

FIRST PRIZE

Staring at Gone

couldn't hereafter have lingered a little?
given just a conversation or two longer?
ahem'd at the door or scuffled with his maps
while I floundered at being a good son, the oldest one?
but—forgiven: Mother is that gentle rain that falls
leaving me twice blessed and cut with guilt at good fortune.

we saw the gasp of pain still frozen on her open mouth
as the dark and disbelief came down.
we gape alone at the end, in sorrow and hurt,
as travellers in limbo sparring with surprise,
wounded at the revolt of our luggage—
split with pain,
ragged with fear,
and alone.

words resolve her
vaults of memories remixed,
the urn unbound.
i should have worn the shirt more, a past gift hanging
with all the other shoulds. certainty is undone.
it's a cold March day,
the sky legible,
our voices shaky.
we were both isolated, irregulars in the promenade.
she survived loss to heal us back, stood us firmly in grief.

i'm staring at gone, a remainder on pause—
the last soul who believed in me in flight, gathered and gone.

by Michael Dance

Nanaimo, British Columbia

SECOND PRIZE

Words Are the Urns of Our First Emotions

fondness feeling tender warmth care affection
eyes listening pupils dilating
I feel the tingling of love

indignation irritation spleen shouting argument anger
fury face hot red distortion
I feel anxiety rising

Such power words have
the mere reading of them
affects the pulsations of my heart

evening quiet lake tranquil trees relaxed peaceful cool green
a summer breeze
I breathe deeply trying to catch the fragrance of the wind

sadness sorrow blue broken-heart gloom doom depressed despair wretched
melancholia infiltrates the air
I sense a whiff of tragedy

By alternating the series of words
I create a roller coaster of emotions
how easy to fool my mood

white winter snow cemetery cold cross cigarettes
your ghost starts dancing in my head
I'm drowning in a maelstrom of nostalgia

mother father family safety support sanctuary
these do not bring any comforting images but confusion
I have yet to assign them clear meanings

I make my own connections and constructs
and live in the world of words
that harbour my memories

I wish for a dictionary updating after every new story
I am stuck with words embedded with affects created before I had a say
I could always learn a foreign language, I suppose—a whole set of words devoid of history

by Dany Gagnon
Montréal, Québec

THIRD PRIZE

When the Bus Stop Is a Forest

A woman in a black hijab holds
a wide-eyed child by each hand.

The waiting crowd becomes a forest
clearing, broad and sudden.

It opens for them to stand alone
on the other side.

A slur slips, slant-mouthed;
a sneer slides its poison forward,

then it is pointed fingers and acid jeers
corroding the air around us all:

a sudden hissing above the veil.

Her dark eyes are liquid mirrors
reflecting fear of the hunted.

I see it there, a clear cut
on the edge of panic, wish

I'd mastered the art of slipping
through alders like the glaze-

gazed doe, born knowing how to lead
her fawns to the shelter of trees,

tall and solid in the soil. Breathless,
heart shooting, I cross the divide.

Silent, wavering on uncertain hooves,
I move to stand alongside them.

by Virginia Boudreau
Yarmouth, Nova Scotia

HONOURABLE MENTION

The Golden Hour

Autumn's breath, warm on my neck, raises fine hairs, lingering long on the backs of my hands, the bottom of my lips, turning cool as I tip my face windward. Leaves turn and flame; a forest fire in metaphors—lush and green at the roots, and everywhere golden light sizzles, it burns.

The cicada's song becomes a distant memory, one where golden silence electrifies the lived-in promise of days short enough to stretch our legs in. The wind picks up, the rippling voice crawls in waves towards my palms that cup the sky.

Clinging sheaves of paper-thin skins and diaphanous veins hang to boles that in humid breath sing sweeter songs for the harsher weather—a song for storms harmonizes in twinned gables of canopy and memory. Around me, Autumn weaves a web of magic in its rapid-cooling breath.

The unbraiding light, the prized hue unmakes the day, letting night creep closer in solemn, fearful ways.

And later, when the blue hour leaches golden light from the same boughs, the hue is long and lush and low. Shadows crawl backwards onto their feet, the ball returning to its tethered pole, where the golden light threw them long just an hour before.

Sometimes I need a reminder of the things that are bigger than me.

And when deep night sets in, the milk light trails like oil slicks, thick and oozy and burning at the sight of a match, building patterns on my plaster-pocked walls, the moonbeams blaze the blue light of nightmares.

The molten midnight sky is shrouded in the orange haze, the light-sickness that chokes the stars from the sky, blotting the purple movement of atmospheric dreams—a mirror of that human noise, a dull, dimmed mimicry of the Golden Hour.

by Raphaela Pavlakos

Mississauga, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

Refraction

Endless prairie summer days, our saving grace;
the sprinkler attached to the rubber garden snake,
hose clamped to the outside tap. *Are you allowed?*
There'd be hell to pay if we were at my place.
Mom's at work, you say. *Anyway, she doesn't care.*

One turn two three all the way

wait for it *gurgle spurt sputter* Ah!

Sky-high oscillation! Silver threads arc and sweep
the cloudless blue; bow low, acknowledging
the gods of summer. You dart in, adjust the head
to spray within your back fence boundary. Gangly,
untried thoroughbreds, we parade to post;

mill and rear and vie. First from the gate, you charge,
whooping, slingshot disseminating the trajectory
of crystal jets I'm never quite prepared for, those first
blissful needle-pricks of ecstasy. The icy tide anoints
our nubby vertebrae and sun-bleached hair.

We dash and squeal until, blue-lipped, full body
quivering, you stammer-shout: *Last one to the patio
is a monkey's uncle!* You beat me every time to
your dad's padded lounger. I get the too-big plastic
chair that brands the tender skin behind my knees.

We turtle into beach-towel capes; you hold out
a sun-brown arm; cold-pressed to mine, compare
our puckered, goosebump chicken skin. We chug
lukewarm, powdered Tang you make at your mom's
kitchen sink. Somehow, you see it. *Rainbow!*

We jump and run and squint and tilt our heads
and marvel at the spectacle of coloured bands,
in order, *ROYGBIV*, refracted on a million droplets
by the sun. We cross our hearts and pinky swear;
we won't tell anyone the pot of gold's in your backyard.

by Brenda Gunn
Edmonton, Alberta

HONOURABLE MENTION

Genie: Another Case History

(Genie, fourteen years old, tied to a chair,
apparently without ever being spoken to.)

Met her in a textbook,
myself and three-hundred others
stumbling over her paragraph of meaning.
I didn't want to hear her breathing,
feel the hardness of her seat, or
see the words written;
at fourteen, it's too late to
learn how to speak.

We all sit in chairs
from time to time,
stand up for ourselves,
use our own words—

but not Genie,
I can imagine her always
having to adjust herself
to fit into one paragraph
for someone else to talk about.

by Maureen Wharton
Brockville, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

We Still Write the Story

We still fill the skies with our fogs of smog
even until the teardrops that respond,
falling from leaden, charcoal-coloured clouds,
tragically with the planet correspond
with similar lists of chemical mists
despoiling and distorting the features
of a desecrated terrestrial face,
contaminating, too, all Earth's creatures
dwelling within the uncleanly confines
of mountains and forests, shores and oceans
infiltrated by phosphates and plastics
and permeated with oil-laced potions.

We still fill coffers of capitalists
driven to advance their profit margins
who concern themselves not with abatement
nor the influence of hydrocarbons
and petrochemicals that propel distress,
environmental consequence of pollution,
indiscriminate mining, clear-cutting,
or the future of Earth's evolution.
Unlike the vaults of affluent plutocrats,
the wealth of nature is exhaustible;
the bitter reality is that to
continue this course is implausible.

We still fill the role of the Earth's landlords,
wholly responsible to maintain it;
we still fill the role of Earth's stewards,
totally accountable to sustain it.
We, the artists of the planet's palette,
discolour blue skies, green fields, and clear seas
with tinctures, undertones, and sullen shades,
which evolve out of our activities.
We, the authors of our Earth's history,
determine the climatic conclusion
but still find our ways to gamble with fate
and ignore the nature of preclusion.

If we still fill our souls with love for creation,
how will we fulfill our obligation?

by Max Vandersteen (66 years)
Edmonton, Alberta

HONOURABLE MENTION

A Winter Silence

Its movement was barely discernible,
like a minute sigh whispered from
the lowest branch of an evergreen
that seemed breathless as I watched
from a snow-cleared spot on a bench.

Traffic buzzed in the distance,
someone cleared a path with a shovel,
and a lone bird chatted too nearby
to not be speaking to me.

Later, walking, I found perfectly round holes
burrowed into snowbanks—mice, I suspect,
and there were several well-worn thoroughfares
from across the fields conveniently linked
to recently shovelled walks—does maintenance
do that, purposefully clear the walks
for people and resident rabbits?

There aren't many parks where I live—
accessible green spaces without the encroachment
of the built environment and cars, but in winter,
if I stay in this one long enough, I can transfer
the experience to the recesses of my being
for use when all else is fraught with
too much of everything except,

Silence.

by Maxine Cowan
Edmonton, Alberta

HONOURABLE MENTION

Love through the Ages

Love over the ages.
Love through the ages.

He: short, grey hair at the side.
A bald dome now splattered
with tags.
She: the bright-blue sari,
threadbare but elegant. The red
third eye
on her forehead says *I'm married*.
Still. And proud of it.
He: a pink shirt
faded and crumpled but clean and
spotless.
She: a gold medallion *Om*
dangling on a chain around her
neck.

They study the menu.
Talk about it.
Discuss it.
Nod.

She walks. A tilt to the right,
dragging her short right leg
behind her, a black bag
swaying over her shoulder.

He waits. And waits.
Gets up.
Looks down the aisle.
Paces between the chairs.
Where is she?
Smooths out the crumpled
seams of his pants.
Looks down the aisle. Again.
His face a contortion of anxiety.
Where is she?
Then, he spots her
coming towards him.
A wide smile envelops
his features.
Time without her
is a year dragging
its lonely presence
minute by minute.

Soup for her.
Coffee and croissant for him.
Love for all ages.

by Kenneth Puddicombe
Brampton, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

Theft of Silence

Early morning clouds hang over Mauna Lea.
They are still, for the wind rests.

Far below, palm trees whisper.
Black lava rocks are laced with flaxen clumps
of grasses swaying in disarray.
Trees reminiscent of the African veldt
frame the golf course.

Masterpiece of engineering and landscaping,
returning life to dead land,
replacing devastation with beauty,
incorporating lava, a reminder of life's fragility.

This is the hour of silence.

It ends abruptly.

On the patio, a bearded man in a blue shirt
arrives with a plate of sausages.
Staff want to clean the barbeque.
He angrily sends them away. He is hungry.

On a third-floor balcony, a woman calls a friend.
"We haven't spoken in months," says she and
exuberantly recounts her vacation.
It is a one-way conversation.

A man on speaker phone calls LA.
It is early, but the matter cannot be delayed.
He has an eighteen-hole round of golf to play.
He is named in a Power of Attorney
for a relative in a retirement facility.
He can't take on this responsibility.

Conversations, once private, whispered,
confined behind closed doors,
have become public, loud, indiscreet.

The drama continues digitally by email, text, tweet.
People electronically connected. Otherwise disengaged.

They miss the moment.
They steal the silence.

by Roberta McGill
Orillia, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

Pêhowin (expecting someone)

For the 215.

I'm waiting by the window
All alone, I'm here
When will you come for me?
I hope you're near

The summer's heat has ended
And they've taken me from home
Will I see you
Through the falling leaves?

I'm waiting by the window
All alone, I'm here
When will you come for me?
I hope you're near

My breath frosts the window
And there's a draught by the fire
Will I see you
Through the swirling snow?

I'm waiting by the window
All alone, I'm here
When will you come for me?
I hope you're near

As Mother Earth blossoms
I can't smell her fragrance
Will I see you
Through the swaying sweetgrass?

I'm waiting by the window
All alone, I'm here
When will you come for me?
I hope you're near

The summer's heat has returned
And it's warming my skin
I finally see you
Across the flowered prairie!

I've been waiting by the window
All alone for the year
I've been waiting by the window
All alone with my fear
I've been waiting by the window
And now, you're here

by Mark Constable

Edmonton, Alberta

HONOURABLE MENTION

On the Bus

I watched you struggle onto the bus, with your monstrous child mover, and your anger. *What has happened?* I wonder in silence, not getting up to help.

A babe screaming in one compartment of the stroller, a toddler oozing snot in the other, his cheeks flushed with fever, sucking on the ear of a grubby stuffed toy.

I know you felt all those eyes on you, but you ignored all censure, throwing your bag to the seat beside you, shaking the stroller to distract, hoping to silence the screams.

Tense with rage, trying to undo the buckles that held in the babe, you snapped a nail and sucked that thumb in pain. Even then, no tears, no words, not meeting any eyes.

Finally, freed from her restraints, the baby suckles and is quiet.

A tiny smile flits across your face, and you gently brush back a wisp of soft baby hair: you breathe, your shoulders soften slightly.

So young, I think, and so easy to label and condemn, to turn away.

Will you be another statistic, another black mark against an uncaring society? Or is part of your anger the force that will break that cycle?

Do you have help, support, someone to love and care for you? Or are you struggling alone, on this bus full of people, in this city full of people?

Ever so gently, you put the now sleeping babe back in her seat, pick up your bag, and manoeuvre off the bus, still not meeting any eyes.

So much anger, so much love, so much pain ahead. So much pride in the strong set of your shoulders.

This is not a fairy tale. There are no perfect endings.

When I have courage to offer help and accept refusal as your right, or you have courage to accept kindness, taking me at face value, then we may start to understand.

And I can attempt to share your burden, and meet your eyes, and we may smile.

by Dolores Brent (75 years)

Edmonton, Alberta

HONOURABLE MENTION

An Unconventional Grief

We were tiptoeing towards a black hole.
Light, the fastest substance in the universe, cannot escape it.
Yet somehow, I expected us to.
Bubble gum, cotton candy, and taffy encase youth.
The sweet innocence of youth blinds intelligence.
It makes the bitter taste of ignorance palatable.

As we reached the horizon,
I knew we were at the point of no return.
The point at which a thirty-year relationship would end in an abrupt sentence.
The point at which life as I knew it would be condensed down to a point of singularity.
A point at which I had to decide which relationship was worth fighting for.
A point that would turn into etcetera.

I taste metal in my mouth.
They call it dysgeusia.

I smell burning flesh.
They call it cacosmia.

I hear persistent ringing.
They call it tinnitus.

I see black specks.
They call it myodesopsia.

I feel pins and needles.
They call it paresthesia.

But I know that these are the five senses of an unconventional grief.

It is ambiguous, angry, and abnormal.
It is bargaining.
It is confusing, crazy, and consuming.
It is disorganized, distorted, disconnected, and disenfranchised.

Shock, denial, pain, guilt, anger, depression . . . and then the upward turn.
These are the normal stages of grief.
This grief has no respect for tradition.

I cannot cope with an unconventional grief in a conventional manner.
So, I become comfortable being entombed in a cage of darkness.
I sob uncontrollably with the skies as they shed tears of sorrow.
I howl with the winds as they rage through the forest, demanding to be heard.
I burn with the fire as it blazes a path of destruction.
And I erupt with the volcanoes when something inside me breaks.
I then pick myself up.

I glue the broken pieces together like a broken vase.
And then I go through it all over again.
I tumble through this black hole,
where time and space are meaningless,
where I am suspicious of my identity, trust, and love,
where I question my memories,
where I cannot see a future.

This is an unconventional grief.

by Faiha Fareez
Hamilton, Ontario