

FIRST PRIZE

An Equalizing Variable in COVID-19

after more than four months of
social isolation, we finally ventured
out to Anna's Greenhouse
in the next little town

light-hearted at being away
from the house and finding
ourselves in the midst of a
riotous bubble of flowers
ferns and palms

we loaded two large carts with
potted deep-purple petunias
creamy-white begonias
flats of neon-pink zinnias
two tall ruby-red mandevillas
and paid a king's ransom

in the gravel parking lot
while my husband tried
to stash the towering bounty
meant for two cars into
our old Volvo

a stranger walked up to me
sixty-ish about six foot three
with styled sandy-coloured hair
Gordon Pinsent face wearing a
short-sleeved button-down shirt
and a pair of pressed chinos

he smiled and as if calling
heaven to witness declared
*I have dementia and I don't
know what day it is*

without a moment's hesitation
I laughingly said I don't have
dementia and *I don't know
what day it is either*

his face lit up as if the world
had righted itself
and he slowly walked away

by Jessie Lee Jennings
Windsor, Ontario

SECOND PRIZE

Glass Lock Lid of My Lover's

Lover, the lid of your glass lock won't fit,
won't lock.
I just can't . . . click it together, today.
I am skilfully decoding the symbols in my universe—
maybe it's the rain.
I am seeking answers, everywhere;
does this have more meaning too?
Does this mean we are destined to fail?
The gasket is gone,
the seal is missing.
I still can't find it,
still can't . . . click . . . it . . . together . . . today.
I am frantic.
I search.
I exhale.
I see—
relief.
It is safe, in the dish rack.
I carefully collect it.
I lovingly return it to its home.
I glide the gasket seamlessly into place
in one soothing circular motion—
it is inserted.
I cautiously try the lid, again.
I feel the seal, secured—
home position.
I know before I begin.
I feel it before I hear it
 click
 into
 place.
All four sides safely secured—
the container is, once again,
whole.

by Grace Ross

Victoria, British Columbia

THIRD PRIZE

pinging the distance

i)

the clock is wrong, time wears a mask,
rupture systemic to the pandemic marathon.
step gingerly steps in corridor custom, postcards of tracks
as if a program dropped down from the above and beyond.

(and) survive. already open doors pad reason to my isolation.
(and) simply retreat, reboot through the gnawing void,
through the vestments of breakage and muffled creations
rendered dumb, speech impeached by the great cause of noise

that mostly gets little done. some clockwork anniversary
passes in flames, some side of the road meme-lick
lost in the routine of distance. not too unseemly cursory
but cursed to patience, stoic in the pandemic.

ii)

the wind blows forward and never gets old;
it does not ask what the buying and selling is about;
we move mapped in space. within without the soul comes cold
like it never was unless in doubt.

mortality rings like a bell, a blundering thing
suddenly naked. there is no dancer
nor nimble story and plot to exercise our imaginings,
just the deep drop of despair without answer.

wrapped in fashions of masks, fingering sequences
to stiff the cold, the nouveau routines harken to academic;
the fittest adapt and evolve to the new frequencies;
some just adapt: sixty-six and stoned in the pandemic.

iii)

that's some slouch of a wrap, a plank in space, i'll eat it if i have to;
a creaky confection of humans and gods paused in the covid ballet,
semblancing in the distance, social with shutters, a thing i give to;
a ballad of strange times tumbling and terse, an emotional moire

that overflows its banks, more poesy than pose,
and i thank the people tapping out love in the exchange, speed spelling
world events and loving in a time-blanked cold who still see the rose
flaming forward in the rubble, bloodied in the art of telling,

but blood just the same, falling, drifting downhill like veins to the sea,
the heart newly coded, shuffled in the season's alembic,
distills down to some subset form: sundown in the pandemic.
dawn might tarry, like children walking to school, but dawn it will be.

by Michael Dance

Nanaimo, British Columbia

HONOURABLE MENTION

This, Too, Was a Lesson

The light on my porch has never worked,
And I swear that it became a beacon
For the monsters in the world to come and rest
And take a place beneath my bed.

And now I'm at an age where I'm
"Far too old for such childish fantasies,"
But I think that we all deserve a place to rest,
A bed to hide under, a porch light that was never lit,
A place for the ghosts to convalesce.

And all of this is to say
That your hometown gets into your skin,
And the dark corners in your room
Are only terrifying until you leave and the new ones
Hold monsters you've not made accords with,
And the terror of growing up is worth more
Than the falling dime collection
You've had since you were five
That taught you about the Victorian ghost in the attic.

The dimes scattered across the floor
And got stuck in the hardwood cracks,
And above your shoulder was a voice
That seemed upset that they fell,
And that the coins had changed from what they remembered
When they were young and excited as you are now
And not hung up as the piece of art that you adored.

I am learning:
We are all the Victorian ghost in the attic
That caused the dimes to fall when you were still a child,
Which is to say that we are all
In a world that's different than we remember

And all wish to go back to days that seemed simpler
In the wake of passing years and the fade from
Colour to sepia-toned memory,
Before you had to sell the dime collection
To pay for college textbooks
And the new house with the new porch light
Dispelled the familiar ghosts
And monsters under the bed.

I have never considered the yearning
For the supernatural to be a part of growing up,
But I suppose that it all seems far more innocent
Than the new terrors in the world
That aren't so easy to pretend were just the wind
And can't be blamed on the porch light that never worked.

by Heather Law
Fort Nelson, British Columbia

HONOURABLE MENTION

Waiting

She wears her headdress jauntily,
with an attitude that almost
hides the fact that she is bald.
But the drawn-on eyebrows
and lash-less eyes
give everything away.

She stares intently
at the distant TV screen
as if fascinated by this week's weather.
But everyone knows why she's here.
The same reason they are all here.
Although their cancers are different,
with differing treatments and prognoses,
they are all here to try to stay alive.
It's no "courageous battle"—
it's their only option.
Any control they thought they had
over their lives is gone.
They're controlled, instead, by the disease,
the medical people and the treatments.
They surrender (some less willingly)
to the horrors, side effects, and violations
of the prodding hands, needles, and machines.
Nothing is private anymore.

A lonely tear
rolls down the woman's cheek.
She wipes it away
with the back of her hand
and continues
to watch the TV.

by Melanie Flores
Toronto, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

Garden

Where yellow flowers mingle with black soil
I notice how the gift of the zucchini
grows in the arms of dark and light.
At first giddy with excitement

I reach into the sharp-edged
forest of leaves and stems
crack off a zucchini no longer
than the flat of my open palm.

Miraculous—a green goddess birthed
but days later while hoping the lettuce won't die
there it is! A zucchini as thick as lumber
as long as my outstretched forearm

its plump rump mooning me.
Suddenly my childhood is the garden
me a globe artichoke attempting to develop
beneath her razor-edged canopy

yearning for a thorn a choke a heart
to burst out of me proof that I exist to love her.
I risk damaging my skin to understand
the depths of the miracles making in her shadows.

I fail over and over again to root with her.
A bristly purple flower blooms in my throat.
My inner child wants to apologize
for choosing awe in witness to her blossoming

instead of embracing my own spectacular inflorescence.
The sun's fingers gently press on my collarbone
coaxing me back to the now.
I am a woman at a cross garden

ever expanding through the light and dark
of childhood wounds—
forgiveness is fertilizer
letting go is water.

by Vanessa Shields
Windsor, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

Grackle's Invasion

robins wrapped in red thread
another ball of yarn to tangle into nests.
a raven calls, warble warped from chains that hang from its beak
as swallowtails cut curtains of the sky.
fanned feathers whip wisps of wonder into frothy dusk,
marrying the clouds with starlight
or visions of steam with sunlight.
red wings and yellow throats and black caps,
heads beating heartbeats,
wood flanks made into homes.
wings like whispers at the throat
tingling of molten lungs or stomachs
all mingling in one cacophonous cry
muffled by the choir of leaves that scream against the tide of the wind.

beneath the broken tree, the cockatiel cries
for death, down an ending eternity of
false forgetting and faceless fountains.
crows gone guileless without good (or sometimes hideous)
intentions
join in justice
and cold, calculating hands knit two threads together
in ephemeral bond,
more promise than practice.
the Grackle fights the dawn for purchase in this placid land.

small beast, oil-slick coat, blue-silken throat and yellow eyes,
you vicious vagabond,
your dusk-dark pupils pierce me in the way
only wild, ruthless spirits can.
such power buried in muscles, to steal the eggs of your enemies,
such ferocity tempered in your teeth, to rip the fruits from their wilting branches,
you wild thing,
and yet you follow our mundane, arbitrary rules,
you creep along our sidewalks and look both ways
before crawling across streets
and prowling over well-kept lawns,

you steal away our natural state,
slipping yourself into the fissures you've created, and pretend
until we believe you were born here as we were—
until we believe you belong.

by Raphaela Pavlakos
Mississauga, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

If My Heart Were a Home

Fear of defeat would drape itself against the stained-glass windows, allowing no radiant colours to form shadows along the walls.

Clarity would materialize from the dim walls only when a haze of anguish seethed through the cracks and threatened structural damage.

Even after repairs, the cracks would allow remnants of the haze to grasp onto the wooden floorboards, convinced no more devastation could be done.

The roof would occasionally drip incertitude onto the already weakened floors, causing them to fracture into fragments of dread and undeniable forgiveness.

Second chances and hopelessness would hibernate beside one another until an occupant gives a gentle knock on the locked front door.

But when the sun could escape between the drapes and illuminate the darkened intramural, vines of beauty would rise along the walls, entangling themselves in purity.

The aroma of blooming and nourished flowers would burst through the house, destroying fragments of debris left by self-misery.

If my heart were a home,
few would be able to brave the hurricane that has awakened the sentiments inside.

by Heather Milligan

High River, Alberta

HONOURABLE MENTION

warmth

there will come a point in your life
when a ghost comes knocking
at your door:
let her in,
she just wants to escape the chill.

let her sit,
she'll pick the seat across from you.
offer her a mug of fresh-brewed tea
she won't drink—
don't let that offend you;
she just needs it to warm her hands.

it's cold,
the life of the ghost.

introduce yourself
in some important way.
tell her about your favourite pair of socks,
or how the first ray of the sun felt against your cheek.
these things mean more to her
than any name ever could.

she's silent.
fill the air with everything else:
a breath cutting through the winter's air,
some steam from a hot shower,
the blanket that your mother made you.
tears, burning your cheeks as they fall,
a gentle touch that aches like static sparks.
excitement, glowing deep inside your bones,
anger, splitting and blistering your skin.

the ghost will smile,
she'll leave you—
fade away,
dispel alongside the steam from her untouched tea.

it's so cold,
the life of a ghost.

by Alexandra Boyd
Grande Prairie, Alberta

HONOURABLE MENTION

The Bells of Notre Dame Are Ringing

As the steeple burns and Paris screams,
the heart of the city smoulders and chars.
Stained glass melts and drips down onto the
headless statues poised under arches, and
the chipped stone gargoyles sitting on flying
buttresses can't flap their wings fast enough to clear
the flames—now they're dropping, their wings too
heavy, the soot and smoke dragging them down

down

down

down falls the conical spire, engulfed in
fibrous flames as if part of the sun was born within; the structure
collapses into the attic as the people of Paris—the *world*—watch
with heads bowed.

by Madyson Matthews

Edmonton, Alberta

HONOURABLE MENTION

Catastrophe and Grace

I am stuck at my dining room table while you
are boarding a plane to Amsterdam,
a string of catastrophe and grace
tangled between us.

I tilt my mug, study the tea leaves
at the bottom, but they
look an awful lot like the
dredges of our last conversation.

I hope you know, as you board the plane,
step off in Amsterdam, settle into your unfamiliar room,
explore the city, eventually grow restless,
board the plane to somewhere new only weeks later,

that I will always welcome another conversation,
will always welcome you home.

I will hold on until we are
more grace than catastrophe.

by Robyn Petrik
Surrey, British Columbia

HONOURABLE MENTION

Carless and Carfree, I Celebrate

At Denman Street Festival,
my feet carry me along
tree-roofed sidewalks as
all breathe no engine exhaust
but weave away from sizzling barbecues.
These Summer green umbrellas
shade my steps
after Springtime's
pink and white blossom showers,
before the crunching music
of Autumn's dried leaves,
awaiting our shared huddling
bare against Winter winds.
Carless, carfree, I am a part
and take part in city streets,
able to smile at each passing face,
able to relish our many green trees
for their free gifts of oxygen.
Carless, carfree, I celebrate Vancouver streets.

by Bernice Lever

Bowen Island, British Columbia

HONOURABLE MENTION

Queenie

Verna said the folks used
To have a dog
When I was small,
But it bit
One of the older kids,
And Dad shot it.
Then,
No more dogs.

Today, I heard a memory:
"Here, Queenie!"
"Come, Queenie!"
I cannot see it
In my mind's eye,
But I hear it.

I was four when
My brother and I
Played
By the empty dog house.
That part is easy to remember.
It was our service station
To refuel our trike
And wagon.

We rode
In the heat,
Back and forth.
I only knew the doghouse
Was empty.

Now at seventy-two,
Unbidden I hear,
"Come, Queenie!"
I have remembered Queenie.

by Ronda Gay
Regina, Saskatchewan