

THE ARTERY 2023



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Cover Art: “Tangerine Sky” by Emma Visser-Dicarlo

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Letter From The Editor:

Dear Thunderwolves,

The 2022-2023 school year may be ending, but there is also a beginning in the form of *The Artery*. *The Artery* season is my favourite time of the year. I love reading the entries and even writing myself, so you can bet that when the ESA says, “It’s that time of year to get creative!”, it puts a huge smile on my face.

This year was different for me though. This year I got the incredible honour of putting *The Artery* together. I still remember the excitement I felt when I got the email saying I could be the Artery Editor-in-Chief. It may have been a huge challenge- and I have a stronger respect for every Editor-in-Chief who came before me and every Editor-in-Chief who will come after me- but it was so worth it. It was an incredible experience that I wouldn’t change for anything. And of course, there were many people behind the scenes that I’d like to thank.

First I’d like to thank my fellow ESA members: Sophie, the Social Media and Events Coordinator; Katherine, the Orillia Representative; and Rebecca, the former Vice President. It’s been a pleasure working with you this past year, and I wish you all the best in your future endeavours.

To our fantastic Editorial Team, Katya, Jen and Nicole, thank you so much for working with me to make this year’s edition of *The Artery* a reality. I truly couldn’t have done it without you. I wish you all the best.

To Cindy and the English Department, I’d like to thank you for your support and spreading the word about *The Artery* and other ESA events.

To Sena, last year’s Editor-in-Chief, I’d like to thank you for always helping me when I was stuck. I wish you all the best.

To all the authors and artists who contributed to this year’s edition of *The Artery*, thank you so much. I know from personal experience how hard it is to share a piece of your soul, through your creativity, with the entire world. It takes courage to do that. Without you we would not have been able to make *The Artery* a reality.

And to you, our readers. Thank you so much for all the support you’ve given the ESA. You inspire us to keep going and to unite writers and readers alike. Always remember to keep writing and being creative. There’s a story within all of us that deserves to be told. So even if your scared, tell your story. Guaranteed it will touch hearts, and that’s the best feeling in the world.

Without further ado, it is my absolute honour to present to you the 2023 Edition of *The Artery*! We hope you love it as much as we do!

Sincerely,
Cristina Morriello
Artery Editor-in-Chief



“Sweet Like Sugar” by Emma Visser-Dicarlo

The Cave

Nadia Zywnina

We need to normalise setting boundaries in 2023

This app tracks your keystrokes to see what you want to see. A curated algorithm— an allegory of insecurity.

We need to normalise self care in 2023

bring this picture to your plastic surgeon!
Buy this cream, buy my supplements, use my code and
buy from our brand, we plant a tree every time you see this ad.

The ice caps are melting, our forests are burning,
what are you doing? Our planet is dying!

Buy now, pay later

If it feels good we can sell it, finance a new personality
you *don't* want to miss that collection call.
No returns or exchanges—hurry before you're gone.

We need to normalise mindfulness in 2023

Apparitions on a screen, ten notifications, scroll, delete.
to get your business we use deceit.

We need to normalise greed!

We need to normalise

We need to be normal.

Golden

Sophie Kuhn

i spent so long waiting for you

reaching

for the warmth

of your touch

mistaking comets

for more permanent creations

but you are the sun

i spent years worshipping

days wasted longing

for your rays to bless my skin

i take comfort in the shadows now knowing

you always come back around

a comforting healing kind of love

and when you do i'll be here

w aiting

o utstretched,

n aked,

i n the sand

if there ever is a time

you aren't mine

i will remember how brightly you burned

how hot it felt to be loved by you

i will savor how you tasted-

warm honey and cinnamon sugar apple cider-

burning my tongue

and i will make peace

with being in the dark

unfinished books

Sarah Favreau

I have collected a series of unfinished books.

old paperbacks filled with romances that remain unrequited,
dragons that continue to terrorize small villages
and heroes whose stories will remain unsung,
hidden behind the barrier of a few too many pages
and lost time.

pens, dollar bills, and gift receipts lay between pages,

marking the line that remains
uncrossed;
which has been conceived,
which will remain hidden,
ideas and plot points disappearing into the
newest purchase.

tucked into bookshelves,
author's livelihoods lie,
paid for in full
yet lacking the true completion
that comes from being
finished.

CHAOS

Vaishak Shibu

The days are getting longer
And nights shorter
Nope
There's no signs of summer yet
When the days are colder
And the nights are darker
I've seen people take shelter
In the midst of their anguish.
But how can I
When my shelter itself
Is chaos?

I am a Bear

Katya Arifin

I am a Bear
but I'm barely a Bear.
in fact I'm embarrassed to even admit that the bare minimum
is the Bear that I am.

I'm so not a Bear
I could be an au pair
and watch your kids after school (I'm cheap day care).

their animal crackers would scare me, I swear
they'd look more like Bears
than the one that puts them in their high chairs.

because when I see
the Bears on tv
I wonder if they're supposed to be me.

those Bears are scary
their eyes dart like flares
they dare me to eat what's rightfully theirs

while
downstairs in my den
my claws on the couch
popcorn in my mouth
I stare at my barely perceptible snout and ask,
how can this be
what Bearing's about?

my mom was a Bear
my dad was a Bear
I'm the heir to a long line of brown matted hair
we eat summer berries
we growl winter carols
and pour out our honey into iron-lined barrels.

but
if I as a bear
(if I'm laying it bare)
can't fit all my fur

To the violent affair
of your image of Bears
then despite all the his'try
and culture I've got
how can I say that I'm
something I'm
not?

I wish not to impair
your ideas of Bears
but your need to define me
is not one we share.

I am a bear.
I know that is true.
I could eat oatmeal
or fish fingers too.
I protest in anger
when passing a zoo
'cause those bears I see
are sort of like me.

from the fur in my ears
to the teeth in my mouth
to the tip of my barely perceptible snout

I'm not embarrassed,
I'm happy to say,
a bear past the bare minimum
is my way.
and so it's the end of my poem,
you see I'll say then,

Exit, pursued by
Me!

Deleting All My Apps

Jen Kesner

Sometimes I think the world is way too transparent.
Go online, walk outside, everyone's ideas are apparent.

Alien sightings, Will Smith's slap, Kardashian baby daddy drama.
World War III, COVID-19 and the secrets of Obama.

I can see so much of the world, I swear I see the core.
I open Twitter, I open Instagram, I can't stop, I need more.

Wake up every morning to see today's historic event.
Death tolls disasters - my phone's still at 90 percent.

Every time my phone dings, my heart sinks to the pit.
Don't worry, your heart can be replaced by a pig's, it's legit!

I open up my Twitter and see that it's been sold.
I can't keep up, there's too much happening; have I just gotten old?

The world almost ended probably a dozen times in '22.
Invasions, pandemic and bomb attacks, to name a few.

I open my phone to this week's mass shooting.
Grocery prices rising, no housing; I can't even blame the looting.

The news never stops, I swear it circles and takes a lap.
If I hate it so much, why can't I just delete the app?

Glaciers melting, Hurricane Ian, weather we've never seen before.
World record temperatures, monsoons and massive floodings galore.

The headlines are constant, broken up by celebrity news.
Free Britney, Kanye's cancelled, don't buy Balenciaga's new shoes.

I refresh my phone with hesitation, afraid of what comes next.
What kind of trauma will I endure with 280-character text?

It's not all bad or scary, there's always something funny.
Right next to articles about death is a cute dancing little bunny.

Is it better now not to be left so in the dark?
So much access, so much info, I can even add my own remark.

I can see so much of the world, so much terror, so much hate.

I wake up in the morning and see disasters before 8.

Seeing so much of the world has made me completely numb.
Why can't I just turn it off? It's so easy. It's so dumb.

Grandma-From-The-Trees

Sarah Favreau

When I was a little kid,
I thought my grandma came from the trees,
as we had to drive down a winding road to visit.

What felt like forever in the mind of a six year old girl
was really only 20 minutes.

My childish imagination adored exploring the outdoors,
my cousin and I setting up fairy houses,
acorn shells and sharp rocks, forming shelters
graced with Black-Eyed Susans and Queen Anne's Lace.

Grandma-From-The-Trees was a fairy in her own right,
feeding birds and deer out of the palm of her hand,
her house exuding a whimsical energy,
with its windows and filled veranda facing the lake.

As we got older, the life of fairies and outdoors was left behind, abandoned in favor of exploring
the indoor collections that my grandmother kept, a museum in and of itself, filled with books,
plants and magazines, even some hand carved dwarves.

Her kitchen filled to the brim with Russian dolls and red waxy candles, the disc
player crooning old Swedish tunes,
as she beckoned us over and offered us buttered rolls
and red, crimson hearts that burned of cinnamon and candied heat.

Cat-clawed curtains hide the sun as we gather now for a holiday,
the veranda filling up with grandchildren as we explore old picture books, crocheted
blankets and empty birdcages.

As the night grows cold and the stars blink in the sky,
Grandma-From-The-Trees joins us with a smile on her face,
sitting down to tell us about the summer we played with the fairies.

westbound to kipling

Sophie Kuhn

There was a man on the subway.
he still dances in my memory, like a dream in a ratty hat and heavy winter clothes
we were just two people passing by.

he stopped and smiled at me.

i hate strangers
but it felt like goodbye.

you remind me of my daughter, he said. *thank you*, i replied.

a million words in his eyes
unspoken and in between

then he was gone, and so was i.

i wish i had stopped
asked him who she was, what she loved, were they close?

let him talk to me in the middle of the platform westbound to kipling.
miss a few trains, share a coffee and shoot the shit, forget that we had somewhere to be
and just be.

i wish i had held his hand
at woodbine station.
given him his daughter for a few moments, been something to someone in that lonely city.

i thought about my father
with his kind and wild eyes
did he see me on the subway too?
a city away
was there someone who looked like me? i hope she is happy.
i hope he is too.

you remind me of my daughter, he said. *thank you*, i replied.
then he was gone, and so was i.

STORIES

Vaishak Shibu

Sometimes I think
What if
I could erase some things.
At least from my mind
What if I have known that
to have known more
was to suffer even more.

The very question of my life
has dragged me to the past decades.
I found stories in my mind,
stories that cannot be rewritten,
stories I wish were never written.
Somewhere in between the lines
I exist,
living in this moment,
being the story.
Living with what I've been given,
giving what I haven't received
And trying to make better stories.

Memories Of Knowing Again

Jen Kesner

Sitting and thinking about how we knew each other before we met.

A time when we were nothing but schoolmates and neighbours.

You walked past me in the hall, not ever thinking twice.

Yet now we're something bigger, something better, something greater.

I think about the second first time we met and since then how time flew,

Do I think about before the first time we met? Of course.

My mind goes back to what life was like without you.

Only to remind me of how dark it was before.

Hoping I would find someone that would hold me close

And love me while leaving my heart untorn.

Making dumb anniversary cards and cheesy little notes.

Mapping out the world we want to travel

And making stupid inside jokes.

Dreaming about the day we move on from now into forever.

Knowing I have you by my side without a worry whatsoever.

The Day We Said Goodbye

Sarah Favreau

We said goodbye on a summer's night,
the heat replacing our every thought,
as mosquitoes tried to stab at exposed skin and
sunburnt shoulders.
We both promised not to cry,
our pride pushing back against unshed tears.
Your car, which had become a familiar place,
became the setting for our rushed and final goodbye.
Windows rolled down,
you weaved through the potholes on the twisting road.
I thought about that one time we almost got hit,
speeding, turning, accelerating down a country lane,
and I thought about what it meant to truly live.
The music played from the dusty radio,
the tune both familiar, yet distant,
singing of daylight,
and eyes kept open.
As you reached my house,
I realized this was it,
 our goodbye.
Looking back I regret running,
smiling and turning away,
with those unshed tears
threatening to run down my cheeks,
silently glistening in the pale light.
As you pressed down on the horn,
 I looked back.
Perhaps you cried too.
I don't know.
That was our goodbye,
 after all.

A balsam fir prayer

Sophie Kuhn

She is a balsam fir

Whose needles ferry heatwaves to rest

And rustle deep within the forest

An aching:

‘farewell’

Like stubborn sap on sticky fingers

She creaks a final gasp of summer

As wild raspberries burst with flavor

On her cherry pink

tongue

I pray to the balsam fir

Whose roots wrap rustily around my feet

That they might be made of stone

That I might not leave so

soon

She brings the forest to life

Breathes magic into the air

To say goodbye

Is to say her name in prayer



“My Point Of View” by Emma Visser-Dicarlo

Corner Of My Eye

Winner of the Halloween Short Story Contest

Sometimes I like to pretend it isn't there, that if I were to close my eyes, it would simply cease to exist; if I can't see it, then it can't see me. Yet I know that's nothing more than wishful thinking, the reasoning of the mad. Perhaps that's what it is: madness. I woke up one morning and something shifted, reality distorting around the edges just enough to make me lose touch with the world around me. That's what it is, surely? This is nothing but a pretty lie. No, I know how this started. I know it just as I know that the figure that sits in the corner of my eye is looking at me. I know this is arguably impossible, seeing as it doesn't have a face. I know deep down I should be dead already. I know it started with a box.

~

I wasn't scared of monsters as a child. Instead I found my nightmare-fuel in the shape of creaky Ferris wheels and murky water, with spiders and bad grades coming in at a close second. I feared what I could see, my childlike mind already fixated on what was real. Despite all this, my mother still tried to instill her particular brand of fear in my impressionable mind, with warnings against demons, Ouija boards and Lucifer himself pouring out of her like sermons. Her utter devotion to the local Catholic church is one of the only vivid impressions I have of my mum. She would drag me there three times a week, the collar of my cotton dress shirt digging into my pudgy 4 year old neck; the legs of my pants getting caught underfoot; tripping me as I walked to the front for a blessing. Mum put a lot of emphasis on blessings. When I was nine years old she picked up a book at a community yard sale. It was a cracked old thing, filled to the brim with religious quotes, Bible passages and pages upon pages of blessings. She would pray for me often using this little book. I could hear her in her room at night, her voice a low murmur, and I knew she was staring at her framed photo of a man who she swore would save her. I didn't say anything about my mum's nightly rituals or her frantic beliefs. I didn't really need to. Whispers seem to spread faster than wildfire when the topic was the crazy lady on 34 Browning Street, and I couldn't escape faster from my small town with the first chance I got. Mum escaped in her own way: overdosing on a new strain of medication that I knew deep down wasn't ever going to have been able to fix her. My mother was paranoid, anxious and frenzied on a good day and controlling the next. What the doctor's couldn't fix was her fear. My mother was scared of something she couldn't even see, and I hated her for that. I couldn't understand it. Until the box arrived. I started praying recently. For all my mother's efforts, I don't feel blessed.

~

To: Mr. Thomas Moore, Flat 3c, London, England.

FRAGILE.

HANDLE WITH CARE.

DO NOT OPEN.

The package arrived on a Thursday morning; a nondescript brown box with sloppily placed tape closing up the flap. When I stepped outside to pull off yet another housing notice from the outside of the door, I almost tripped over it. I hadn't even noticed it until my shoe caught it, almost landing me face first into the hard cement of the hallway. As my hands swung towards the door frame, the white sheet of paper drifted down, landing a few feet away. I didn't make any attempts to reach for it, already too caught up in the culprit of my near fall. It's weird. Looking back, I really should have seen the box the second I opened the door. It must have been the hangover I had after a night of bar-hopping with old college buddies whose names I wouldn't have remembered even if I hadn't been so drunk I couldn't recall my own. My impending eviction could wait, I was just surprised to even have mail in the first place. Contrary to what my nightly activities might have suggested, I had no friends. I was a 31-year-old man living in a 2-bedroom flat with a leaky sink and a carpet that stunk of mildew and copper. The only thing keeping me afloat was my desk job at a tech firm, which, while it paid the bills, did not need my Bachelor's Degree. There was no one waiting for me in this dingy space, unless one counted the stray cat that scratched at the door on Tuesday nights. *Perhaps this is just a new way of sending out taxes.* Yes, that was probably it. I was of course ignoring the obvious red print on the sides, unnerved by the message's directions. No matter. I picked it up, looked both ways down the hall and walked back into my flat. This all happened within the span of a minute. I should have thought more, questioned why there hadn't been a knock at the door signalling the package's arrival. I should have taken a closer look at the sticker, wondering why there was no return address. I should have left the box outside. I didn't. A solid kick with my foot sent the door slamming shut. That was my first mistake.

~

I barely had any room on my dining table, so I dropped the box on my couch. It was surprisingly heavy, its weight leaving a sizable dent in the cushions. Rereading over the address, I frowned at the line with my full name- Thomas Moore. You see, I hadn't gone by that name in years, preferring the shortened Tom, or even Tommy. Only one person ever called me Thomas, and she was long dead. I shuddered, tilting the box so I could better read the red font branded into the side.

DO NOT OPEN.

I thought it was a typo; some sort of ironic misprint. What else was one supposed to do with a package? Boxes we made to be opened. I just needed to figure out how. There was a severe lack of scissors in the flat, so I opted for scratching at the box with my nails. I sliced myself by accident on the rigid cardboard, the cut already stinging as it touched the air. As I sucked on the finger, my other hand reached out and gripped the tape, peeling ever so slowly. Little did I know that, as the tape reached the end of the flap, I had just signed my death warrant. Breath catching in my throat, I pried open the flaps, exposing the insides of the cardboard box. Adrenaline rushed through my body as I looked inside.

No. No, no, nonononononono. It can't be.

Resting at the very bottom was a very, very familiar book. *Daily Prayers, Blessings and Readings: Pocket Edition* taunted me from the cover, the pages browning and creased from my mother's constant handling. I assumed they must have found it in some old storage locker, thinking that I, as her last living relative, would want something to remember her by. But this? I had never expected to be thinking about my mother and her broken mind in over a decade. Yet here I was, now in possession of her most prized possession. It sickened me, yet I couldn't help but reach in and touch it, stroking its leather cover with an index finger. If I had taken a moment, I would have noticed that the cushions had risen, the box seemingly having lost weight from the moment its contents touched the stale air of the flat. I didn't notice this, instead enthralled with the book that contained so much of my childhood. Picking it up, a shiver ran up my spine. When I opened the book, about to see the words my mother would frantically repeat over and over under her breath, I expected a *Blair Witch* style drawing; maybe even some scribbled notes to her estranged son. Instead, I flipped the book open to nothing.

Every single page was blank.

~

Having been confronted with my mother's madness once more, I threw the book across the room, the thunk of it hitting the wall satisfying a broken, confused part of my soul. The adrenaline that had been coursing through my body left me feeling like a trainwreck, exhaustion seeping into my bones. The mere thought of my mother had sucked the life out of the day. Now my only focus was on getting rid of both the book and the box as quickly as possible. First order of business was simple: the box was booted out the front door, the red lettering mocking me as it skittered to a halt right by where the slip from earlier lay. I really should have listened to the warning. It would have saved me from being reminded that my mum made my life infinitely difficult growing up, with her psychotic nonsense. I take that back. It wasn't her fault, really. She wasn't herself, not in the end at least. She was a stranger, even to herself. Marching back into the flat, I set out to find the book, making sure it found its way into the bin. It took a second to find it, and once I had pulled it out from its damned hiding spot, it was promptly thrown away. *Good riddance*. This entire event had probably taken less than an hour, from opened door to slammed trash bin. Sitting on my couch, the feeling of eyes suddenly tickled my neck. Turning slightly, I could have sworn there was someone there beside me on the couch. Whipping my head to my left, I was met with nothing but a pillow, a speck of white paint, and leftover tape from the package.

I decided at that moment I was going to get very, very drunk, starting at one in the afternoon.

~

I have been drunk many times. I was no saint during my college days, and personally I think I would have rather died than go through those years sober. Yet never have I *seen* things

when drunk. I don't do drugs, preferring not to mix my poisons, lest I end up in a hospital bed. So when I saw a man standing in my kitchen out of the corner of my eye, my heart nearly gave out. I yelped and swung around with my fists in the air. No one was there. *What the hell?* Taking a cursory glance into the room, I was met with nothing but empty air. Pouring myself a glass of water I shook my head slightly, trying to kick the fuzziness from one too many shots of gin. Everything felt like was spinning. Turning off the tap, I looked towards the clock on the wall. 6 pm. There, in the corner of my eye, stood the man. I jumped, spinning once more to face him. No one. Something was wrong here. Maybe I was tired, a bit too drunk. These thoughts are what led me to lay down in bed early, turning off the lights and raising the blankets to my chin. Fear has a funny way of getting to you. I didn't know what to expect next. My heart was beating at a frantic pace. Was I seeing things? Was there actually someone in my house right now? Was I being stalked? Flipping over to face the room I froze.

There was something sitting at the end of my bed.

Every cell, every nerve in my body, was standing on edge. I couldn't see his entire body, the outline of his figure blurry in the corner of my eye. I didn't know what to do. What does one do, in a situation like this? In horror movies, they usually scream, cry, yell, maybe even try to fight the intruder. I did none of this. Instead I just stared at the man in my peripherals. There was something off about him, something I couldn't pinpoint due to my drunken haze. He didn't move, so I lay still as well. My breath came out of me in short gasps. I slowly stared forward, looking at the wall across from my bed. Suddenly, it moved. I'm not afraid to admit that I screamed, probably loud enough to wake a neighbour or two. I didn't care as I jumped from my bed, the covers hitting the ground behind me as my feet smacked against the linoleum flooring of the kitchen. The lights flickered with the intensity with which I slammed the door shut. Turning, my heart dropped. *Daily Prayers, Blessings and Readings: Pocket Edition*. Mum's book had made it out of the bin and was now laying on the kitchen table. It was in my hands before I could blink. Yet this time, when I opened the page, there were words. Scribbled notes, in red, vibrant ink.

Don't look. Don't look. Don't look.

Underneath was a list of prayers, organised by need, hope and situation. Some were circled with that same red pen- *prayer for security, prayer for guidance, prayer for faith*. The man was back. Standing still, in the corner of my eye. He didn't have a face. There were no features, no eyes, no nose. He was smiling at me though. I have a sickening feeling that he smiled at my mum too. Maybe that's what drew her to her end. Maybe it did it. With shaking hands, I flipped to page 23: *Prayer for Strength*. I thought of my mum. Her whispered blessings. If it was even possible, the thing in the corner of my eye smiled wider.

~

“Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” Matthew 26:41

All the Quiet Trees

Jenna Veenstra

There is a well-traveled route through the quiet trees. Each time I have wandered through it, these trees have softly hummed to me treasured songs.

When I was a child my father would lead me by the hand to the top of Cuckoo Valley, which rests only a few stepping stones away from our home. Some four billion years ago, giants laid down to rest along the river. Their silhouettes met the sun each morning as their quiet bodies lay dressed in red and white cedars, maple and scattered birch. This blanket of trees runs up and down the valley, and hidden gnomes and fairies frolic underneath its cover.

Behind my home, a river weaves through the many trees. It fuels them and sings to us while we enjoy each other's company. This water houses the trout, tadpoles and crayfish I would take home to my mother. After dodging trees, the river soars off the limestone and falls to the bottom of the valley.

Long ago, miners thought they found treasure here, but pride and greed strung them on for weeks on end. They left the valley none the wiser, with piles of pyrite, a fool's gold. A building of stone and a few rock walls lay along the banks and painted for me a picture of those selfish days. My father once told me if they had listened to the trees, they would have been met by a far better fate.

When I could zip my own zippers, my mother let me take to the woods by my lonesome. I would chase goblins, scale the oaks and make forts with the cedars. I would follow the old miner's trails to the bottom of the valley and swim in its magnificent pools and sun on its rocks.

When the giants began to swallow the sun, I would run my little feet to the cabin and share with my father the magic of my days.

When the stars would shine, I would tuck away in bed: here, trees would sing me lullabies, while others would flirt with the wind. Some would even tap dance on my window. Sap would often stick to my feet and walk with me to school, where they tried to shape me into what the concrete and cubicles craved. When the bus took me home, I would fling off my shoes and race to the trees. Here I was met with who I was and not who I was supposed to be. I would lay in the shade of the maple and nourish my roots with all the quiet trees. The more I aged, the more I learned about the trees - the fruit they would bear, the sunlight they needed, the insects that crawled through their bones - and about the squirrels, the shoot moths and the song sparrow that made these trees their homes.

The more I aged, the less I knew about myself and questioned what I was to do with all my days yet to come. I would take to the trees, who gave my secrets a home. As the trees and I grew closer to the stars, I made more time for the world. The whispers of my friends nearly became a memory as I left my home atop Cuckoo Valley and took a familiar road. I became a machine for making money and children. I played this role quite well. But a song from the trees rang in the back of my head: "You belong back at home." Twenty years ago, when my father returned to the earth and my mother to the city, I found myself living above the valley and lost in the trees, now with a family of my own. When I arrived, I slipped off my shoes and took to the forest.

"Welcome back," they sang to me as they drowned my worldly sorrows. "Come now, sit with us, listen and do not speak." The fairies, goblins and trees I once knew had babies of their own and we raised our children together along the brook. Some evenings the trees would snoop through my windows, whispering to each other about how I treat those I loved. When I would return to them, they were quick to remind me of my follies.

When I grew gray, I would lead my children's children by the hand through the miner's trails. I taught them how to catch gnomes by the hat and we would swim beneath the giants as the trees hummed the songs of my youth.

As my offspring aged, they found valleys, trees and adventures of their own. As I aged, I felt more alone. Through the ancient trees I have taken many walks with sorrow. Here, they sang to me, "these miles too, are treasures."

Tonight, I am full of sleep. Too weak to walk to the trees or dip my toes in the river. My window opens to a sky with twice as many stars as I have ever seen. From where the giants sleep to where the river bends a chorus begins and dances towards my wrinkled frame. The trees have been quiet for all my days, but never silent. They have echoed to me many songs since I stood, for the first time, above the valley thousands of moons ago.

As I listen to my dear friends, I close my eyes and pretend I am with them in the congregation. I can make out the voices of the cedars, oak, maple and scattered birch who sing in harmony. Tonight it sounds like the river, stars, giants, gnomes and all else who live within my sweet valley have joined in. With the last bits of who I am, I sing with the choir the hymn that sums up all the goodness of my life. It begins: "To enjoy your time in this life, without solace, is to not enjoy your time at all."

Alba and the Wolf

Jen Bridge

Once upon a time, there was a young man named Alba who lived in the woods with his father. The two lived a simple life in a small cottage, with a few chickens, and a small garden of root vegetables. On Sundays they'd make their way to town with a wagon full of chopped wood, with the hope that they might barter for cheese and bread and such. Always, the fire roared in the hearth and their bellies were full. Still, as boys are apt to, the son wanted more.

"Why should we stay in one place for all thirteen moons," he would ask his father, "when we might travel as the herds do? See the whole countryside, barter along the way for interesting spices and wares. What do we need but our axes and wagon?"

"A few nights on the road, Alba, and you'd be missing the warm fire and soft bed of our cottage. Besides, there is many a danger in the wide world." And so the days went, with father and son venturing familiar paths and bushes, felling trees, foraging, and hunting. Spending nights by the fire, munching on bits of wood sorrel and smoked venison, sitting in companionable silence.

One autumn day the father took ill with chills and a nasty cough. He could hardly rise from bed, much less work in the forest.

"I'll go Papa. I'll bring back some chokecherries and make a tea to restore your health."

"No son. The forest is dangerous. We have enough food for a few days, and I will mend by then." "Papa, I'm sixteen, nearly a man full grown. I know the forest. I'll be fine." "No, Alba!"

So Alba fed the fire, tended the chickens and chopped wood, staying in the clearing. The wind grew cold as the sun began to sink. Alba knew in his bones that the first now would soon come.

Early next morning his father's forehead was still hot, and he slumbered deeply, so Alba packed some supplies and his axe, setting out into the woods. He visited all their usual places, gathering herbs and harvesting roots, but when he reached the chokecherry trees, all the berries were out of his reach. The lower berries had been eaten by a bear as she prepared to hibernate. Alba decided to go deeper into the woods, walking by a creek that he knew would guide him back home.

Another hour, he had found the berries he needed and loaded them in his pack. When he turned to head home, a woman stood in his path. She wore a coat of animal hide, dyed deep red and prettily embroidered. Two long braids trailed from beneath its hood. Transfixed by her beauty, Alba could do nothing but admire her, his gaze lingering in the bistre center of her almond eyes.

Redhood spoke then, addressing him in a strange tongue. Though he couldn't make out her words, it seemed clear enough that she did not appreciate him picking the berries. He ducked his head in apology, attempting to gesture an explanation of the healing tea he intended to make. Then he made her an offering of the other herbs in his bag. She took some cedar and dipped her head, then beckoned him to follow her.

The two made their way into the trees until the creek was long gone; Alba worried he may not be able to navigate back home. Betimes Redhood would pause and point at things: odd shaped stumps, impressive mushrooms and such. Each time she did so, a voice echoed in his head.

Remember.

Soon he realized she was helping him to map their passage, and he relaxed. Eventually, he ducked after her into the mouth of a well-disguised cave and found himself in her dwelling. It was quite different from his own; full of things that were found, or carved by hand, instead of things that were tooled and machined. It was warm and inviting.

Redhood dropped some bark and yellow flowers into a leather pouch, signing that they were for tea to cure fever. Then she stoked the fire, boiled water and cooked some dough wrapped on a stick. They shared a meal of earthy-flavoured tea and fired bread with a bit of little cheese from Alba's pack.

Alba couldn't remember a time when he'd been so content, as the two passed away the afternoon exchanging smiles and teaching one another bits of language. He still felt lightheaded when finally she urged him to the door, pointing to the sinking sun. On a lark, he spun about and stole a kiss from the enchanting beauty. Redhood gave him a scolding nip on the lip and wagged a finger at him. He hung his head in apology, nursing the lip she'd nicked, but she stroked his cheek and gave him a smile. She followed him out the door, and with a stick, drew some symbols on the ground. Alba understood: Redhood wanted him to return to her under the next full moon.

At home, Alba found his father looking worse than ever. He bathed his brow with a damp cloth as he boiled water. As he added the bark that Redhood gave him to the cup, he prayed for his father's health, and thanked the tree from whence it came. Not long after he'd spooned the last of the brew into his father's mouth, the fever ebbed, and by morning his father was well enough to get up.

"I was in such a state, Alba. I thought you left the cottage, but it must have been a dream." said his father as he ate and drank chokecherry tea.

"I did Papa. I had to get the chokecherries for your tea."

"Oh no! Son, I told you, it's dangerous in the forest! I hope you didn't venture too far."

"I'm fine Papa. I followed the creek to the berries and followed it home again. Don't worry."

But his father looked worried. His face grew pale and his eyes widened. "Promise me Alba. Swear you'll never do that again! You could have been taken by one of them."

"Who?"

"The Tribe of the Moon," whispered his father, glancing around frantically. "They're not like us, Alba. They're wild. Some say the tribe was attacked by a wolf pack long ago. All the parents were killed, and the few children who survived were raised by the wolves. They live in dens and hunt with their bare hands and teeth. Their speech is gibberish after being raised by animals. Those who go too deep into the forest never return." His father's eyes looked haunted, and his hands trembled.

"Oo-kaaaaay," said Alba. "Seems like you're still a little sick, Pa. Let's get you back to bed. Don't worry, I'm not going anywhere today."

Later that evening, after dinner was cleared and the chickens were tended to, Alba sat quietly by the fire, listening to his father snore. He wondered if Redhood was one of the Moon Tribe people, and if such a group even existed, though he dismissed all this wolf business as pure nonsense -just cautionary tales for young children. Certainly, Redhood was no wild creature. Already he itched to see her again.

Alba woke to the sound of his father chopping wood and noted, as he peered through the curtains, that the man looked fully recovered. Happy as Alba was to see it, he also felt a trace of disappointment. There would be no more exploring in the woods for a long time with his father on watch. He found the cottage stuffy and confining in a way he never had before.

Days passed in the usual way: chopping, chickens, chores. Alba's tension only grew worse. In the bush it seemed he could smell and hear everything, and he desperately wanted to run and explore. When he was indoors, he became restless, and his skin itched all over. He kept his eye on the night sky as the moon grew.

On the eve of the full moon, Alba served his father a large dinner portion and slipped sleeping herbs into his tea. No sooner than his father had drifted off by the fireside did Alba run out the door. He packed nothing. He didn't even put on a coat. As he ran into the moonlight his body began to burn on the inside, and his skin felt too tight. He tore and scratched away his clothing, thrashing about on the ground to escape the sensation. Finally, just as he thought he might burst, he was blinded by a white light and he found release. When he could see again, Redhood was standing in front of him. He knew it was her – he knew her scent - but the woman he'd met was gone.

Instead he looked upon a sleek black wolf. He glanced down at himself to see a set of silvery paws where his hands had been. Redhood crashed into Alba, licking his face in greeting, and then the two were off like a shot, frolicking and hunting in the night.

Alba woke up the next morning, warm and calm and surrounded by deerskin blankets that smelled of Redhood. His father had been right: he would never return. Not only did Alba sense that his home was now deep in the wood, far from humans and towns, but he also knew he'd found his mate, and would never leave her side again. The pair lived out the rest of their

days in the forest with their pack mates- the Tribe of the Moon- happy and free. But Alba never abandoned his father. He kept watch from afar and laid a fresh kill or some berries on his doorstep each week.

I AM A BOY

An Excerpt From A Picture Book

Liam Pridding Squire

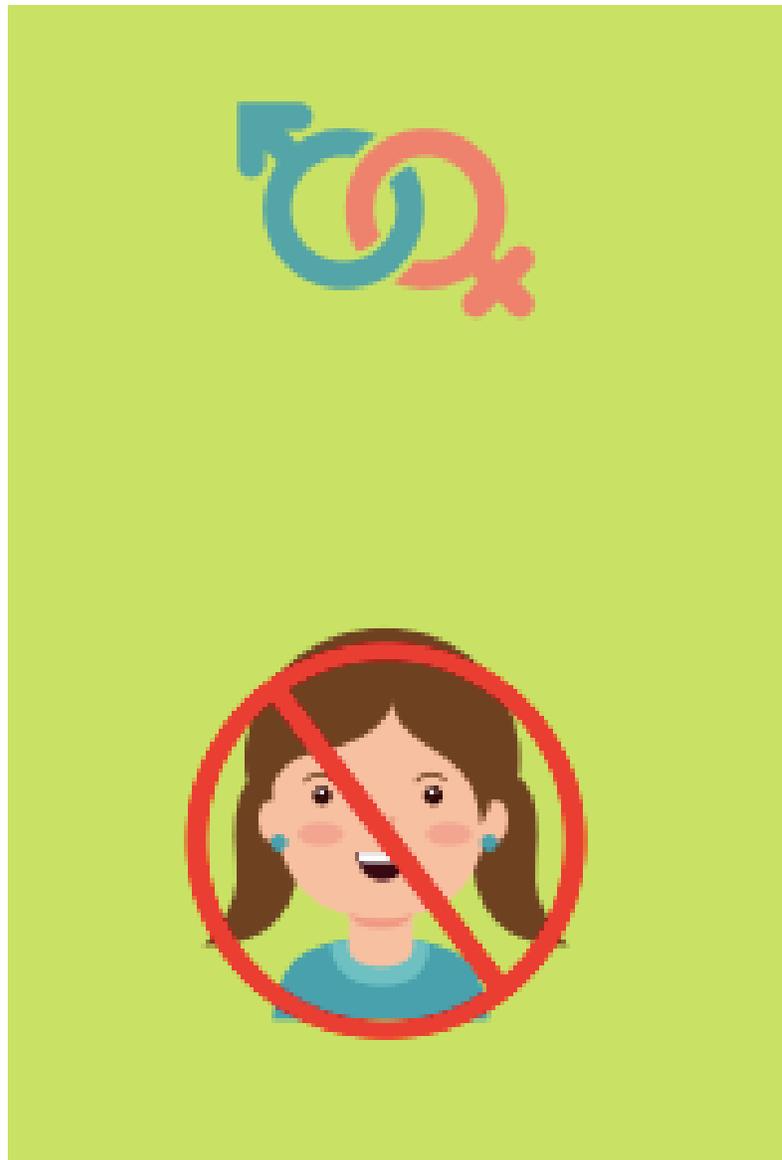
Yes! I am Liam.



What I am not is a girl.

In fact, I don't identify with my assigned gender at all.

Can you guess my gender identity?



I am a BOY!



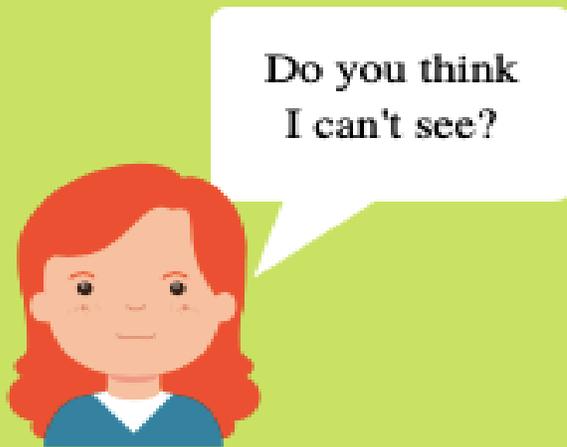
In my heart, I have short brown hair!
But what I really have is a ponytail.



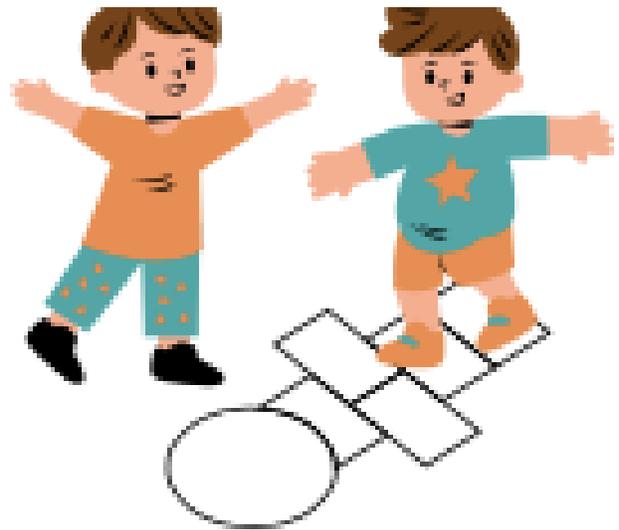
In my mind, I have a strong flat chest!
But what I really have are two small breasts.



The one thing I'm missing.
What seems so simple...
Is to be called Liam and acknowledged by people!



If only I looked more like the boys in school, maybe I wouldn't feel so uncool. ---

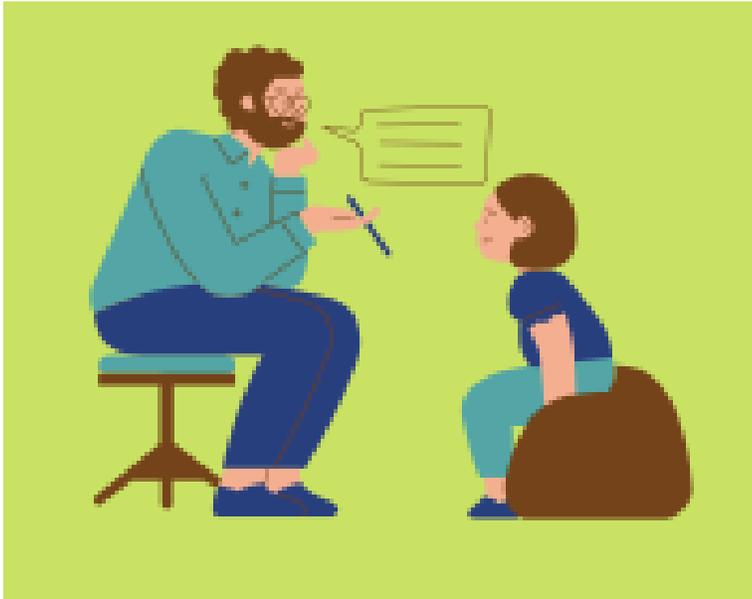


Maybe this is a passing phase,
maybe I need to try and behave!

Maybe I could try to be more feminine,
but I know that dressing up won't erase me as a specimen.



How about I try some gender therapy?
Maybe this choice just isn't for me!



The more we talk, the more I conclude,
that I am most definitely a DUDE!



Loveless

Jen Kesner

Sitting just inches away from each other, feeling the tension build up in the room, neither could look up at one other, each afraid of what would come next. A slight lean to each other's faces could ruin the friendship that had been developing for the past three years. The gap between them closed, and their legs touched. Was this the end? The end of a friendship? Or was it the beginning? The beginning of something real, something that was *meant to be*... or just the beginning of the be the elephant in the room for the next little while?

Three years ago, Tristan met Lil at a friend's gathering, and they instantly clicked. They were both lost souls, both just out of long relationships and neither looking to jump back into anything. Their friendship started platonically. Each focused on themselves, just wanting to find a new friendship. Having similar interests, the two were inseparable. At Tristan's house conversations went on for hours, and there was always something to do. Whether going on walks, playing board games or finding new food around town, they were never bored. Their friendship developed quickly and their connection quickly became strong. Never a dull moment and never an awkward silence.

Eventually, harmless flirting made its way into the friendship, which evolved into dirty jokes and holding hands. Everyone around Tristan and Lil was convinced they were together, but neither thought anything of it. There was something off-putting about Lil, though. The friendship was deep, but there was almost no depth to her. She didn't have a warm and welcoming energy. She was cold and numb but never sad. She was happy and cheerful but seemed loveless. Everybody she interacted with was almost a robotic response, as if she was programmed to respond a certain way to blend in with others. It was like she didn't feel love and copied others to see the appropriate reaction. Lil holding a puppy was like watching someone interact with Ikea assembly instructions: confused about what to do with them and how to feel about it. When she looked at Tristan, her face was cheerful, and she was always smiling ear to ear around him, but the look behind her eyes was cold.

Tristan loved seeing Lil. His heart raced when he saw her, and he rushed to open her messages every time she texted him. She took his breath away, as much as he hated to admit it. He wanted nothing but for their relationship to become more intimate and passionate, but there was something about her. Something that just didn't sit right with him. Something that made him think she didn't love him back, even just as friends; maybe even that she couldn't. Their friendship was perfect, and he didn't want to ruin it with the hopes that he could change her to feel something she'd never felt. He knew how he felt about her, but he also learned quickly that she felt nothing. Not just toward him but in general.

She never talked to Tristan about love despite having dated before. (to Tristan?) She spoke of success and promise but never about how she felt. He knew her idea of a relationship seemed transactional. She had a list of qualifications and refused to part ways with it. Even when her friends talked about their relationships, she wondered why anyone would be upset if an anniversary was forgotten or they didn't receive a good morning message. Lil was more focused on the bigger picture than the small relationship issues. It didn't matter if her boyfriend was out partying all night without her as long as he kept his six-figure job and promised to travel around the world with her. It wasn't entirely about how much money the guy had but more about his status and perks. Nothing mattered to her more than bragging rights. It didn't matter if he lived in a tiny condo as long as it was in a good location. It didn't matter if he had nice clothes as long as

she could dress him in the clothes she wanted him in. It didn't even really matter what other people thought as long as it was up to her standards and she could talk about it with other people.

She was like this with her friends too. Relationships weren't based on how much fun she could have or how good she felt around them. It mattered what they were bringing to the table. Was it friends of some high-class social circle so she could tell other people she knew them? Was it people that knew someone that knew someone famous? Was it people who had condos where it was difficult to find parking so she could use their parking garage? Or maybe people who like to listen so she could brag about the life she thinks she has? She felt nothing toward her friends; it didn't matter anyway because she used them to feel better about herself.

Tristan refused to see this side of her. He gave her the benefit of the doubt. He knew she had no depth but couldn't see her using him. If she was, he couldn't find a reason why. He already knew she didn't have many close friends, and many of her "friends" were more acquaintances than anything. Tristan didn't have a "perk" like all her other friends. They genuinely had a good time together.

Now they're sitting on a couch together, just a few inches apart. Tristan wants to lean in and see where it could go, while Lil feels the tension and wants it to break. She also wanted to know what would happen if their friendship turned into something more. Tristan couldn't take his eyes off his right knee, touching Lil's left. The conversation they were having was slow and quiet. Neither paid attention to what they were saying. Tristan's heart felt like it was slowly sinking into his stomach. Lil felt his energy slowly moving closer to him. She moved her hand from her thigh just to put a couple of her fingers on his knee. Both were nervous to look up. The tension was so deep they couldn't go back to the friendship they had been having. It changed. There was something there. Slowly looking up, Tristan leans toward Lil. Lil brings her face closer to his, and they continue talking. Words no one's listening to as they watch each other's lips move. Leaning in a little closer, maybe a centimetre apart, the tension builds. They grieve the friendship they once had. Softly touching each other's lips, they share what was probably the quickest kiss anyone had experienced. Lil pulls her head away, looking at Tristan. The first awkward moment for them happened. A moment of piercing silence caused their hearts to stop. The blood rushes to their faces, red from confusion about what just happened. Neither knew what the other wanted. Lil stood up, saying she needed to leave and would message Tristan, but he worried he'd never hear from her again.

Tristan thought about the person Lil was and how they would move on from this. He wondered if he could change her and show her what it was like to feel love. He wondered if she was even capable of changing. All night he lay in his bed, staring up at the ceiling and wondering what could come from this.

Lil was less worried about the kiss and the tension. She wondered about the next time they would see each other. Would the dynamic be different? She wanted the friendship to continue, she needed things with Tristan to stay the same. Suddenly, her phone buzzed.

Tristan

I feel like we need to talk about what happened tonight.

Lil

I don't think things need to be awkward, but yeah, we should talk.

Tristan

What do you think about it? Should we go forward with this?

Lil

Let's see what happens the next time we see each other. Maybe it was nothing. Maybe we're overthinking it.

Tristan

I think we should explore it. Let's test it out and see how it goes. Maybe there's something worth exploring.

Lil

The next day, Lil went over to Tristan's, and the two were definitely different- not a bad different, but maybe not necessarily good. It was awkward. It was weird. Neither knew what the other wanted. Tristan wanted something passionate, something real with Lil. Lil wasn't sure what she wanted but knew she wanted to keep her relationship with Tristan. After a little while, Lil and Tristan decided to try taking their friendship and turning it into the same thing but a little more intimate.

Weeks passed, and their relationship got more awkward. Things were different, and Lil hated it. She wanted things back to normal. Tristan's house was her safe space, a place to escape her family drama and be away from her friends. She wanted it to return to the place where she would relax, change into sweatpants and lay down. The house she used to run is somewhere she felt like running away from. It wasn't working, and she didn't want it to continue. She had no idea how break the news to Tristan. She knew her ending the intimacy would change them. She wanted her safe space back. She wanted to walk into Tristan's house without the drama. She wanted it to turn back into the place it was when they were just friends. So she texted him.

Lil

I can't do it anymore. I miss how we were.

Tristan

What's wrong with how we are now?

Lil

Things are different. I miss how we used to be together.

Tristan was heartbroken but not surprised. Despite getting to know Lil on a different level, she was still the same loveless and empty person. He wanted to fight for her, but he knew that wasn't what she wanted. Lil didn't know exactly what she wanted, but she knew it wasn't Tristan. He blamed himself and wondered what he did to deserve it. He wondered if he was loveless as he hears a text from Lil coming in.

Lil

I'm so happy things are back to normal. I missed going over to your place and just hanging out.

Tristan

Me too.

Time passed, and things eventually went back to normal. They were still their flirty selves before the kiss and occasionally made joking references to their almost month-long

relationship. They still hung out at Tristan's place, which quickly turned back into Lil's safe space. Tristan still had deep feelings for Lil but knew she could never love him back.

A couple of months later, Lil met someone. He was tall, relatively attractive, had few friends and wasn't all that sociable. He had an office job, but no one really knew what he did. It was rumoured that he made good money, but he was the one that started that rumour. He was boring, but it didn't matter because his condo was right above the centre of the excitement. He was awkwardly outspoken, but he promised to take Lil around the world.

Tristan didn't really like Lil's new boyfriend, not because he had feelings for her, but because there wasn't much to like. He tried to start conversations with him and be nice, but there was no depth to him. Maybe they were perfect for each other because there wasn't much more to them than what was on the surface. Tristan wasn't sure how much Lil really liked this guy because she was still always over at Tristan's house to "have a break." She was still running away from her family drama, friends and now her boyfriend. She never told her new boyfriend about her and Tristan's almost-relationship because she didn't want to lose her safe place. She and Tristan never changed. They were still their flirty selves, still making inappropriate jokes, and still had awkward moments where they were sitting maybe a little too close to each other.

Tristan couldn't help but wonder how Lil really felt about her boyfriend if she was still running back to his place after seeing her boyfriend. How much could she really like him if Tristan was still the priority? Tristan never turned down the flirting. He missed what they had, but things had changed. After seeing how she was with her boyfriend, he couldn't imagine a relationship with her. He wanted to love her, but she was too superficial. He couldn't love someone that couldn't love him back. But he just had to know.

Tristan

If things are good with this new guy, why do you keep coming to my place?

Lil

Your place makes me feel safe. It gives me a break from the outside world and everyone in it.

Tristan

I'm happy I make you feel that way but isn't your boyfriend going to be kind of upset about that?

Lil

Well, it's more your place, not really you, so he's totally fine with it.

Tristan hadn't experienced this pain before. He didn't even feel it when Lil said she wanted to end things. He couldn't believe what she had said. All this time, Tristan thought she felt safe with him. He thought she wanted to be with him. All she wanted was a place away from everyone, and he had that. He didn't think there was a way for Lil to use him because he didn't offer anything except their friendship, but he was wrong. It was his place. It was his couch. It was his TV that she watches her shows on. He didn't know how to respond. This was worse than betrayal. It was proof. Proof that she never felt anything. Proof that she never cared. Those moments in their friendship where they laughed for hours were just a bonus to Lil. It wasn't the main reason she wanted to be with Tristan. All she wanted was a place away from everything else, and Tristan never bothered her when she needed these moments.

Lil never understood what upset Tristan so much. She thought there was nothing wrong with every person in her life having a purpose for her. What was so bad about having a friend to

fall back on when everything in your life was irritating you? Why couldn't the people around her understand that?

Their friendship still dragged along, but it wasn't the same. Lil began to go over to Tristan's house just to complain about the rest of her life. It wasn't the Lil he knew before. It wasn't the Lil he thought he knew. Even though Tristan hated that Lil wanted to return to the time before the kiss, it was all he wanted. He just wanted to feel how he did before. Before he knew she was loveless.

Midnight After Grad

An Excerpt From A Novel

Cristina Morriello

Wednesday, June 26th, A Very Grueling Midnight.

It's been thirty-five minutes since I left Clearbrook as an upcoming ninth grader. I already feel nostalgia - is that even possible? I felt tired when Mom drove me home from the dance, but now my thoughts are running a mile a minute, keeping me alert and wide awake. I still feel like I'm in the Twilight Zone, but I don't feel numb anymore. I can feel emotions. I've never felt an emotional overload like this since Janet, my occupational therapist, told me I have autism twenty-two days ago. The difference between these two emotion overloads? My diagnosis gave me powerful positive emotions. Right now I feel powerful negative emotions that are making me dizzy and are hurting my chest.

I feel angry. Rage is pulsing in my temples and constricting my heart. It's over. My time as a Clearbrook Bulldog is over. I've never liked school, but at least grade eight was mostly fun. But I didn't do anything worthwhile. I wish there were things to try out for that weren't just sports or science and math stuff. There was nowhere I could fit in. I didn't have friends because I didn't fit in. I never hung out with anyone outside of school. I used to be the Resident Weird Girl until my diagnosis. But it was too late to really be able to discover myself completely. A big piece of me was missing, and when it came to me, it was in June of grade eight. Nothing could've been done.

I feel sad. I did have fun in grade eight, but I didn't acquire the memories everyone else was able to acquire. I was out of the loop all the time, never invited to anything. Everything now feels like a "could've been". I could've been different. I could've sacrificed big parts of me to fit in. I chose my character over possible friends. I know a huge part of it was my fault. But it would've been nice to get the best of both those worlds without having to sacrifice anything. I'll be Eloisa Montello, the girl Clearbrook forgot.

I feel regret. I spent all of grade eight as an outsider. I could've done things differently. All that I produced was a fourth place finish in the annual speech competition and a trophy for Kiddie Theatre. I haven't done anything worthwhile. I want to be somebody, like in that Emily Dickinson poem "I'm Nobody!". I know everybody's a somebody to somebody, but what I mean is I want to be something more than I am, something I want to be. I'm not an athlete or a nerd or a preppy or a pop or a pretty girl. I'm not memorable. I'm just an outsider. If I took more initiative, I could have started to be somebody. Maybe- just maybe- I could've fit in somewhere.

I feel lonely. I'm going to spend summer alone. I was never invited anywhere, except to Danica's pool party which I'm not allowed to go to. I'll be spending my summer with my characters and thoughts. Don't get me wrong, my characters are my friends. But they're figments

of my imagination. As much as it kills me to admit it, they're NOT REAL. I think about all those times the girls of Mrs. Duncan's class hung out after school without me. It's gonna be like this in high school, I just know it. If I couldn't fit in in elementary school, how do Mom and Dad expect me to fit in in a much bigger, more intimidating, more crowded high school?

I feel invisible. I felt like I could never be seen because I didn't fit into the eighth grade mold. I felt like I was only seen because I told everyone about my autism. They really talked to me more after that. I was once the "weird girl", but now I'm the "disabled girl" or the "autistic girl". My story didn't begin until it was too late.

I feel impatient. I'm sick and tired of the school scene, where you can only be somebody if you fit into a clique. I want to be seen NOW. I want to shine NOW. I WANT TO BECOME SOMEONE NOW!

I pull myself into an upright sitting position in my bed, smoothing down my pink nightgown and gently putting Cocoa- my old stuffed puppy in a sparkly pink dress- aside. I blink. I don't feel an ounce of fatigue. It's twelve twenty-eight now. I should be tired. I should be sleeping. But my mind's being my worst enemy right now.

I flick on the light and look at the pictures on my camera. I look awful in the ones Mom took. And all of the pictures I took at the dance were bad- the "selfies" consisted of whoever I was with and half of my face. I delete all the "selfies". I keep the group photo that Claire took because it was pretty nice.

I know I can never assume I know other people. Assumptions are evil. And stereotypes suck. I remember just recently that whenever I did something out of the blue that wasn't "normal"- I've never liked the word "normal", and now I refuse to use it after I got diagnosed- people would always assume it was an "Autism Thing" rather than an "Eloisa Thing". But I saw how everybody seemed so happy, talking about after-school or weekend plans I was never invited to, understanding social cues I could never catch onto and fitting in. Maybe it's just a surface I see. If every book character has a secret, then every real, living person must have a secret, too. But why do I feel like I belong on another planet? Even seeing these pictures, everyone seems so grown up, while I look childish. Even my pink Cinderella dress doesn't seem to cut it. It's like everyone's a swan, and I'm still the ugly duckling. I want that to change NOW.

I hear snoring coming from Federico and Domenic's room. Federico snores like a freight train. I faintly hear the TV playing in Mom and Dad's room. There's no way I could hear Gabriella or Margherita no matter how hard I try to listen because their room's on the other side of the house, but I bet they're asleep too. And I can even hear Valentino, our chihuahua, snoring very faintly from the family room. I really should be getting back to bed now.

I'm about to turn off the light again but stop in my tracks when I see a big black sheet of paper lying face-down on the floor. My poster. I pick it up and flip it to face me.

On the last Friday of school, we took pictures of ourselves using the photo booth app on every Chromebook at Clearbrook, and printed them out on the school printer. We cut our faces out and glued them onto a piece of black paper, and we drew our bodies. I made my character wear an elaborate pink ball gown. On the bottom right corner, we have an information box about us. I read what I put:

FULL NAME: *Eloisa Saraphina Montello.*

BIRTHDAY: *July 15th, 2000.*

FAVOURITE COLOUR: *Pink.*

FAVOURITE SONG: *"Planet Earth"/ "(Reach Up For The) Sunrise"/ "Electric Barbarella"- Duran Duran.*

FAVOURITE BOOK: *"The Outsiders" by S.E. Hinton.*

FAVOURITE CATCHPHRASE: *"Can you hear me now, this is Planet Earth. You're looking at Planet Earth. Bop bop bop bop bop bop bop. This is Planet Earth" -Duran Duran.*

FAVOURITE PIECE OF ADVICE: *"You're an okay kid, Pony." -Sodapop Curtis, "The Outsiders".*

WHEN I GROW UP I WANT TO BE: *An author and actress.*

I WILL MOST LIKELY BE: *An author.*

WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNED ABOUT YOURSELF IN GRADE 8?: *I learned that I'm braver than I ever gave myself credit for. I learned that you can make a difference at any age. I learned that I love to touch people's hearts with my writing even more than I thought before. I learned that the missing pieces of you can be the ones that can make you shine brighter than the stars. I learned that I want to impact the world in the best way possible. I learned that I will if I work hard and let my heart guide me.*

I smile despite my heartbreak. I really am ambitious. *Let my heart guide me?* What a pathetic attempt at being profound. But the words do resonate with me. I can make a difference at any age. Why can't I make a difference now?

I look at my ambitions. I want to be an author and an actress. Why can't I do that now? If I didn't make an impact in elementary school, why can't I do something amazing now? At a young age? Why can't I make a difference with my writing now?

I've always wanted to publish a book. I read over my goals in life and realize that...

I can do it now.

I mean, there's no way I could publish a book right away. I haven't even written a book that I want to publish right away. And the publishing process takes a long, long time.

But I reread *The Outsiders* quote and think about how it's my favourite book... and I realize something else.

S.E. Hinton wrote and published an amazing, powerful book before she turned twenty.

Why can't I?

Why can't I be a teen author, too?

I stare at the poster for a little bit longer and my mind races. But it's racing positively for the first time in a long time. Maybe I couldn't make an impact at Clearbrook like my classmates did, but I can make an impact on the world. I know what I want to be. And it took until after grad for me to have a plan, an epiphany. I've always wanted to be an author, but I've never thought about publishing a novel before I turn twenty. And it's an awesome idea. I'll make sure I achieve my goal. I'll work hard, and yes, I'll let my heart guide me.

I put my poster down and get in bed, hugging Cocoa to my chest. I turn off the light. I spend the rest of the night tossing and turning and not getting much sleep; my mind taking me away to could've beens and new possibilities. It's a total contradiction. But now I have a plan. I'll be a teen author, too. Like I wrote on my poster: I'll shine brighter than the stars one day. I hope that through my writing I'll impact people in the best way possible, and that that day will come sooner than I would've thought. Through my writing I'll belong, and I hope I'll make other outsiders feel like they belong whenever they read my books.

I may not be able to sleep and it may be the end of an era, but I know what I can become. One day I'll shine through what I love to do most of all.

Wyrd Feeling
Alex Dowhoszyna

Moments like this were scattered throughout her life, collective fragments like the dust-like snow that danced in little ribbons across a cold empty road, forming brief little patterns. Currently she was sitting in a little cafe with her friend. The two of them had never been there together before, and it seemed like the perfect place to chat over open books and call it studying: dark burgundy walls matched the worn red plastic-leather armchairs in groups of twos and fours around mismatched coffee tables; chalk drawings on the walls (courtesy of the cafe's patrons) were scribbled in between the framed posters and paintings on the walls (most by local artists, some too annoyingly colourful for her tastes). The two of them were sitting towards the back of the room, tucked away near the hallway that led to the washrooms, the perfect dimly lit corner to hide away in. They threw themselves down into the broken-in chairs on either side of a little wobbly wooden table topped with an ever-teetering lamp that cast a warm glow over their paper coffee cups and their books they'd briskly flipped open and had just as quickly abandoned. They chatted, and she'd been watching the way her friend's hand turned the little paper cup, thin fingers maneuvering the cup so that the logo slid from her view and into her friend's, when the image of it snagged at her brain like how a thorn catches cloth.

None of her dreams had ever made sense. She had only ever had one dream where she woke up, and thought it had been real, but coming to her senses in the waking world, she knew it never would be. Her dreams were scattered, a collage of storylines and odd little moving pictures that seemed too bizarre to translate into real life.

But days, weeks, months later, sometimes little snippets from these dreams would find her in her waking life. She saw in unison with her dream-memory and her waking eyes how her friend's fingers moved to turn the cup, pointer and pinky stationary, balancing, middle and ring

fingers working with the thumb to turn the cup. She remembered so vividly the little blue stain on her friend's pointer and middle fingers, paint or ink or something that hadn't wanted to wash off.

The dream had been strange, the before and after a muddle of paranoias and waking-life worries pieced together like a nonsensical stained-glass window, barely worth remembering. But in the middle of it she had seen so clearly her friend's hand on that cup. The moments in her dreams that would eventually become real all seemed at the time too strange, too alien to ever be real, but in the waking world among the context of linear time and the slow lapping waves of daily life, these moments made complete sense. Though, whenever these moments found her, it pulled at her attention, so sudden, a soft wide piece of ribbon being pulled taut with a flat little *snap*.

There never seemed to be any point to all of it; the memories were never of any importance to anyone. They weren't pivotal moments in time, or warnings of some dire nature. It was probably a good thing that they didn't matter, because she always faltered afterward, stopped mid-sentence to let her eyes unfocus, to try to remember *what happens next?* But it was only ever that half-breath of a moment, *snap*, the briefest intersection, then back to the waking world.

And in a moment it was over, and all that was left was a half-turned cup under an old, warm lamp and a *wyrd* feeling in her gut.

Let Me Into Heaven

Jenna Veenstra

I am an apple. I sit in a tree. I am ripped from my branch. Teeth sink into my flesh. The chops spit out my pitiful chunk. A worm hole has deformed me. I am tossed into a compost pile, meaty and repulsive in smell. I slump in this mound for a lengthy, frigid winter. What a terrible end I have met. I fester. I fade.

Let me into heaven.

Rays of glory shine, transforming my worthless soul. Birds sing lullabies to infant leaves as rapture shoots through my mangled core. I am dug up and flung into a peckish garden. Worms wriggle through me. A carrot is guzzling my rotten brine. I am foul. I am depleted.

Let me into heaven.

This carrot and I, we became one. I am now wholesome and orange. I dwell in the magic of the earth. The rain fulfills me. The sun is divine. I flourish. Until a calloused hand rips me from the ground. I am boiled alive and split from the waist down. My bottom half rests on the plate next to me. A mustache grazes my back. Yellow fangs devour me. I slide down a grimy throat into a scorching pool. I am pulverized. My nutrients flow to different parts of this framework. I find myself dwelling as a miniscule, reproductive cell. I wriggle like a worm. I have read the manuscript. I know my role. I hurry towards paradise.

Let me into heaven.

I abide in a midnight world. Within my mother's being now, I am pleasant, tranquil and snug. Evolving is my only pastime. I have outgrown my refuge. I am blinded by piercing light.

Let me into heaven.

I am innocent. I frolic carefree. The world is my utopia. I dance and flow freely. I grow for seventy-eight years. I seem rather wise. I wrinkle. I yellow. I decay. My funeral is packed with scripture and prayer. He has prepared a place for me.

They lay me in the dirt. I am made prisoner to the ground while worms devoured my corpse.

Please let me into heaven. Those golden gates. That splendid fairy land.

I am now a worm. I slave through the mud. A familiar, sweet scent looms.

Let me into heaven.

I creep into that secure apple. I wriggle so close to the ever juicy core. I am hostage to the cycle. I will never know much more.

I will never get to heaven.

If you get to paradise, describe for me just a taste. Are their trees bountiful and gardens rich in harvest? Do you dance with the freedom of a child? Or rock in your chair ancient and wise? What do you feel in this unimaginable place? Tranquility, fulfillment, even magic perhaps?

Stained teeth sink into my comfortable abode, missing me by only a hair. Tossed in the compost pile, I fester, I fade.

Onward then, to heaven.

Le Stelle

Nicole Pacion

The ocean breeze is warm when it blows through my hair. I can't help but wonder how the wind could be warm; shouldn't it make me shiver? I guess summer hasn't left quite yet. The moon stands timidly in the night sky, although its reflection on the water encourages it to shine brighter. The beach is empty, at least as far as I can see. It's late, so the restaurants and bars along the promenade are full; most people-locals and tourists alike-don't go to the beach at night.

The sand usually burns my feet during the day, but this evening I dig my heels into the beach with ease. Looking up, all I can see are stars. Despite being alone, I don't feel lonely. The waves crash and fall rhythmically as if the ocean itself is inhaling and exhaling. I, like the evening, feel calm.

He's probably wondering where I went.

I look back towards the steps that lead from the beach onto the promenade. It's September, so there are far fewer tourists than there used to be in the summer. Nevertheless, the promenade is busy, especially around the restaurants and bars in the central Piazza.

My father owns a coffee shop located in the far corner of *La Piazza Durante*, Letojanni's miniature town square. For as long as I can remember, my life revolved around our café, *Il Bar Centro*. Around the same time I was learning how to walk, I was learning how to pull an espresso shot.

I live with my father in a tiny apartment above our coffee shop. I don't have any siblings, and my *Nonni* and the rest of our extended family live in Taormina, the larger town on the mountain. We don't visit with them much, aside from the holidays. So it's just my father and me, living together and running the shop.

My father raised me all by himself. I never met my mother, and I know nothing about her. When I was old enough to understand and ask questions about her, my father simply told me she left after I was born. Unsatisfied with that answer, I tried to look for one myself. Despite all my searching, I never found any photographs, belongings, or anything I could trace back to her. My relatives never spoke of her, either. The one time I brought her up, the topic quickly changed. Since then, I've never asked any questions. At some point, I'm not sure how old I was, but I decided that to ease my mind, it would simply be best to pretend she never existed.

My childhood wasn't typical. I would attend school during the day, then spend my evenings working at the café and doing homework. I did well in school and graduated from *Liceo* with honors. I've always dreamed of going to *Università* to study, but I could never leave my father alone. Especially now. Some days he struggles to get out of bed, and some days he doesn't get up. I cook, clean and sometimes even manage the café alone. I never complain. Even when I find empty liquor bottles on the kitchen table in the morning, I just clean them up.

I guess I've always felt like I owe so much to my father. After all, he had to raise me all on his own. Perhaps that's why I am so hesitant. Sitting here on the beach, my heels digging into the sand, I can't help but think of him. I clasp my hands around the leather notebook. Is he the reason why I don't know what to do?

I was working at the café earlier today when I found the notebook. It wasn't particularly busy, so I told my father to rest; I could manage alone. With little to do behind the front counter, I decided to clean some drawers. I was sorting through old receipts, menus, and random pieces of paper when I came across a small, leather-bound notebook.

As I sat down on the rickety stool and began to unwrap its leather tie, a young man walked into the coffee shop. His entrance pulled my eyes off of the notebook and towards him. I stopped unraveling the leather tie and returned the notebook to the drawer. Our eyes met as he moved towards the front counter. I couldn't help but notice how his eyes twinkled, just as *stelle* do at night. I never thought someone's eyes could give off so much light, but somehow, they were shining when I looked into them.

"*Ciao*," he said, attempting to mask his accent. His gaze was intense but not in an intrusive way; I found it almost comforting.

I noticed I had been staring. And it was definitely not in a comforting way.

"*Signorina?*" he asked kindly, waking me from my trance.

“*Si. Scusa,*” I replied. Surely, he noticed my embarrassment, as he offered a smile and said not to worry. “What can I get you?” I asked, feeling myself blush. He promptly ordered a *cappuccino* while taking a moment to ponder the pastries.

“Hmm, I’ll take a *cannoli* as well, *per favore,*” he decided. I prepared his order and wished him a good day.

“*Grazie mille. Ciao,*” he replied with enthusiasm. I watched him sit at one of the tables on the outside patio. For a while, he just sat there, sipping his *cappuccino*, savoring the *cannoli*. I couldn’t help but wonder what he was thinking about. What was he doing here? What brought him to Letojanni?

I realized I shouldn’t be so curious about someone I didn’t even know, someone I’d never see again. I had learned that lesson before. I quickly forced the thoughts away- as I usually do- and retreated to my cleaning.

A few hours later, after I had finished sweeping the floors and washing all the tables, I decided to close for the night. We hadn’t had any customers in over an hour, and it showed no signs of picking up. As I was going to grab my keys from behind the counter, I bumped into a drawer I had left ajar. Before I closed it, I remembered the notebook. Hesitant, I pulled open the drawer, picked up the notebook, and unraveled its leather tie. I gently turned the front cover over, revealing the first page. Looking down, I saw handwriting oddly similar to my penmanship. I gasped.

“Sorry to scare you! I just had to come back for another *cannoli!*” It was the same young man from earlier this afternoon. Perplexed by my discovery, I hadn’t even noticed him enter the café. He continued apologizing for startling me, although it wasn’t his entrance that caused me to gasp. It was what I had read.

“We’re actually just about to close,” I explained as I fumbled with the notebook, my hands still shaky with disbelief. Attempting to be discrete, I placed it back in the drawer behind me. He smiled, leaned against the counter and looked straight into my eyes.

“I must admit, it wasn’t the *cannoli* I came back for...”

I froze, unsure how to respond. I opened my mouth to speak, but no words came out. Casually, and to my relief, he broke the silence.

“I’d love to meet up with you later. Perhaps for dinner?” he suggested, “I can just wait outside until you’ve closed the café.”

Somehow, I conjured words to form a sentence and agreed to meet him for dinner. In fact, I even suggested we go to *Ciao Ciao*, a seafood restaurant not too far down the promenade.

After closing the café, I ran upstairs and quickly changed into my yellow sundress. I checked on my father, only to find him asleep; I decided not to bother him. I grabbed my purse and hurried downstairs. Amid my rush to get ready, I couldn’t stop thinking about what I had read on the front page of the notebook. I could only picture the name *Rosalia* in the middle of the page.

I was wasting time. On my way out the door, I stopped behind the café counter, grabbed the notebook from the drawer, and stashed it in my purse.

I found him outside across from the café, waiting for me near the fountain. I was nervous. We began to stroll down the promenade, walking towards the restaurant. Once we started talking, his air of nonchalance quickly calmed my nerves. He spoke to me as if we were old friends; our conversations flowed with such ease I was almost convinced that we had known each other for years.

We enjoyed fresh fish and red wine. He was American, originally from Seattle, but had moved to New York for school. He told me he’d studied accounting at NYU for a year but decided not to return for a second year. When I asked him why he said he wanted to see the world.

Listening to him speak, I began to wonder what else was outside my tiny fishing village. Outside of Sicily. Outside of Italy. I suddenly felt curious about the world. Part of me had always felt this way, but I always held it back. I held it back because of my father. I could never leave. I couldn’t abandon him; he needed me.

“Don’t *you* want to see the world?” he asked, almost as if he had just read my mind. I smiled and shrugged my shoulders. I thought of my father, who was 58 years old and had never stepped foot outside of Messina. *If he never left, why should I?*

After dinner, we strolled the promenade aimlessly, as if time did not exist. The sky was clear, and the wind was warm. He pointed to the sky, remarking how he was in awe to see so many stars. He continued to tell me stories of his travels, the places he’d been, and the places he intended to go. He spoke passionately; I could tell by how his eyes lit up. Just as he was in awe of the stars, I was in awe of his eyes.

As we continued to walk, I clutched my purse to my side. I felt the notebook inside it and remembered what I had seen earlier. Suddenly, I couldn’t stop thinking about the name. Although he continued to talk, I was no longer listening. All I could hear was the name *Rosalia*. I realized where I had heard that name before.

“Why don’t you come to Greece with me next week?” he suddenly proposed. Surely, the bewildered look on my face caused him to panic. Without hesitation, he apologized, saying he was being too forward and clearly overstepped. I continued to stare at him in silence.

I wish I could’ve explained that the look on my face wasn’t my reaction to what he had said. But how could I explain that I had just realized *Rosalia* was my mother’s name?

I should’ve explained, but at that moment, I wasn’t sure how. I decided the best thing to do was to run. I mustered out a faint *scusa*, turned on my heels and rushed in the opposite direction down the promenade, past the Piazza and towards the public beach access. I descended the steps and continued onto the beach hastily, stopping only once I approached the water. I stood there, taking a second to catch my breath. I looked out at the ocean: the water was a shade darker than the sky, and the waves rippled the moon’s reflection. The breeze was warm as I felt it blow through my hair.

I’m not sure how long I’ve been sitting here. My heels are now resting in small holes dug into the sand, and my skin feels salty from the ocean’s mist. I trace my fingers across the leather-bound cover of the notebook.

I can’t decide whether I should open it or not.

Part of me believes if I open it, I'll find out all the answers to the questions I had as a child. The questions no one answered for me. I can't help but feel that if I read this notebook, I'll finally get to meet my mother.

My fingers move to open the cover. I pause. What if I don't find the answers I'm looking for? What if there's a reason all these questions have gone unanswered?

I look up at the sky. There are so many stars—too many to count. Staring directly into the sky, I try to imagine how many *stelle* there are. I look back down at the notebook. It rests on my lap with my thumb holding the front page open. I read the name once again. *Rosalia*.

I look back up at the sky and all the stars. I stop trying to imagine how many there are. Perhaps some things are simply better left unknown. I close the notebook and place it on the sand beside me.

In the distance, I hear a man's voice. He's calling my name.