no reason to believe otherwise;

the darkness is the landscape for my own eyes.

Last funeral I attended was for a pigeon—that smashed
into my glass window while I was discussing an existential question
with a friend;

No one cried, I looked down at its broken neck.

There are more ways to go than one, said my friend.

The pigeon was buried on my rented land; its bones feeding the soil's fertility.

Why didn't I cremate it, I wonder?

Moments before it entered the landscape of darkness, its wings fluttered with a flightless result.

All my life, they buried the ashes of selves past
into the rich red of our holy mother's land.

Now I have stopped pointing at funerals—
instead I stare through windows; averting my gaze from the dead.

Strange, New Beginnings

Sanjana Sharma

Dust off the years.

Wipe detachment

Off your coffee table.

Come,

Let me hold your hand.

It is alright to sit down

And have tea by yourself again.

Times and Spaces Bleak and Terrible



Ivy League Student

Evalina Sacchetti

The Story Holder

Andrew Brigham

Oh that, that morn, that quiet fore storm,
And the slugabeds fast asleep.
But a hero stood, at the edge of a wood,
Reflecting on the murky keep.

The setting out, or starting in,
With hopes to find those things...
But came the loss of welkin,
And the shadows the forest brings.

Bore down upon this hiker's crown,
The temper of the trees,
To argue the outsider,
And to drive it to its knees.

During a blink, the trail kinked,
Then limped off into an abyss.
The treader trampled forward
As the clouds let out a mist.

Through all the wet the traveller bent,
To find some kind of cover.
But boughs allowed the waters down,
And spilled it all like gutters.

It showered a span and soaked a spell,
The end was well past noon.
But now the trespasser was at a loss,
The mood was swamp and gloom.

Then out of pines, a sad song sprang,
A voice of great affairs,
In language lost through neglected past,

Solemn words, as if sung by bear.

And sung by a bear, the trampler found,
Or a bearish kind of beast
For bear it was, and upon its back,
A small forest of greenery.

The beast was aware of its audience,
But continued in lament.
The fear that overtook the wanderer,
Stilled at hearing the verses spent.

The lyric grew to a bewitchment,
Then floated into dreams.
Stories were shared that night,
Those abandoned histories.

Well, perhaps we can share them hereafter,
Too much sadness before the late,
The mythical extinction,
Stains of humanity's mistakes.

Before the next day's dawn appeared
The fur-robed forest-friend,
Guided the traveller back to home,
But that's not how this story ends.

Oh that, that morn, that quiet fore storm,
And the slugabeds still fast asleep.
But the hero frowned at the edge of town,
And left that place in grief.

We Will Sing Songs

Sanjana Sharma

They will sing songs –
United by blood shed
And love lost.

Pain that you've caused them
And stains etched in their souls –
You will pay for the days you stole.
Lives lived with holes in their hearts –
You will pay
For the barren land and homes
That haunt their memories still;

You will pay for their people
You left to die, yet you're peaceful
With that belly you filled 'cause of a fruitful season
On THEIR land, from their women
And men working day and night.
You turned a blind eye
When they needed you.
Think of what happens when you won't have food,
When your stomach roars
And your appetite not even close
To satisfied,
Desperation dragging you to the streets
For any grain that they could spare.

Think of what happens when your family is in despair

Like theirs have been for months

And you'd be so helpless –

Corrupt democracy and sellout press

Won't save you then.

They have shed blood and sweat

But they would do this all over again;

We know they were honest.

They fed the whole country with every harvest;

And we will be here with them

Singing songs among the people that are left,

Praying for the love that was lost,

And for all that comes next.

(Context: Farmers' Protest, India, 2020-present)

I Ought to be Thy Eve

Madison Maki

The sun cuts sharply through the thinning towel covering the window. It wakes her every morning. Through squinted eyes, she sees the dust flying through the sunbeam that cuts through a rip in the fabric. She turns to the small box, what Elizabeth had called an alarm clock, by her bedside. But as of a few months ago, it has just sat on the small desk, silently collecting a layer of grime. The bright red numbers are stuck on 18:17, continuously flashing. The constant dull gleam of the numbers have proved a cherished distraction. The batteries, another word Elizabeth has taught her, have ran out and there seems to be little to no hope in finding new ones. Even if they could afford new batteries, which they cannot, finding any supplies lately, is rare.

She was the perfect woman. Well, the image of one, perhaps. She was not so sure. She has been *told* she is the perfect woman, made in the image of desire, longing, and contempt all at once. Elizabeth was not the one to tell her this though, it's others that have. She has discovered there is no rule book, no written guidelines for being a woman. Yet, the sum of all her parts must mean something. They do not assemble these bodies without careful consideration and thought.

There is no reflective surface in the room, she has only seen the face a select few times, looking down at murky puddles of dirty water, or the slippery black liquid she can not name. Only ever in fragments, never as a whole.

So she assumes she looks like a woman.

Suddenly, her stitches wrench her from her thoughts, a vicious reminder of her... what do they call it?

(unholiness)

Unwholeness. Her decay.

Couples who have some valuables left can trade to get bodies

(bodies?)

(creatures?)

(monsters?)

that are fused together, bonded by Skinheals, which function exactly as their name suggests. They are one of the last pieces of advanced technology, but eventually even this resource will be completely devoured. It was once possible to find skin that was not decaying, but now, finding anything healthy has been near impossible.

(people these days cannot afford to be too picky)

Skinheals are, by default, more costly, but the results are staggering. If completed very well, usually by a surgeon who was once held high regard, some can almost pass as human. Their scarring is almost invisible, and no stitching means seamless assembly.

She was bought, or ordered, or requested, however it goes, into existence by a couple with little money.

So, she was assembled together by stitches, which always hurt. The dull throb is always there, a constant, almost like the flashing alarm clock. Tik tik tik. Throb throb throb. Lately, she finds the stitching is becoming increasingly painful, as if at night someone comes down

(if it was anyone in this household, it would be the husband)

and winds them up, tightens them, in a desperate effort to keep whatever is inside of her, inside.

However, stitches or not, all creatures are supposed to be made to the Husband's liking. Of course, the Husbands still only have so much influence – the Makers need to follow the Guide. They cannot have unruly bodies, and they cannot have unregulated breeding. Everything must be approved by the Makers in a ritual that she knows nothing about. She has pieced together words from over hearing conversations – Court, docket – but these words mean nothing to her together, or alone. She knows this was the beginning of her existence, that whatever happened out there, was a debate over her existence, her birth, and that she won because she is here now, or maybe it was the Husband who won, she is never quite sure.

In her first days and weeks, the pain of the stitching was faint, like having a child gently pull on your arms, leading you somewhere. Not yet strong enough to physically move you but there just enough to notice. Now, they burn. They always seem to burn the worst in the morning, as if the old air in the house dries them out, makes them tighter, tauter, her

(hers?)

skin feels stretched to its limits, as if it could rip open any moment. Sometimes, she wants it too. She wants to dig her uneven, chewed off fingernails into her binds and just rip and rip and tear and claw and split and rip and

(vandalism is against the Redactors' rules)

“He will be back in a bit, but for now, he is gone,” the words break into her thoughts, and she recognizes them as both a warning and a proposal. She stiffly pivots her head towards the source of the gentle voice, one that has brought her some sense of comfort.

“Good morning. Well. It is late day now, I'm sure of it. You sure enjoy your sleep, huh” Elizabeth chuckles uneasily, leaning against the bare frame, arms wrapped around her thin waist. She catches Elizabeth's fingers rubbing and picking at the fabric hanging from Elizabeth's frame. She has realized Elizabeth does not even know she is doing it, the constant picking and pulling and chewing and rubbing. She's irritating the fabric that's already stressed and worn past its lifetime. As she glances down at Elizabeth's hands, she cannot help but notice the calluses on Elizabeth's hands. Sometimes she wishes those calluses would vanish. She finds, when her eyes are tightly shut and her body tense, she can hardly tell the difference between Elizabeth's hands and his.

“How are you feeling? Do you feel sick?”

(yes but not in the good way, not in the way you want me to be)

Elizabeth is intelligent, intuitive, instinctual, but she does not know it, and probably never will. But still, Elizabeth's spent face registers that she knows the answer to the question, finding it in the silence and in the stillness of her body.

“Elizabeth” Her voice cracks because she needs to force the sound out of her throat, out from within her body. Elizabeth just shakes her head and brings a fingernail to her mouth for another assault, breaking open old wounds, and blood begins to pool underneath the nail. Elizabeth's eyes flicker around the room, scanning every object in the room except for her.

(look at me, look at me)

“Did you hear what he said?” Elizabeth replies, taking a quiet step towards her.

She knows what Elizabeth is talking about. Whether Elizabeth acknowledges it or not, she has failed the one task she has been put into existence for, which is to breed. The Husband has not been silent about her failures, getting angrier and louder each time he expressed his disappointment in her unrighteous body.

“It is not true” Elizabeth replies to the empty silence between them

(it is, Elizabeth, look at me, I'm rotting, I'm dying down there, Elizabeth)

“He will not return soon; we have some time now...” But Elizabeth knows the answer, and is already making her way to the bed, not passively nor quietly anymore, but taking up as much noise and space and existence as she wants.

(I do not deserve this, she is so earthly, so ethereal, so human)

(am I not a monster?)

Well,

I did not ask to be made this way.

So yes, come lay with me, Elizabeth. Let us forget that you are you, and I am me, and there is no sense in believing it can be any other way. Let us have this moment, even if it barely exists, even if you barely exist, even though I am barely existing.

Come here Elizabeth.

Come undone, just like I am, just like I will.

Tower of Bones

Sena Honke

“If I catch you down here one more time, there will be serious consequences,” sneered the overseer, shoving Aislinn through the door.

Aislinn let out a huff and stormed away. She was frustrated with herself for snooping, but more frustrated that she had gotten caught. There were just so many *secrets* in this place, and she hated to be excluded. Exclusion meant expulsion, and Aislinn refused to ever be alone again. As the sound of the evening bell echoed in the corridor, Aislinn realized with a start that she would be late and quickened her pace.

She had been at the Tower for just over a year. The Tower was the government’s new attempt to improve the effects of humans on this dying wasteland of a planet - as if stacking their dead on top of each other solved anything. According to the government, *the Tower saved precious space that could be used for housing or reforestation*. Trying to pretend they were useful for more than housing their rotten bones. Who needed cemeteries when they have Towers to hold the bones of those long passed, and us to maintain them?

Jumping over gnarled roots and puddles of mossy dew, Aislinn could make out the dull blue tint of her skin through the hole in her shoe. The edges of her soles were caked with mud, likely from the water running down the Tower’s blue stone walls into the sooty floor. It wasn't uncommon for the floor to be covered with goo or mud from all the soot in the air - after all, the apprentices had to clean the bones one way or another. Fire was simply the quickest, and the overseers positively loved high productivity. The architects wanted to make the place seem more *natural*, like a real graveyard, overgrown and haunting, and yet it felt so alien. Aislinn chuckled to herself. She would know the feeling, after all.

Aislinn quickly arrived at her destination. She’d never been to Floor 15 before, and it gave her the chills. Most apprentices, as Aislinn and the others were called, never ventured above Floor 10. But with all the disappearances causing shortage of workers, Aislinn had received word that she was to help with the upper levels today. She only allowed herself a sliver of satisfaction at having been asked over Graham, who always attempted to outdo her, before the fear set in. Aislinn had heard the rumours from the other children, rumours of shadows around corridors and footsteps leading to nowhere. Despite the rumours, Aislinn knew she had no choice but to control her emotions, never show fear, and get back to work. She had just rounded a corridor when she heard the muffled scream and a resounding *crack*.

She froze in her tracks. She waited a moment, straining her ears to hear the screaming continue but only silence answered. In the time she’d been working at the Tower, she’d never heard screaming before. Screaming would suggest something was living within these walls and aside from the other children who worked alongside her and the overseers, there were no breathing souls.

Aislinn hurried faster, desperate for answers. Someone could be hurt, or maybe one of the children had been taken again. If she could be the one to find out what was happening, she might finally receive a promotion. A bigger ration of food for her growing body of sixteen. A larger blanket for the cold nights. A new pair of shoes.

Reaching a crossroads in the halls, she paused for a moment and strained her ears to hear something. Anything. Suddenly, Aislinn heard voices down the right corridor, and bolted in that

direction, swift footfalls echoing off the stone and air puffing out in clouds before her eyes. She paused beside the entrance to the hall where she heard the scream and realized how cold this floor was compared to the others. The Tower usually maintained a lower temperature to prevent decomposition in the rare cases the bones of the inhabitants hadn’t been properly cleaned, but this was...different. The air had a bite she’d never experienced before, and even the dull blue stones of the hall that surrounded her glistened with frost. Aislinn felt a chill in her bones that was more than just the air around her. Curling her fingers

together, she blew warm air to fight the numbing sensation that had wormed its way up her fingers. She knew she was stalling, but someone could be hurt. And something felt wrong.

Aislinn closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and gently placed one foot out to turn the corner. When she opened her eyes, what she saw terrified her more than the children's rumours ever could.

Doors lined the halls, thick and metal, with bars on the windows and giant locks beneath each handle. It looked scary. *Like a prison*, a voice in her head whispered. Goosebumps crept up her arms at the thought. Creeping down the corridor, Aislinn knew she had found the right door when she peered inside and barely stifled a gasp.

Three things were immediately visible from where she was perched on her tip-toes to snoop through the window in the door. The first was the rolling tray covered with various sharp tools. The second was the metal table in the center of the room, on which lay a pregnant, unconscious woman. She must have been the one who screamed earlier. The third was the two men in white uniforms who were standing over top of her. Aislinn froze with terror.

"Goddamnit, those mutts better not have heard her screaming. Boss told us not to let anyone find her," one of the men growled. The man was tall and looked like ghosts in the stories grandmother had told her about when she was a child. His white uniform and hat matched his pale skin and the white scruff on his face. The only notable features were his eyes, which from a distance appeared dark as night and angry as a winter storm. The man turned and grabbed a set of plastic gloves from the table, yanking them onto his hands with obvious frustration.

"It'll be fine, George. Don't worry. This should be over in no time, and then we can dispose of her," the other man stated calmly. George huffed in response. Turning towards the table, the unnamed man began cleaning the surgical tools. The other man, George's opposite, was similarly dressed in white but that's where the similarities ended. He had skin as dark as night and eyes that blended into his skin, a gentle brown darker than George's had been. Though he appeared friendlier, Aislinn's eyes drifted to the woman on the table and remembered that he was involved in whatever was going on here.

"Where did you pick this one up anyway, Arthur?" George asked after a moment. He looked up at Arthur with curiosity, but there was no sympathy in his gaze. Arthur grabbed the woman's clothes and began cutting at them with scissors, revealing the swollen body beneath. The woman's breathing was shallow, and there were bruises on her face and arms. Aislinn grimaced and hugged her arms together, rubbing at herself to get warm amongst the chill.

"That's none of your concern, George. You handle the...hands-on part of this exchange, shall we say. I handle the rest, and we both get paid." Arthur regarded George with disdain, the way one might flick a piece of dirt off their shoe.

Then his eyes twinkled with mirth as he leaned close to George's ear. Aislinn struggled to hear what he was saying, fearful of getting caught.

"But if you *must* know, we found her on a street corner on the outskirts of town. Seemed like she'd been there for a while. Nobody will ever know she's missing." Arthur grinned conspiratorially.

And then they got to work. Aislinn watched them do horrible things to that woman, mutilating her beyond repair. Aislinn had never before felt pity for humans. She was "employed" by them after they had taken her planet and made it their own, ruining it much like they did their first one, and she tended to their dead when they all turned to bones and dust. And yet, this poor woman was now certainly dead at the hands of these two men. A moment later, a new screaming began.

The child's wailing echoed down the corridor, and Aislinn covered her ears against the sound. The creature it was emanating from was tiny in the men's arms as they yanked it from the woman's belly. The mother lay dead on the table as her child was stolen from her.

“Perfect. It’s a boy. Boss will be able to fetch a pretty penny for him, don’t you think?” George grinned. He held the baby in his arms, gentle but firm.

Aislinn gasped in horror, hands flying to her mouth to stifle the sound a moment too late. The two men froze, their eyes slowly moving from each other to the doorway. The baby continued to wail in the arms of his mother’s murderers.

Aislinn didn’t know what else to do. She ran. And she screamed.

Life Compromised

Kelsey Douglas

Yellow and red scattered the ground, while the barren trees stood lonely without their leaves. The long, deserted street, devoid of human activity, was the all too recognizable vision for Eliza. Ever since the pandemic hit, everyone had been permanently entombed in the prisons they called their homes. The fall air was frigid on Eliza's bare skin, and she watched as the dead foliage swirled at her feet while she walked. Dark clouds blew overhead, which made this gloomy, empty street feel even emptier. Eliza breathed in deeply, taking in the smell of rot and decay, and couldn't help but notice that every house on the street had a face in the window. If they couldn't leave, they may as well live vicariously through her.

Eliza looked up, relieved to see the glowing "Wal-Mart" sign just ahead of her. She stumbled across the sea of garbage most people call a parking lot and took a long look at herself in the shining glass of the doors. Everything was always so shiny in the store, giving off the impression that things were cleaner than they actually were. She heard the loud screech of doors that hadn't been oiled in a long while as she walked in and nearly gagged at the lack of fresh air. It always smelled of bleach, fresh lemon and baby poop, even through the mask. She noticed the shelves were just as empty as the trees. This wasn't anything new.

She walked through the empty aisles, grateful not to see any human activity. This meant no germs would be present. The sound of her shoes hitting the glossy, almost too white, tile echoed off the sterile shelves. It hadn't always been this way there was a time when the public didn't care about the amount of people in the store or the number of times an object had been cleaned. Eliza longed for those days, the days when she didn't have to worry about how many people had touched the items she wanted or the limit on paper products.

At that thought, she stood still and gazed at the toilet paper shelf, remembering the days when people acted as though it were Black Friday every time a shipment of the stuff came in. Just like every other shelf, this one was unfruitful. The produce aisles looked as though someone had scavenged them, and she was lucky to find one bottle of shampoo hidden in the back of the shelf behind the men's deodorant. She had gotten used to being an archeologist; She was the new Indiana Jones. Eliza faked a whipping motion and held up her shampoo bottle as though it were the Arc of the Covenant. She laughed at herself, grateful nobody else was around, and began to go through her mental list, most of which she knew she wouldn't be able to get.

Eliza heard nothing but her own footsteps as she waltzed up to the self-checkout machines and certainly wasn't surprised to find out she was the only one checking out. She click-clacked on the machine, startling herself with the brash beeping of the scanner. As she left, she made sure to breathe deeply, knowing she wouldn't smell that terrible stench for another month. The harsh silence that had fallen over the nearly abandoned grocery store was suddenly interrupted by the shrieking of the doors once more. It was time for her to go back to her solitary confinement.

Eliza inhaled the fresh air deeply, noticing how much darker it had become outside. She wandered through the parking lot, prized shampoo in hand, watching the moon gaze down at her in delight for her find. She reminisced about the days when curfew didn't exist. She glanced at her watch, noticing that it had taken her longer in the store than she had originally planned: too much celebrating. It was already 9:45 pm. If she wasn't home by 10:00 pm, she could be fined or even jailed if she couldn't provide an essential reason for being out so late. Was shampoo essential? It wasn't the only thing she had come for, but it was the only thing she could find. Her cupboards resembled a wasteland; they consisted of mold, decay and a whole lot of nothing.

Eliza picked up her pace, ignoring the faces at the windows. The occasional glimmer of hope and worry shone through the eyes of the robot-like humans that gazed at her. She began to panic when she saw a police car pull up behind her; a wave of relief flooded through her as she reached her door. She

sprinted inside, slamming the door behind her as though a hurricane was about to enter her home. Anxiety coursed through her all because she stopped to happy dance over a bottle of shampoo. She checked her watch once more it was 9:59 pm. She opened the bottle of shampoo, and removed her mask, not knowing what scent she had grabbed; it was the refreshing scent of summer watermelon. The intoxicating fragrance made up for everything: the pandemic, the desert that was referred to as “Wal-Mart”, the curfew, even the stench of the store and the lack of population. Maybe shampoo was essential after all.

Musical Energy

Sarah Whorpole

No longer are we in the Rocket Man's year
Where we can just burn up the atmosphere
We have to be like Manfred
And band together for the earth, man.

So hot it feels like we're walking on sunshine
Or colder than ice
The temperature is rising
And the barometer is getting low.

Not even Rihanna's umbrella
Can hold back acid rain
Like Milli Vanilli's careers
Our time is going down the drain.

Alicia and Nikki won't be the only girls on fire
If we continue down this path
It could be U2
Unless we fix things fast.

So get out of your fast car
And buy a ticket on the midnight train
Because we're on a highway to hell
There's no paradise by this dashboard light.

We need to use Earth and wind
Instead of firing coal
We must harness the power of aqua
Before we all have to live in yellow submarines.

Timberlake said it best
"What goes around comes back around"
We've experienced the landslides

And the tornados in Kansas

The world we knew

Won't come back

Though we could be turning the tables

We don't have to be stuck in one direction.

Three Days Grace said "it's never too late"

What if it is though?

If only we could turn back time

Then maybe we would've found a way.

Unmasking the Weeds

Marc Viherkoski

On the last nebulous day of the pandemic's finale, a phantasmal young lady biked with the howling breeze around the vacant streets. Her classic CCM Munich cruised onto the corroding sidewalk, where there were once sterilized bystanders... but now, only these petrified tumbleweeds stirred in their place. She observed her surroundings like a vigilant tourist, scoping out the desolate skyscrapers, the forsaken restaurants, and the countless vines that were creeping their way throughout all the (e)motionless architecture.

While the young lady assessed the area, the Sun had decided to assist her by revealing the presence of the final soul in tumbleweed town. Roughly half a kilometer down the street, there was a barely breathing body, sitting up against an inert drugstore. And so, to make his whereabouts apparent, the Sun blazed a portal of incandescent light down past the Sky's gloom, producing a pin-pointing brilliance around the man's coordinates. From the distance, the young lady noticed the sunny spotlight shooting through the overcast and onto the body, illuminating its worn-out white hoodie with matching sweatpants, as well as its faded Maple Leafs cap that shadowed the body's miserable face from the Sun's almighty glare. But the minute that the young lady thought she witnessed some signs of respiration, her masked smile grew into a gnarly grin and she biked swiftly off...

Unfortunately for Danio, the warm, shining deliciousness encompassing his being wouldn't last. As the barking breeze and tumbling weeds continuously devoured the silence with a whistling racket that he couldn't hear the pedaling frenzy of the young lady cruising his way.

It wasn't until he heard the smashing force of her bike like glass against the pavement that Danio snapped back to reality. Yet, his breathing appeared to have stopped. Or at least, that's what Danio wished it looked like. Keeping to his stone-still position, facing the ground, he tightly shut his dotty eyes, and hoped that those light-footed stomps weren't marching in his general direction. But when they stopped directly in front of him, Danio's mind raced around in circles with a plethora of perilous possibilities, but also with a pinch of wonder.

Who is this towering over me? Danio thought... And with a dash of bravery, he slit open his eyes to a pair of pearly-white sneakers that stood dead-center in his down-casted view.

"Excuse me Sir, but are you A-O-K?" Gently asked a muffled feminine voice, with a tone that appeared to have some sympathy, enough that Danio became encouraged to behold more of his inquisitor...

As Danio peered up, passed her sneakers, where she kept one pant leg tucked into a large rainbow-striped sock, he thought this young lady was a post-apocalyptic nutcase. For the rest of her getup consisted of one navy-blue jumpsuit with a nametag that said, *Born to Die* in blood-dripping, pink punch letters. And to finish it off, her face was concealed behind a ZYC gas mask that had an open back, allowing her shiny black hair to be fanning out gloriously behind her.

During the few minutes that Danio was stunned by the bizarre yet logical attire, he slyly stared at her shaded visor, wishing he could see her eyes... when all of a sudden, his wish came to a somewhat fruition. As two translucent, red dots appeared like eyes in the visor and lasered out into a single heart-shaped dot upon Danio's forehead. Then for a split-second, Danio's eyes nearly popped out of his skull before they groveled back down to her pearly sneakers.

"No... don't kill me... I'm too young to die," thought Danio to himself, not realizing that he whispered it out loud.

“Well, of course you are!” Replied the muffled lady’s voice, “That’s because you’re not wearing your mask!”

Then as the young lady proceeded to crouch down to Danio’s level, she placed a hand over his trembling eyes.

“Don’t worry...” She tried reassuring him, as Danio quivered and listened to her remove her mask, and softly felt her plant a kiss on his forehead. Danio’s mind fell into a minute of loving ease... he almost wished that he could see at that actual face of hers. But that wish shriveled quickly when she murmured loud-and-clear into his ear: “I’m going to give you one, last shot... Danio,” and with one of her needle-like fingers, she pierced through the side of his forehead she had kissed.

After she removed her bloody finger, jolts of panic ran spasmodically in every neuron of Danio’s brain. *How did she know my name?* He thought amongst his confusion while he felt that his consciousness becoming altercated. When Danio realized he could no longer keep his squinty eyes open, he muttered some prayers within his mind. Petrified for his own good will... *But was it good?*

Suddenly, Danio’s blood began coagulating uncontrollably. Then, he felt his aching bones come alive, as though they were growing inside of him— like sharp, pointy sticks. Now Danio knew nothing except excruciating discomfort, as his sprouting bones continuously knifed and rerooted themselves throughout his innards.

Eventually, the relentless stick-torture came to a halt. Or at least, any feeling(s) of pain that Danio had experienced. For his bones proceeded to branch out of his shabby clothes, ripping them to the ground... tossing behind Danio’s skin, muscles, and organs, which left a gory mess on the sidewalk. The only recognizable article left belonging to the once breathing body was the blood-drenched Maple Leaf’s cap, that sat like a cherry on the top of Danio’s pulpy carcass.

The next thing Danio knew, he was tumbling restlessly down the streets... along with the others.

WHEN: A Four-Letter Word for A Long Four Years

Taylor O'Brien

“When.” One word, four letters. A word usually used at the beginning of a sentence to ask a question. A word that references time, either the beginning of the end or a moment of duration. When is this assignment due? When will Rihanna drop a new album? When will the new season of *Bridgerton* be released on Netflix?

“When.” A four-letter word to depict a long four years. One letter for every year of agony we have felt. A problematic, relentless, and appalling four years. Four years of pain, deprivation, and adversity.

It is no secret our world has faced more trials and tribulations in these last four years than can be counted on two hands. As a society, we have watched as governments took away individual rights and laws. We have heard politicians state that white supremacy is acceptable, deny the severity of climate change, and contradict health officials on the ferocity of Coronavirus. As we continued to read the ghastly headlines in the news every day, we pondered “When’s” existence and asked ourselves a question that was on a loop through our minds like a broken record: “When will there be change?”

“When” is what we have asked ourselves time and time again, more frequently of late. When will Coronavirus be gone? When can I stop wearing a face mask? When can I stand in a grocery line without fearing someone is less than six feet away from me? We emitted our cries of desperation over the ongoing injustice our world faced and the little action taken by leaders to fight it. We roared with anger and cried tears of helplessness. Tired and fed up, we kept asking ourselves: “When will there be change?”

Drained and yearning for a difference, we decided to find change ourselves. We took to the streets to protest police brutality and systemic racism. We commanded politicians to acknowledge the severity of climate change. We begged for equality and equity and said, “enough is enough.” Enough of the lies and pain. Enough of the acceptance of hate and the zero changes made to condemn it. 2020 was when we no longer tolerated the deceit, so we decided that it was time to replace the current government to see change. We felt closer to “When” when we used our voices to obtain change. Yet, we silently wondered if “When” would indeed appear, despite our incredible efforts.

As we have seen over the last four years, “When” has the power to take two different forms. The first is a hopeful embrace. “When” wraps its tender arms around our souls to give us hope for a brighter future. You see the change you so desperately long for right before your eyes, and you envision the peace and prosperity with which it will grace the world once it arrives.

The second form is one of despair. “When’s” warmth drops below negative thirty degrees and runs its icy finger up your back and sends a shiver down your spine. At times, it feels impossible to know if change will ever arrive; as “When” thrusts doubt and fear through our minds. We no longer know if the change we desire is too far out of reach or if it was even there in the first place. While hopeless and discouraged, we wrestle to fight off “When’s” freezing grasp, as we know change is the one thing that stands between achieving democracy and tyranny’s survival. We feel defeated, yet we still query, “When will there be change?”

Friends, stop asking. Stop calling out for “When.” Stop asking yourself when will change be made. “When” is no longer a question. It is a statement. After a long, four-year battle, change has arrived. More spirited and boisterous than ever. Because of us, we have done it. We begged, pleaded, and insisted on “When” to reveal its shrouded face, and now we can see it unmistakably like a seabed of a crystal clear, blue ocean. We begin 2021 with a new leader who does not question what constitutes right and wrong. We no longer have to live in fear of insurrection, the revocation of human rights, and a government that cannot see the beauty in every single human. This new leader brings expectations for a brighter and more loving, and welcoming future.

While we shout our praises from the rooftops, cheer with enthusiasm, and let out a heavy sigh of relief, we know this is only the beginning. We are only on Day 1. Though we see stability and orders signed, we remind ourselves that we still have another 1460 more days to go. This new leader must make several modifications. But take a breath and soak up the moment. Enjoy this feeling of overwhelming joy and relief. It's taken us four years to get here, so embrace it. This is only the beginning of what will be four upcoming years filled with the hope for prosperity, love, and equity. There is a positive transition coming, and we already see hope spring anew. Moving forward, we can all rest a little easier and sleep a little sounder knowing the world has added another name to the list of leaders who will transform it for the better.

So, when you ask yourself, "When will there be change," smile and know that it's already here. "When" is today, and change has begun.

Coughing, Chest Pain, and COVID

Kelsey Douglas

You sit down on the bus, it's a normal day like any other, except for the fact that you begin to cough, wheeze, hack and sneeze. These are the starting symptoms of COVID-19; this virus presents itself as though it were allergies at first. To believe that you are simply experiencing allergies would be naïve and you know it; you would be just a few clowns short of having a circus. Your throat is sore, your muscles ache and you feel as though you can hardly move. Do you have COVID?

As you watch each stop go by and person after person escapes the confined space that might be a petri dish of your own germs, you realize how tired you are. In fact, you have been tired for days now, exhausted from the time you awaken, and you really can't pinpoint when exactly that tiredness started. Was it before or after you went to the grocery store? Or maybe it started after the man sneezed on you in the line at the local bakery. Either way, your whole body feels as though a rock is holding you down, sinking further and further into the seat you've chosen for the long journey home.

You start to think about the symptoms you've heard on the radio; now that you think about it, you realize that you do have to stop every few minutes when you're walking to catch your breath. Your chest is in constant agony, you struggle to breathe most of the time and yet you ignore it because you know the worst is yet to come. You remember that every bite you've taken in the last week has seemed bland and now you realize, you weren't able to smell the candle your roommate was burning yesterday. Your whole body is on fire but somehow you feel as though the Arctic Sea has just rolled across you; you shiver, but as soon as you touch your finger tips to your body it feels as if your skin has a thousand fire ants running across it.

In the days leading up to this moment, you know you've been popping Ibuprofen just to ease the pounding elephants that are constantly running through your brain. You allow yourself to believe that it's just stress, it's always just been stress. You look around the bus and notice you're almost at your stop and you need to pinch yourself to keep your body, mind and soul awake enough just to get home. You feel as though the contents of your belly are going to explode out all over the floor. You feel bad for the bus driver but the wave of nausea that is falling over you is more than you can bare. As you struggle to breathe, lying in your own vomit you have one thought; *I must have COVID.*

Reconvergence

Emma Maki

Darkness, adrenaline, blood. These were things that gang members were exposed to on a higher-than-average basis. Didn't mean you got used to them. At least, Nick hadn't gotten used to them yet, even being with the gang for less than a year at this point. Maybe, given more time to toughen up and truly become one of the gang, he wouldn't flinch at the glint of an enemy's knife, wouldn't have tears in his eyes as he heard the soul-chilling screams of his companions. But he hadn't gotten enough time. And now it seemed he never would.

It was the blood in particular that had an effect on him. The coppery smell hung so thick he could almost choke on it. The alleyway was too dark to make out anything clearly, so he couldn't see the blood splashed everywhere, but he didn't need to. The taste in the air and the sticky feeling of it splattered on his clothes and face were more than enough. He wasn't bleeding yet. At least, he didn't think he was. His blood was moving alright—pumping ferociously—just not pouring out of him. He didn't feel any luckier for it. Cowering in an alley, his back against the wall, head in his trembling hands as his friends were butchered by rival gang members, there was nothing to feel lucky about.”

There was a flash of movement, and a scream—Ken's scream. Nick slammed his eyes shut, unwilling to look. Just like with the blood, though, he didn't need to actually see the stabbing to picture it precisely in his head: Ken staggering backward, gasping in pain, the hilt of a knife protruding somewhere from his body, staining his fancy leather jacket dark red. More movement, accompanied by another shout—Ray. It was a battle cry, not a scream of pain... or at least it started as one. Then, the deep, decisive, hair-raising *schlk* of a metal blade entering flesh, and Ken's shout lapsed into a high-pitched exclamation, almost a yelp.

The elevator doors slid open with a clean metal *whoosh*, revealing the neatly organized office space. The first sound that pierced Nick's mind was a persistent high-pitched whine—an office fan, no doubt, but the noise was reminiscent of a mosquito buzzing in one's ear. Nick tried not to grimace. If this was the place he was supposed to be working at (well, there was no *if* about it, actually; it *was* the place that had just hired him) then he'd need to just grin and bear any ever-present irritations—and *that'll go for coworkers, too*, he reminded himself with a wry smile, *not just ceiling fans*.

The fan, to its credit, seemed to be doing its job of keeping the office cool, given the chill Nick felt as he walked across the office space to his new desk. It was a humbly sized office, he noted; only about ten cubicles total, each already occupied save for the one that was to be his own. It wasn't hard to

guess that he had been hired specifically to replace someone. In the back of his mind, he vaguely wondered what kind of person he was replacing and why they left, but he pushed such thoughts away. Just like the ceiling fan, these were things best kept out of his mind if he was going to get along well at this new job. In any case, it wasn't a bad little workspace. The limited number of cubicles meant that they weren't all ridiculously crammed together; his desk provided enough room for him to get up and stretch when needed, and the computer was, if not state-of-the-art, at least of the same generation of machine that he had at home. Even the chair was decently comfortable—not amazing, but decent. And decent, for Nick, was better than his younger self ever would have imagined his life could turn out.

If you asked Nick why he decided to join the most notoriously ruthless gang in town, he would answer with a noncommittal shrug and a mumble of “I dunno,” all the while not quite meeting your gaze. That was his default answer to most questions posed by authority figures at this stage in his life. But the leader of the gang didn't ask *why* he wanted to join. The only question was whether or not he was up to the task. And once Nick proved himself in a mock-up knife fight against a senior member of the gang, the scrawny 16-going-on-17-year-old was deemed fit for initiation.

Despite the leader's *laissez-faire* approach, Nick still had supervision. Otherwise, he wouldn't have lasted a week. Instead, two other kids around his age took it upon themselves to show him the ropes and look out for him while he grew accustomed to the gang's rough and rowdy lifestyle. At first, Nick was annoyed by Ray and Ken always swarming around him like a couple of flies on a hot day, but as time went on, he had to begrudgingly admit that they bailed him out of a lot of scrapes that may have otherwise proved costly. Around six months into Nick's career as a gang member, he realized that Ray and Ken were both really cool guys. Well, maybe not “cool” in the traditional sense—sure, Ken was cool with his short, tousled hair, leather jacket, and crooked smile, but Ray was less so with his vaguely effeminate mannerisms and the occasional too-wide smile that suggested something a little sideways was happening in his brain. No, but they were both really cool—more so than anyone else in the gang, at least in Nick's eyes—because, as time went on, it became increasingly clear that they were the only ones in the gang who actually cared about him.

Nick never did see what happened to them that day in the alley, when they were hunted down and cornered by members of a rival gang. But it was easy to imagine. In his months spent as a gang member, he saw a lot of bloodshed. He heard a lot of dying screams. And such screams rang in his ears on that day, too, although he couldn't tell whose they were. It didn't matter. There was no way anyone could get out of that mess of knives and blood alive.

“Hey, you're the new guy, aren't you?”

Nick was pulled from his examination of his new computer by an amicable voice coming from behind him. He jumped, startled, and spun in his chair to see the man who had appeared.

“Nice to meet you. Boy, it’ll be nice to have a little less work on my shoulders. I’ve been working overtime ever since Mark left.” The man addressing Nick was bearded, with a receding hairline; Overall, he looked like an average thirty-something office worker. Still, there was something oddly comforting about the man’s arched eyebrows and cocky posture as he leaned against the door to Nick’s cubicle. “Boss told me to show you the ropes, so...”

He produced a USB drive from his pocket. Nick blinked, taken aback by this introduction; after a moment’s hesitation, he scooted over so that his apparent new coworker could lean in and insert the USB. After a bit of fumbling with the port and clicking around, he brought up a video file titled “Welcome New Employees!”

The video took what was realistically only a few seconds to load, but it felt like minutes. Nick squirmed slightly in his chair, all too aware of the other man standing behind him breathing down his neck. *Hasn’t this guy ever heard of personal space?* Still, he once again reminded himself not to display any negative emotions toward any aspect of his new workplace, and so he twisted the beginnings of a scowl into a placid smile while the video loaded.

Once the buffering stopped and the video began, the screen was transformed into a 90’s computer graphics hellscape. Bouncy hip-hop music crackled over the computer’s dusty speakers as the screen flashed in gaudy shades of blue and green, complete with random unnecessary geometric patterns. Then the slightly compressed recorded image of a person popped up—a young guy with long hair, maybe twenty-something but dressed up like a teenager—waving at the camera with a goofy grin on his face.

“Hey, welcome to this office! Before you start working here, there are some things you’ve gotta know.”

Nick stared, dumbfounded, at the screen. No, dumbfounded wasn’t a strong enough word. He... it felt like his brain had just bluescreened. He *knew* the face staring back at him from his computer screen. He’d recognize those features, that voice, those mannerisms anywhere. But... this was... it *couldn’t* be...

“Holy mother of...” Nick breathed, unconsciously gripping the sides of his office chair so tightly that their texture left an imprint on his hands. “Ray?!”

“Wait, you know him?” the man standing behind Nick exclaimed. As he spoke, Nick realized, with the sensation of a rug being pulled out from beneath his feet, that he knew this man as well. “That’s crazy. Ray and I go way back, but who are...”

He trailed off. Nick spun in his chair to face him, wide-eyed and breathless. On the computer monitor, the video carried on uninterrupted, Ray's pre-recorded speech providing a backdrop to the dawning realization in what Nick now recognized as Ken's eyes.

Being so new to the gang, there were some things Nick never got the chance to learn. He didn't learn how to toughen up and be like the senior members. He never learned how to kill someone, and deep down he had never truly wanted to. But most importantly, he never got to see his friends in a fight, because when things got dangerous they would tell Nick to run away.

Fifteen years ago, in a dark alley, a trio of boys on the cusp of becoming men found themselves backed into a corner, literally and figuratively. Blows were exchanged, of both the fist and knife variety. For Nick, the memory flashed before his eyes every time he closed them. For Ken, the whole thing was a blur. For Ray, it was practically a regular Tuesday, with the only real difference being that he was fighting to protect someone this time.

They all left the alley drenched in blood. For Ray and Ken, some of that blood was their own. But leave the alley they did, all three of them, alive. It was just that Nick had already fainted at that point. The poor kid's constitution, it turned out, was just too delicate to take the heat. In the long run, that was probably for the best. A rival gang member stumbled over his collapsed body and ignored him, assuming he was already dead.

Unfortunately, once their opponents were defeated, Ray and Ken made the same mistake. If they knew Nick was fine, of course they would have roused him. But he lolled on the ground just a little too limply, his face just a little too pale, and they could already hear the wail of rapidly approaching police sirens—and, being a couple of frantic teenagers, they didn't think to check for a pulse. Carrying Nick's body would slow them down too much. They had to get out of there, now.

And so, with heavy hearts, they did.

When the sun came up the next morning, Nick was in the back of a police car, cold steel handcuffs clamped around his wrists. His friends' blood was splattered all over him. At least he assumed that most of the blood belonged to his friends... and he was never given any reason to believe otherwise, because they had been so terribly outnumbered, and he never saw his fellow gang members again.

That is, not until today.

Before he could think of any appropriate words to say (because what words *were* there for an occasion like this?) he was being swept up off the chair and into Ken's arms in an embrace that crushed

the air out of him. Ken was laughing at the top of his lungs—a deep, hearty sound that reverberated against Nick’s chest and made his throat swell with long-forgotten affection.

“Hey, what’s happening over here?” For a moment Nick thought it was still just the video playing on the computer, until he felt a second pair of hands clamp down on his shoulders. “You’re the new hire, I take it? Ken, what’s...?”

Nick turned, face locked in an incredulous wide-eyed stare, to face Ray at the same time Ken clapped a hand on his shoulder and announced, “You’ll never believe this, Ray—it’s Nick!”

“Wha...” Ray blinked, eyes going even wider than Nick’s already were. Of the three of them, Nick thought Ray looked the least visibly different from the old days, but he too was unmistakably older, with a newfound air of dignity which promptly vanished as he grasped Nick’s hands in his own. “Dear god, it’s true! You’re alive? I—I never thought—”

“Yeah, no, I...” Nick just shook his head, still hardly able to fathom what was happening, let alone find the right words to express his feelings. “I never thought I’d see you guys again, either. Just... wow.”

“And yet here we stand!” With a gleeful cackle, Ken slung his arms around Ray and Nick’s shoulders and pulled them tight into a three-way embrace. “Oh, man, Nick, it’s seriously been forever. We’ve got a *lot* of catching up to do.”

“I... uh... yeah,” Nick managed finally. As he glanced back and forth between his friends—*his friends!!*—it truly began to sink in that it really was them, and his face split into a grin so wide it felt like his skin would crack. “Yeah, I guess we do.”

Not all troubled youths would be as lucky as Nick, Ken, and Ray. On average, in fact, this outcome is one hell of an outlier. Nevertheless, against all odds, three frightened teenagers left a dark alleyway one night. Fifteen years later, three men entered an office building. As with a bell curve on a graph, some lines are always destined to reconverge.

Pen to Paper (or Fingers to Keyboard)

An Amateur TedTalk about Writing

Taylor Onski

I like TedTalks a lot. But I never feel like I know enough about something to actually give one. But why not start with something I know something about and do a lot of, writing.

I admit it, writing may look easy...but it's actually kind of hard. The act of taking the words brewing inside us and then putting them on paper or computer screen seems easy. But then, reality hits. If you want to have your voice "publicly" out there within the words you write, people are going to have to read what you wrote. I don't know about you, but that's kind of terrifying! The fixations in our heads finally become real, but at what cost? It could be making what should have been a short story a poem, or crafting an essay out of something a haiku can convey in only 12 syllables. People can read our thoughts, critique their procession, or worse...not feel a thing after reading your manifesto you carved out precious time for. Or, you can be smart and give yourself the satisfaction of keeping your powerful prose locked away from wandering eyes, guarded by steel stronger than Captain America's shield...that glistening silver diary lock. Writing is hard and miserable at times. But on the other hand, something is liberating about navigating the woes of writing.

With that said, CONGRATULATIONS! You decided to commit to a writing project! Big, small, novel, journal entry, flash fiction or poetry book, you're going to venture into word-smithing, and it's going to be a bit of a ride with roaring waves. The first time we take that liberating step, to cross the threshold from inward to outward expression is definitely worth celebrating, but the honeymoon ends quickly.

Full disclosure: you're getting all this from an amateur writer. But I have an HBA in English, so I *think* I'm at least somewhat qualified (note the emphasis on think).

Personally, the step I struggle with most is the "idea." Ah yes, the hovering lightbulb or the fixation that we meet in deep slumbers. For me, it's the "my idea is not good enough" thought that stops me dead in my tracks-keeping the word doc white and the page inkless. But that's the biggest issue. I stop at step 1...the worst step to stop! I haven't even started yet, and I'm already singing to myself, "fuck this shit, I'm out!" But here's the thing, you have to write about that idea. So write that "not good" idea down and then sit with it. Eventually, you can see that "bad idea" grow into something "not too bad." Then you'll think of something else, and then something better until your page looks really messy and disorganized because one idea suddenly transpired into many, and now you're starting at words on a spider's web. Now is where you can play and begin to make something fun. But one thing to remember is that even though you have not started the story or work, you're writing. You're getting your ideas out and word vomiting from everything you can pull to try and make something. It may take an all-nighter or a month, but you're writing. You're writing! HELL YEAH!

So now that you've written a bit, here comes the next wave, so I'll just give you a life-line now. No idea is "original." Don't be like me and use that as an excuse to distinguish the idea from inside your brain's ever-expanding filing cabinet.

"Oh, that idea already has been done. Might as well just not do it." I say to myself
"Girl, shut up!" I immediately reply.

Do what everyone else does, steal! Don't copy, obviously, but add your twist to the moments you loved and eventually, your canvas will no longer be a carbon copy.

This is my “philosophical” dismantle of the “original” obstacle (note the quotations here; I am only 23 and know jack shit about philosophy). Let’s say I’m walking and I see a tree. Suddenly, the light bulb goes off, and the tree gives me an idea for a writing piece. However, that idea stemmed from (sorry, I’ll stop with the tree puns now) something that already existed, a tree. I did not imagine that tree into existence. It was not an original fixation I made up. My idea was based on something that already existed, the tree. So, nothing is really original because everything is an inspiration. You get your ideas from something, and that’s ok. Everyone does it, from the greats all the way down to me, and now you’re going to take the un-original thing and make it your own. Not a bad idea if I say so myself.

Another constant woe in my mind is how to present these words. What form can my internal manifestations best take flight? In what ways can the ideas I conjure impact readers, listeners, wonderers, storytellers? I can do a narrative story where the lines of real and whim are blurred. Crafting characters with wants and needs, and, if we really want to be spicy, who reflect people in our real lives. Then putting them on a journey where the Campbell formula is fulfilled in your own unique way. But what if the message I want to convey does not come out through the people I create? What if I want to explicitly tie my words to me and not convey them through a fictional person and story? There’s always poetry.

Ah, poetry. The language of lovers and Tumblr. Just kidding. Poetry is for everyone and anything. From a haiku where syllables sync when read aloud, a song where the right words blend with a melody so well you cry, or the metaphor curated in the most accurate word choice ever that just rips your heart out and smashes it on the floor. Poetry is anything you want it to be. That’s the exciting and scary part about it. You just have to find, and eventually, write your rhythm.

Or let’s say you’re not the best with fiction and metaphors... that’s ok too! There’s always a good old diary to just let everything out. Exhale everything out onto the page with your pen, pressing what you want to say in the rawest state possible. Just let it all out, no one is marking it, and if I was, I’d give you an A+ because you’re writing. You’re using writing to see for yourself the power your words carry because they just told your story to you in its rawest form.

Or, you can always just do the creative/non-fiction essay I am attempting right now. A little bit of structure, a whole lot of fun, at least that’s my definition of it. You define it however you wish. Either way, picking the right medium can be hard—my advice: just start writing shit down and see what happens.

But I think the most secretive woe of writing out there is human nature. How many times have we not wanted to do something when someone told us to do it, but then when we, ourselves, want to do it, tunnel vision mode: activated, operation: self-produced desire? The same goes for writing. When we have to write an essay on symbols in *The Great Gatsby* where our prose, proof, and paragraphs face a red pen and numerical value, our own green light is not within reach, nor do we want to swim across the bay to gain it. When exterior authority doesn’t tell us to write, when we tell ourselves to write what we want to write, we already swam half-way across the bay, glowing green just in reach. We never want the green light when someone tells us to get it. We want the green light when we long for it. The same goes with writing...at least for me it does.

Writing is seeing your imperfections, confronting them, erasing or deleting them (depending on your preferred method) until your ideas of perfection and satisfaction are staring back at you.

Now, do not be like me and think about writing more than you write. It is better to take the risk and just write. It will be sloppy, cringey, and you might hate it and question every word you put forward. But just keep moving along and soon enough, you’ll get there. But with each step, you’re writing and frankly, that’s what I want you to do, write!

Being ready to share words takes time, so set your own journey and time-line. It can be tomorrow, next month, five years, or never, that's ok! Just know, if you have thoughts you need to let out, writing will be there for you.

Right now, you're reading the risk I took by making this open for others to read, and I am honestly, completely terrified you'll think this is trash. Most of you probably will, or in some miracle, you'll laugh and enjoy the things that manifested from listening to piano music at 1 am on a Friday night (total rager right?!). Nonetheless, I told myself I would put my words out there for people to see. So no one can take that away from me.

Writing is hard, committing to it is harder, but like anything, it takes practice, commitment, and passion. These writing woes will probably never go away, but that shouldn't scare you away from writing. It should motivate you to put your words out there. Take them out of the filing cabinet, let them run wild and rear them however you wish.

So, what are you doing still reading this? Go write something! Anything! I'll be there to read it if you want. :)

The Phone Call

(An Excerpt From A Novel)

Cristina Morriello

Friday, September 12th, 2014.

I have a stuffed animal army. I have nearly twenty stuffed animals and dolls on my bed. My colossal Webkinz collection is scattered around my room. I have a huge beagle in the corner and more plushies on the bookshelf. My angel doll and Prayer Bear are on the dresser. And of course, Cream Soda, my favourite teddy bear, is on my pink chair. There's a lot, but I love my stuffed animal army. When I'm sad, I grab one of them and hug it. They comfort me more than people do. When I was little, I always had one with me when I went out. I even brought one of my Webkinz, a Chihuahua named Evita, to school until the end of grade six. Each has a name and I can tell you, what year I got them, and for what occasion.

I'm sitting on my bed with a journal on my lap, a pencil in my hand and a stuffed chihuahua puppy beside me. I look around my room. Everywhere I look, I see pink. My queen-sized bed is covered with a pink comforter and matching pillowcases. I have two pink pillows my Nonna sewed for me and a pink blanket at the foot of the bed. Pink trinkets lie on my bookshelf and dresser. My night table has a pink lamp and a pink picture frame. Above my bed, on the wall, is the pink cross I decorated in elementary school surrounded by pink pictures and canvases. My room is very girly and very pink. To me, it's the greatest room in the world. It's my safe haven.

I stare at my journal. Ever since I was a little girl, I have always wanted to be an author (I have this crazy dream to write something amazing and be published before I turn twenty, just like S. E. Hinton). I've had my idea since the summer. The series is about a girl named Elena, an Italian Catholic girl on the Spectrum, just like me. I want to write about how she navigates school and beyond. Elena is named after my baby doll, who, sadly, is not in my room. I don't know what happened to her. When she disappeared this summer my heart broke. She has curly brown hair, big brown eyes, and she wears a little pink dress. I NEED to find her. She belongs in my room.

Anyway, I got the idea right after I was diagnosed with Asperger's. Not only do I want to be an author, but I want to spread awareness about autism and show kids what it really means to be on the spectrum. Ever since I was diagnosed, I've wanted to write a character with ASD. I want the world to see through my eyes. And as I paced around the coffee table in the family room one day, it came to me. Just like that. A coming-of-age series with inspiration from my life. My mind often takes me away to alternate worlds that I find much more felicitous. I think I have a pretty unique idea. I've been planning it for most of the summer.

I spent a big chunk of this week- aside from doing homework after dinner, listening to CDs, and playing *Just Dance* until my siblings come home and reclaim the TV- brainstorming a character background for Elena Alessandra Modugno. She's just like me. All I need to do is start writing.

I'm just about to write *Chapter One* when my phone starts ringing. I look at it, a Samsung with a pink case, a late fourteenth birthday present. I wish I knew how to make my ringtone any song I want; I'd definitely go with Duran Duran's *Hold Back The Rain!*

It's Emmanuella. I answer the phone. "Hello?"

"Hi, Vera!" Emmanuella is always really excited, but she keeps me as calm as I can be, which isn't very calm; I don't know how to relax. "How was your first week of high school?"

I look down at my pink dress with white lace detailing on the neckline. "It was okay." I say. "Not as great as elementary school, but it was okay." When I came home from school, my fingers sticky from

the Brownie Dough Blizzard I had, Emmanuella texted me demanding all the details. I told her I wore the dress that I had worn on my fourteenth birthday, about my classes, and no, there's no other guys I'm interested in. She already knows about my only non-celebrity crush. I've never told anyone else. Emmanuella is not only my cousin, but my best friend, too.

"Anything interesting happen?"

"Well, I have this cool project for Religion." Since Emmanuella goes to a public school, she doesn't have Religion classes.

"Cool! What is it?"

"We were assigned to do a modern retelling of a parable to fit in a high school setting. We get to design covers and everything."

"Oh cool! Let me guess... you're doing "The Good Samaritan", aren't you?"

"Of course! I think I'm going to do a bullying story."

"That sounds awesome. I'd love to read that."

"I'll show it to you someday."

"You'll have to remember to remind me." She's joking; she knows I have an incredible memory.

"I will."

"How about your other classes?"

"Well, math sucks. I've never liked it. We're doing an algebra review. I don't get how my dad likes math so much." He's not big on anything English or creative. We're total opposites. I take after my mom. "We're making a lab safety manual in science, and in French we're doing a review of *avoir* and *être*. I'm nervous with the months, I always say December is *Dicembre* instead of *Décembre*." I sometimes get the words mixed up with Italian. "How are your classes?" I ask

"Well, I'm doing review in Italian and in drama we're starting with get-to-know-you scenes. We're doing a play in December. I hope you can come. I'm auditioning for a lead role."

"I'd love to come! I'll tell Mom about it. She'd love to see you too."

I can picture Emmanuella smiling, sitting on her bed in her pale pink room, under her fuzzy *Frozen* blanket, and surrounded by her own stuffed animal army. "I'd love for all of you to come, even though the thought of performing in front of Lucia makes me nervous. She was so good in all the musicals I've seen her in."

"Don't be. I know you'll do amazing! Lucia will love seeing you perform! So will I! And Enrico and Alberto might be bored, but- oh..." I feel awful now. I always say the wrong thing. "Sorry, Emmanuella, I didn't mean it like that--"

She laughs. "It's fine."

"I'm sorry. I feel terrible."

"Hey, Vera. It's okay. I'm not offended. My brothers will be bored too. But I'm dragging them over to see me. Enrico and Alberto, too. We're doing *A Christmas Carol*."

"Cool! I think they'd love that. Who are you trying out for?"

"The Ghost of Christmas Past."

“Good luck- um, I mean, break a leg! I know you’ll get it.” I rub my leg. One of my favourite Webkinz, a Love Spaniel named Emilia, catches my eye. I grab her and settle her beside me. “How about your other classes?”

“Well, in science we’re starting physics and in English we’re about to read *Pride and Prejudice*.”

“Your classes sound awesome!” I say. “Better than math and ... well ... you’re also taking science, so I can’t say that.”

“Did you take pictures all four days?” During the first week of classes, we have a tradition of taking a picture every day of the outfit we wore to school.

“Yeah.” I say. I got Mom to take pictures. They turned out better than mine.

“I did, too! I got some new clothes that I was excited to wear.” Emmanuella is much prettier than I am. She is taller than me with neat, wavy brown hair, sparkling brown eyes, and no pimples. She looks pretty in anything she wears.

“I’m sure you look pretty.” I say.

“Aw, thanks! And I know you look pretty; you always are.”

“Thanks.” I say, even though I don’t believe her. Everyone always calls me “cute”, and but I never believe it.

We’re silent for a bit. I stroke two of my stuffed animals. They are soft, warm, and comforting.

“So...” Emmanuella trails off. “I know you’ve wanted to tell me your big idea?”

I’m so excited I shout “YES!” into the phone. I realize I probably hurt Emmanuella’s ear. “Sorry. I’m just so excited! I wanted to tell you before but I was working on it! I think I have an awesome idea!”

“Details, please!” Emmanuella is just as excited as I am.

So I explain everything to her about Elena Modugno and the series I want to write. I finish by telling her how much I miss Elena, my doll, and that I want to find her.

“That sounds amazing!” Emmanuella says. “I can’t wait to read it. There needs to be more characters with autism.” When I got diagnosed, Emmanuella was one of the first people I told. Mom let me call her from her phone. She told me that she was proud of me, and that having Asperger’s makes me more of a person, not less. Emmanuella said that she will help me navigate life, no matter what.

I smile, “Thanks! How’s your screenwriting going?” We both write, but I write novels and Emmanuella writes screenplays. A cool fact about Emmanuella is that her father is a screenwriter who writes teen movies. He offered my sister Lucia a role for his newest movie, but Lucia is stubborn; she insists on auditioning first.

“I’m writing a new one.” I can tell Emmanuella’s smiling. She’s loved movies since she was little and has been screenwriting since she was eleven.

“Cool! What is it about?” Emmanuella has the coolest ideas for movies.

“It’s about a girl named Belinda- I got it from Belinda Carlisle, I know you’ll appreciate that- who is bullied, and she wants to audition for her school musical, but she’s sabotaged.”

“That sounds awesome!” It really does. “And I love the reference to Belinda Carlisle!” She knows I love Belinda Carlisle songs.

“Thanks. I just really hope I can write something amazing, you know? Something that will make my name known.”

“Me too.” I say.

“The world will soon know the names Emmanuella Colangelo and Vera Molinaro!” Emmanuella says dramatically. We laugh. When she calms down, she asks, “Any cute guys?”

I groan. “You already asked! I’m not interested in dating!”

“Okay, okay, I get it!” She laughs. “I’m talking with this guy, Marcello Paoli. He’s so cute! He looks like an eighties heartthrob! He gave me his number. He’s really cute!”

“You already said that!” I laugh.

“Do you think he’ll ask me out?”

I don’t know why someone would ask me a question like this; I never have the answer they’re hoping for. “Maybe?”

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

I can hear Emmanuella’s mom call her. “Five more minutes, please, Mom?” she answers. Her mom says something. Emmanuella is back. “So did you make any friends?”

“No.” I say. “But I have a question.”

“Anything.”

“I’ve told people I’ve met that I have Asperger’s Syndrome, and they act weird around me after I tell them. Why?”

Emmanuella thinks this over. “I don’t know. Maybe people aren’t really familiar with Asperger’s Syndrome, so they don’t know what to say.”

“Do you think they’ll make fun of me?” I’m really nervous.

“No, I don’t think so. But be careful, Vera. Sometimes people can be mean, especially teenagers. Face it. We suck.”

“So maybe I shouldn’t tell anyone?”

“It’s up to you. But if anyone makes fun of you, I’ll hunt them down.”

Knowing Emmanuella is there for me makes me feel a little better. Maybe I should keep my Asperger’s Syndrome a secret, just for now. It hurts, because it’s a big part of me that I want to embrace, but I am scared. I wish I was brave like Emmanuella. I want people to know who I really am.

I hear her mom call again, and Emmanuella sighs. “I’ve got to go. Good luck on everything.”

“You too. I’ll see you soon. Bye!”

“Bye!”

We hang up.

I hear Mom and my younger siblings enter the house. “Hi!” I yell. I grab my journal and go down the stairs.

Mom smiles when she sees me. “Hi, Vera!”

“Hi, Mom.”

“How was school?”

“Good. Emmanuella called. How was work?”

“Great. How’s Emmanuella doing?”

“Great. She’s trying out for the Ghost of Christmas Past in *A Christmas Carol* for her drama class’ play.”

Mom smiles. “She’ll do amazing. We should go watch her.”

“Yeah! She really wants us to be there.”

She sits down, a little break before making dinner. I offer to help, but she says it’s okay. I have my special pencil and a pink pen. With the pencil, I write:

Chapter 1

In pink pen, I write:

ELENA

crEative

girLy

Intelligent

Nice

Amazing

And then, I start the first chapter of the first book of the series I want to be known for. It comes naturally.

Endless Possibilities

Sanjana Sharma

I close my eyes.

I am in my head:

A colorless, dark landscape,

Stretching to the edges

Of desires, passion,

Longing for lost ones;

And corners of fear,

Restlessness,

And beyond.

Thoughts appear and house themselves

In different spots and dimensions,

Evolving every second,

Organizing themselves like

Brand-new clothes

Finding home in my closet.

Endless possibilities.

These thoughts, these scatters

Of words and hazy images

In this infinite, safe space

Help me understand the world better

And go about it when I open my eyes again.

Bloom

Taylor Onski

To bloom is to grow,
like the child from young to old.
So reach roaring heights,
seas of stars,
and fearless flights.

To bloom is to rise
like the sun shining gold.
So inhale the unknown,
exhale the fear,
and welcome your journey.
It is here.

To bloom is to explode
like the petals stretching wide
So burst through before,
cry out to the sky,
and break binds.
You are here.

To bloom is to shine.
So show how your petals
glisten and glow.
And begin proving
that you'll never stop blooming.



Growers Eyeder

Evalina Sacchetti

Penning Lines on Skin

(After) Sunset #75

Marc Viherkoski

In the midst of twilight, we strolled a sabulous beach, her palm in my hand.

The bronzy waves of her ethereal hair sparkled softly under the Moon's radiant glare,

While our bare feet embraced the tide's natural cycles upon the shore.

Yet as the welcoming waves greeted our shins once more – I stumbled over a stick,

With which I began to ingrain her name into the sopping sand.

But then, the tide came like a hand and seized her name away,

Melodiously singing her assuasive syllables, ere their escape beyond this Miraculous bay.

She chuckled at my presumed pain, as I wrote it again, and then a-gain.

“Oh my dear Love,” Her curious lips simpered, “Why do you insist on preserving my name
within these pebbly grains?

If immortalizing me be your game, consider carving our names into one of those palms instead,
so you may satisfy your Lunacy.”

“But don't you see?” I said to her quite sincerely, “These tides will endlessly echo your name,

To porting cities and ships, both above and below the cerulean seas.

Great tidings of your thunderous Grace thus shall forever be known throughout the aquatic
terrain.

So now you know, the means of my Mania, for you—my beloved Aquarian princess,

For I'll hold you in arms and heart, while we ascend to our Ancestral destinations,

Where our spirits will continue to shine in the oceans of our celestial constellations.”

“baby love child”

Austin Campbell

i sank into you so easily,
did i think it would hurt
any less?
i fell
so damn hard
i hit the floor,
shattered -
messy broken pieces
cushioned only
by
copious coping mechanisms
and
erudite discussions
of
self-love.
kiss the Sun
and
feel the fire
consume flesh
that weeps,
decays
for love;
starved and starving
so
willing to risk it all
for a future
that
feels far and foreign
like some forgotten
(or perhaps, mad?)
dream
juggle life and death

only to spiral
deeper
into the past
into the present
into emotional volatility
like
the withdrawals my heart endures
away from you
and
the pain of longing,
having longed for nothing more
than your touch;
addictive personality prevailing,
sinking further
into lovesick madness,
I turn to the past for answers:
memories attack like zombies
rising from dew-laden graves,
bursting
through time's barrier
between the now and then...
i see myself
grasping someone's thumb
i feel love
for the first time;
i see a girl
smiling at me -
she kisses me
awkwardly
next to a green ladder
and
i can't respond
because
i don't know how;
i see an arm around a shoulder

in the back of a Dodge van
and
a sweaty highschooler
asking for a girl's
cellphone number -
did he save her life
or did she save his?
time slips
through them like
knives
cutting ribbons
out of clear paper
and
centuries rust
like the forgotten bike
in the shed
that belonged to the groundhog
we could never get rid of;
i see a sweater,
hear a voice,
and my heart colours
the sky
with every shade
of the love
i cannot yet admit
i am feeling -
she is better than me,
of this i am certain,
which is perhaps
why it hurts when
she is so far

and
i already make myself
feel so small.
i see myself,
alone,
young,
afraid.
how powerful my love
feels
when i let it go -
while no one's watching
and
it has nowhere to go
but inward;
a tree falls,
hidden in the dark -
lay in the snow
and
cease.
my heart, ready:
blood-pulse-rhythm
beat beat beating
beating beating
beat.
doomed
to love
and
cursed
to care
this fate:
only human.

Unlearned Apathy

Sydney Kondreska

I've always been an emotional person.

As a kid, I cried at things I knew should not hurt me

caring far too deeply about things I know will never affect me.

it was something i was once deeply embarrassed of

for no particular reason, really— it was never seen as something shameful

something to be embraced, met with slight bemusement from the outside world.

The little smile I see my parents share when I express an opinion

Far too big and with far too much anger for my age.

Learned apathy.

The issue herein lies: a cold flame can keep burning low,

But snuffing out a spitfire is akin to killing it entirely.

as I allow myself to inch closer to the heat, though, i find myself thinking otherwise

There is a certain joy in waiting up for the sunrise

An inherent power in the romanticization of my own life

Righteous anger and full-bodied love so strong it has the power to choke.

No longer do I feel shame.

I feel nothing but pride for the way I hold myself wide open to experience life.

so long as I breathe, I refuse to embrace apathy

Hannah hannaH

Austin Campbell

have you ever seen words
dance like that?
she can make syllables
shimmer like diamonds,
the pieces of her soul
she bares
when she smiles and laughs
filling the room with
the serenity of snow
and
the warmth of her heart
woven from the same fabric
as kindness and beauty –

transport me through time
to find that
I still admire her just the same
and
the worlds and characters
she concocts
inspire worlds in me;
bend dreams into
marvelous shapes,
lost in the throes -
the fervent grip
of her beautiful imagination.

Sunshine Walks Beside Her

Ryan McCulloch

For all the reason that there's a sun in the sky
There's even more question as to why
All of the things that are better left unsaid
Are never said better in time

But if she's unhappy then it's your job to know
If she wants to go then let her go
Understand the way the wind must blow
Sometimes it's better off to walk alone

Sunshine walks beside her
But sometimes so does rain
Know that the sky won't always be blue
Because sometimes it has to be gray

For all the threads that bind us there's even more to break
Not all weaves can be so strong
The fabric of a bond can be tattered and worn
But you have got to know when the thread is gone

Sunshine walks beside her
But sometimes so does rain
Know that the sky won't always be blue Because sometimes it has to be gray
Never try and stay if you don't feel that way Never try to fake it like you do
It's ok if someone else is better for her
Because someone else is better for you

But if she's unhappy it's your job to know
If she wants to go then let her go
Help her on the wave that leads her ashore
Always be the board, not the stone

Sunshine walks beside her
But sometimes so does rain
Know that the sky won't always be blue
Because sometimes it has to be grey

Thing Called Love

Ashley Stewart

There's a girl sitting on the floor,
Reading is no longer a chore.
She dives into each book,
Before waiting to find a nook.
Where she may sit for an hour,
As the powerful characters devour
What's left of her lonely feeling.
But who notices the concealing?

There's a girl sitting on the floor,
Pencil in hand always wanting to explore.
Experimenting with techniques,
Hoping no one critiques.
Even though she will never show,
She wishes to bestow
The masterpiece she has created.
Realizing she is alone, that wish is deflated.
The tears soon begin to streak,
But who will wipe them off her cheek?

There is a girl sitting on the floor,
She doesn't know what to do anymore.
Praying she won't be alone,
Otherwise no one will read her stone.
A shadow passes over her face.
Arms help her stand and embrace,
Piercing her soul and heart.
Carefully without missing a part.

Who could this possibly be?

There is a girl no longer on the floor,
Who has a new feeling deep in her core.
She believes that this new emotion,
Could finally slay her prenotion,
Of keeping herself high above,
And using this thing called love.

The Hearts Infidelity

Shanna Scarr

I can't remember the last man that made me nervous
After you there was no one else.
No gusto or façade could shake me,
No chiselled chin or strong arm could incur a double take
I was hooked;
Caught swimming against your current
Willing the rod to snap, I'd take the hook with me if I could
Without any effort you pulled me back in
Too sweet to resist
A gentle hand on my back, a patient kiss on my head
I damned you,
 (for awhile)
I wanted to go —
To be free —
Away from this inflicted affection!
I couldn't stand loving and not being loved
But I still mouth your name until I feel your lips
I listen to the quiet until I hear your voice,
I close my eyes tight until I see your face
I lie still, so still
Until I feel your hand
 Lightly
Run over my figure.
It's an aching,
Hungering,
Want -
To be loved by you.

Perhaps...

Alexandra Dowhoszya

Perhaps...

Perhaps, I will go stand outside.

It's one o'clock in the morning,

The sun sank below the horizon eons ago

The moon has hung in its place

For ages and ages.

Time is soft tonight,

As still as the snow

That has come to rest on the ground.

The air is cold,

But not sharp.

It doesn't cut and sting at the cheeks;

It caresses them with cool kisses,

Welcoming.

The sky is not dark,

But instead, a light grey,

A ceiling of clouds painted

By the restless glow

Of the city below.

The black boughs of trees are stark

Against the clouds in a lovely display.

Fluffy flakes dance

In whimsical swirls

Down to kiss my nose

Looking up at the sky
And taking a deep breath,
Letting the cold air fill my lungs
And soothe me;
I'm glad I stuffed my feet
Into my father's
Too-big boots
And shuffled out
Into the snowy night.

Coping with the Rainbow's Light

Ashley Stewart

“I’m leaving.”

His voice stopped me. Leaving? Now? I could not face him. I slid the plate into the sink, the soft sound echoed in the silence.

“Why?” My voice was calm and steady. I faced him now, my eyes met his blue-gray ones before he looked at his loafers.

“You know why, Emily. I can’t keep living this lie. It’s killing me.” Nathan caught my gaze and I knew he told the truth. He told me before we got married, and I agreed to keep his secret for as long as I could.

Nodding, I turned back to the dishes. “Okay Nathan, I understand. Does Erik know? Or your family?” I could only imagine what his mother might say. A few choice words for sure.

“Yeah, Erik knows. I haven’t told any of my family, especially not my mom. She would have a conniption fit. I wish dad were still around to take care of her. He was always strong for her. I’m not sure about Jesse though, I feel as if she’s been avoiding me. You know how sisters can be.” I heard the scratch of the chair on the linoleum as Nathan took a seat.

“Your mother is stronger than you realize Nathan. She might not accept who you are, but she’ll always love you. A mother’s bond with her son is an unbreakable one.” I paused, scrubbing another plate. “Don’t worry about Jesse, she’s probably just busy. She did just become the CEO of her own company, you know.” Wiping my hands on the dish towel, I leaned against the counter facing Nathan. He fiddled with the placemats, his knees bouncing.

“You think I should tell her? Mom, I mean. I don’t even know how she’ll react.” He glanced at me with a worried look. I knew what he thought; was he about to ruin his relationship with his mother?

“Yes. Especially if you and Erik want to be happy together. Besides, there will always be a place for you here if things don’t go as planned. If you want, I can be there when you and Erik break the news?”

“Thanks, but no. I think I need to do this with Erik. I’m grateful to have you in my life. You’re truly an amazing friend. I really appreciate everything you have sacrificed for me. Spending four years of your life, married to a gay man? How crazy is that?” He laughed. “I still can’t believe you said yes even though you knew it wasn’t going to last.”

Feeling tears, I quickly looked down. “I guess you don’t realize how much I actually love you,” I said. Suddenly, Nathan’s strong arms were around my waist, holding me close to him. I buried my face into his shoulder and breathed in his familiar scent of cinnamon body wash and fabric softener. He took a step back, placed a kiss on my forehead and left the room.

Sliding into the driver’s seat, Nathan turned the engine of the burgundy colored ‘64 Mustang. It was a wedding gift from her parents. Pulling out of the driveway, he could see Em’s silhouette in the master bedroom.

“What if leaving is a mistake?” Nathan’s voice echoed around the cab, startling himself. Nathan pulled into an apartment parking lot, next to a black ‘65 Chevelle. He looked over into the driver’s window and saw the curly, black hair he fell in love with. A tall, slim, soft featured man stepped out of the car. He opened the door and slid into the passenger seat of Nathan’s Mustang. The sweet smell of soap and leather filled the car.

“Hey Erik,” Nathan grinned, locked the doors and started to back out.

“Hey Nate, are you sure you wanna do this?” Erik’s brow furrowed.

“Yea.” Nathan’s voice shook with the word, prompting Erik to reach over and grasp his hand firmly. The air in the car was thick, the radio doing nothing to ease the minds of either man.

They pulled up to an open, wrought-iron gate, as if the owners were expecting them. Nathan maneuvered the car up the long winding driveway until they spotted a large farmhouse that looked like it was just built. However, as they drove closer, Nathan and Erik could see the strips of paint hanging below the yellow-tinted windows. Nathan remembered when Jesse chased him out of their bedroom window once because he had accidently broken her dolls. He was lucky, only sprained his wrist.

“You grew up here?”

“Yea, I loved it. In the back there is 4 acres, most of it is covered by trees and bush.” Nathan paused. “I built a log fort out there once, used to pretend I lived out there sometimes.” Nathan climbed out of the car, locked the door and waited for Erik.

They barely opened the storm door before a woman threw open the front door. Nathan noticed the thin gray wisps of her hair, and the wrinkles that sagged around her mouth.

“Nathan! What a lovely surprise!” Nathan is pulled into a massive embrace before the woman steps back and lets them enter. “Oh, hello Erik. It’s been a while, hasn’t it? Since the wedding I believe?”

“Yea, that’s right Mrs. Brantford,” Erik offered a small smile and followed behind Nathan, stopping to glance at the intricate interior of the house. The white walls reflected the natural light coming in, making the house seem brighter. There were pictures everywhere he looked: on the walls, on the shelves, even on the fridge. Along with the frames, there were multiple crosses hanging around the house. A picture of Jesus Christ hung above the fireplace.

“Can I get you boys anything? Tea perhaps?” Nathan’s mother bustled around the kitchen, her apron stained with the years of cooking and cleaning. She readied the kettle and placed cups on the small round table in the middle of the room.

“Sure Mom.” Nathan stood by the door as Erik decided to settle in one of the wooden chairs that surrounded the table. Only after his mother had poured the tea and sat down, did Nathan notice Em and his wedding photo on top of the fridge.

“Mom. I – I have something to tell you.” Nathan’s heart picked up speed as his mother glanced at him, her eyes wide with love. Nathan opened his mouth, then closed it again.

“Go ahead Nathan, whatever you have to tell me, you can say,” His mother cupped her hands around her mug, still looking at him. He saw a mixture of concern and unease in her eyes. Before he realized it, the words had left his mouth, flowing into the silence of the small kitchen.

“Okay. Mom. I love Emily a lot, but I can’t keep living this lie. We are getting a divorce and I am going to be with Erik. Emily understands. Erik does too. I haven’t told Jesse yet, but I- I will. Erik and I

want to be together and I want your blessing... I know you are a strong believer of God and the Bible but I'm your son. I would never want to disappoint you or let you down. Em and I are only friends. Mom, I'm gay." Finally, Nathan stopped and held his breath. Glancing at his mother, he noticed her mouth was closed, and her eyes were unreadable. He swallowed hard. Was she mad? Maybe she knew? There's no way. Nathan wiped his hands on his jeans, the sweat staining the light blue fabric. He inspected his loafers, as he did this morning with Emily, and wondered if this would be the last time he would have a cup of tea with his mother.

His mother stood, leaving the kitchen without a glance at Nathan. He turned, looming in the doorway of the tiny kitchen. His mother walked to the front door, and held it open, waiting. Her voice sliced through him, "I think it's best you leave now."

Me, Myself, and Pie

Taylor Onski

To introduce wood to dough,
and rolling pin to grip,
is to make a home where wanderers wander,
stories soar, and love lands.

To pour sugar
onto apple's tang
with a sway left
and flick right,
is to be a child lost in the tango of taste unfolding.

To lay the dough over,
blanketing carved apples,
is to feel your mother's warmth suddenly rise in you.

To see the dough rise,
feel spice-laced elixir awaken your nostrils,
and taste golden harvest warmth,
is to welcome a dream.

To make an apple pie
is to bring myself home,
welcome youthful awe,
make my mother smile,
and dream this never ends.

A Love That's True

Marc Viherkoski

My presence fades as my blithe soul ascends,
Into a myriad of maternal sheen,
Amidst celestial groves with cherished friends -
To joyously rove whilst divinely free,
Away from secular inanities.
Though many will stay chained to their vile lives,
To suffer eternal misery
From basely transformed temporal demise.
But once Remorse arrives and restores their eyes,
I shall fly through the endless, desolate night,
To grab our loved ones solely by surprise
And bring them back to our celestial twilight.

There we'll be patiently awaiting you,
Upon reunion, of a love that's true.

Confirmation and Apostasy

Matthew Benoit

I read *Fun Home* today. Near the end I broke down sobbing. One short line undid me. *Sexual shame is in itself a kind of death.*

I treated my body as a graveyard for years, pleading with it to swallow desire and produce the eunuch I desperately needed to be. Confirmed in the Church, I carried shame like chrism and agonised stirrings that would make *babcia* hate me.

I loved my best friend once. I recognized him with a surge of joy, but he didn't see me. He's married now.

Before I knew what a browsing history was, much less how to clear it, I googled. *Gay ... Gay kiss ... Gay sex ... Gay love?* These searches became my brother's arsenal of weapons when he wanted to extort more computer time.

My parents didn't react when I came out and took me to my first Pride Parade the next summer. I felt out of place. A lily in a garden of violets and carnations.

Blowjobs were easy; I could do that. But sex required lubrication. Luckily, Polishness paid off there.

My brain buzzes always; I think they hear it. My longest relationship lasted about as long as a tic tac. A nice guy liked me; I needed a marathon's distance.

Men with greying hair and eager fingers: did they pursue me or vice versa? Did it matter? Somebody was willing to touch me.

I'm crying in my kitchen in my little apartment in a little city. I am very small — though physically teetering on 275 — (imagine how small I'll be in Toronto) — my anguish very large. I don't know how I fit it in here.

It's almost three and I have to meet with my GA prof. I stop crying; I've practiced doing so often. I meet with her and I'm light, easy. We talk about grading and student expectations.

I keep it together for our entire meeting, only letting auguries of regret spring fresh wells once the zoom window closes.

Eyes I paid a pretty penny for hurt and I have to start my readings for next week.

I'm tired but wide awake.

Cum Passio
Matthew Benoit

Your hand started on my thigh
And ended on my cheek.

