

FIRST PRIZE

It Never Ends Well

It never ends well.

It ends with a lacklustre text message
and a poor excuse instead of the truth.

It ends with a crushing conversation
when you're trapped in a car together,
your favourite song playing in the background.

It ends with a long conversation at two a.m.,
just hours before you're supposed to leave
for a cross-country trip together.

It ends with so many unanswered questions
that will haunt you for months
or maybe years.

It always ends,
and it never ends well.

by Robyn Petrik
Surrey, British Columbia

SECOND PRIZE

Taking Vital Signs on a Shared Frequency

I am the threatening, the unknown,
the clinical, and the sterile,
embodying everything invasive
with probes and needle sticks—
tools used to heal that hurt
as my unwelcome entourage
of beeps and alarms
sets her amygdala on fire.
She wears the tension over her clothes
and I wear mine under my scrubs,
but all she can see is me
armed with a stethoscope.

I don't need to listen with the diaphragm
to hear her kind of stridor,
the high-pitched turbulent sound
that vibrates my eardrum
with a desperate music wound
of a shared history I mute
so I could survive—
the angry beats chill
just below the surface
of a practised classical layer.
Hers pulses in the air around her.
But if I listen with the bell,
I can hear thousands of buried children
weeping in unmarked graves,
echoing through her eyes
into the heated coil of this moment.

Her muscle tension reflects a ten
on a pain scale we don't record,
so with my eyes, I unmute
and let her rate mine
as she settles under an instrumental
of the silent melody we make
of two bruised little girls
resonating wordlessly together.

The stressful medical chords
relax into an easy harmony
inside our bubble of connective tissue,
and she lets me listen to her heart
because I let her listen to mine.

by Renee Cronley
Brandon, Manitoba

THIRD PRIZE

Cracked Boulders

shoots have thrust through the earth
beside the path in the woods

branches with green buds sway
in the warm May breeze

my back acting up again, I walk bent over,
watch with some envy those young men and women jogging
past me in vest and shorts

I look for a bench but finding none, I rest against a tree
noticing then across the way
a boulder half my body size
placed there, it seemed
just for me at that very moment

solid metal-grey, split by a thin white fissure,
a shoot has pushed through it
dark green, a single red nub
straining for the late-afternoon sun

what eternal force beckoned it,
conspired with the alterations between
winter freezes and cyclical melts,
to crack this stone and create the needed inch to thrust
and power this thin green blade through near-
solid rock and frozen ground and cold and blackness to
free a flower that could not be denied
its moment of glory

nearby, another rock
less substantial, also showing the strains of seasons,
slightly cracked but flowerless, with
perhaps an ill-formed seedling slowly rotting beneath it

I walk on, watching a couple, dog on leash, their children skipping beside them,
and contemplate the winter freezes and cyclical thaws of growth and death and
love and hope and despair these children will face
as they strive to embrace the sun

and then remember, sadly,
ill-formed friends, now gone,
who never did

by Albert N. Katz (75 years)
Fredericton, New Brunswick

HONOURABLE MENTION

September

I removed all of my teeth for her.
They were razor sharp,
with chips and cracked edges.
They protected me, but they were unkind
and knew too intimately the taste of blood.

I removed all of my teeth for her.
Because I could not bear to hurt her,
the way people had hurt me before.
I lay soft and belly-up for her,
revelled in her protection and vulnerable words.
Under it, I could be gentle and cracked open wide.

Take care of me, I said.
I rely on your kindness after I gave away my anger.
My heart jumped into my throat,
tender and bleeding.
I never questioned why she kept her teeth
because I trusted her to file them down,
to kiss me close-mouthed
and protect me from the razor points.

That's why I couldn't have known
or ever expected
when she moved her head
and bit down.
I watched doe-eyed
as she raised it,
with my heart in her clenched jaw,
while I lay defenceless
and in love all the same.

by Lex Langille
Cranbrook, British Columbia

HONOURABLE MENTION

Who Is That Old Lady?

Who is that old lady
who peers back
through the mirror at me?
I am not old, so why
is she in my mirror?

Look at her! Wrinkles
and grey hair, tired eyes,
scrawny neck, and drooping chin.
The mirror should show me
as I am. Perhaps not as young
as I was but, still, not like her.
She looks past it, whatever
it is. While I am with it.

Most days,
I am ready for a swim
in the ocean, for a quick
game of tennis
or climbing that mountain.
I'm ready for a night
at the disco and work next day.
(Do they still have discos?)
I'm good to go travelling
the Silk Road maybe or
rappelling down Icelandic volcanoes.
That old lady can't do that.

Look at her, tired already,
and she just got out of bed.
While I'm going to put on new makeup
to attract that cute crossing guard
who can't be a day over sixty.
That old lady should go back
behind the wall where she belongs.

I don't want her looking at me
with those ancient, knowing eyes.
I want to see a young girl
with perky, flirty eyes,
with smooth skin and bouncing hair.
She was in my mirror once.
Where is she now?

by Valerie Fletcher Adolph
White Rock, British Columbia

HONOURABLE MENTION

Growing Cancer

My mother's hands were strong,
Long-fingered and elegant.
But around the cuticles, there were always open cuts.
"Allergic to the oil I work with," she would say.

Oils and grease and unknown chemicals
To lubricate machines,
To clean the roller bearings,
To make them spin so smoothly.

Chemicals absorbed through skin and breath
And open wounds,
Planting slow-germinating, deadly seeds.

by Ann Sprague
Windsor, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

My Left Eye Wept

As I exited the car
my body intuitively knew
what I would see
as I entered
Woman Love Freedom

Mahsa Amini, twenty-two, murdered
Iranian morality police
Wisps of hair
escaping her hijab

My left eye wept
as I viewed each work of art

Left eye shot out
shades of black and grey
some red
haunting

Ghost family
part leaving
part left behind

Image of a woman
deadbolt on her throat
opened a crack
hair flying in the wind
butterflies honouring loose hair
heart shining

My left eye wept
“Grounding the Light”
man and woman
standing together
arms around each other’s shoulders
looking forward together

Local council women
bring greetings
speak of their young daughters
wanting them to always have the right
to use their voices
to speak their truth

My left eye wept
signs of hope
I am here
we are here
using visual voice
speaking for the women of Iran
for all women

My left eye wept

by Ruth Ann Wilhelm (75 years)
Windsor, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

The Tower and Beyond

IV fluid drip drips into her body.
The poison swirls inside her,
massacring cells—good and bad.
Someone calls her name.
Searching for the voice
through lashless eyes,
she sees dozens of reflections
of herself, attached to IVs
like spiders to their webs.
A symphony of *drip dripping*
pounds in her ears.

She'd escaped other trials in life,
Towers of tribulation from which
there seemed no salvation.
But how?
Memory is a vague fugue
itching at her brain.
And this Tower is strange, unfamiliar—
The Tower of Cancer —
with its twisted nooks and crannies
offering two-faced promises,
always taking, never giving.

The toxins hint at healing
but mess with her body and her mind.
She runs her free hand through her hair
and remembers she has none.
She weeps inconsolably—
they tell her to seek therapy.
She stares at them with her chemo eyes
and recalls who she was
before this nightmare took over—
strong, beautiful, and independent.
Now, she is bald, angry, and alone.

And some call her brave:
“*She battled cancer and won.*”
But she doesn't feel brave.
She doesn't feel like a hero
with her scarred body and mind.
Hair, lashes, and eyebrows have grown back—somewhat,
but side effects from the treatment linger—
a constant reminder of her time in the Tower.
What lies ahead she doesn't know.
She only knows that one life is over
and another has begun.

by Melanie Flores
Toronto, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

June

When I am told that I look like my grandmother,
My father's first mother,
I can't help but cringe.

Don't get me wrong,
I see the resemblance.
Is that the reason that my father sometimes flinches when I enter a room?
Does my mere existence conjure an image of a woman he spent years forgetting?

I gaze into the mirror, and I beg her
To leave me to my own, to let me be not the reincarnation
Of someone who chose to leave her son with a father
Who spent thirty years erasing her from his mind.

But she lives when I live.
And for this, I wonder if she felt the same way that I do,
If we are both the mirror of a woman whom our fathers lost.

by Sydney Alexander
Prince George, British Columbia

HONOURABLE MENTION

The Future Is Dead

Why do we
Idealize the future?

The future is dead

We have smothered the world
In gasoline
And dropped the match

The future is dead

The world is on fire
The air replaced by smoke
We cannot breathe

The future is dead

Now we watch
Idly
As the poor burn

The future is dead

When will we realize
We are destroying
Our future?

The future is dead

We must act
Before it's too late
Before—

The future is dead
And so are we

by Michelle Ruff
Sudbury, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

Grounded

Kid-loud, summer loud, we two, skipping, chanting singsong in the backyard:
... *had a little sports car, a 948; drove around the corner, slammed on the brakes.* ...
You step onto the deck, alert in shirtsleeves, shield your eyes, scan westward,
graze blue skies above our heads.
“Smells like rain,” you say to no one in particular, though we’re right there.
Your words suspend in static, storm-hushed air. Our rhyme game
silenced, pink-handled ropes slack in small hands. Wide-eyed, we see,
behind your head, shifting clouds mass, angry
roiling blue-black. Somehow, you sense these thunder cells. Some telepathic
vibe. We are your oldest: yin and yang, dark and fair; complicit
now in steering clear, navigating your negatively charged force fields. Far-off
thunder rolls. You count aloud:
“One-one-thousand, two-one-thousand . . . ,” gauging the encroaching booms.
“Each one represents a mile.” We grasp at, clutch, and stow
your voice, each rare and precious word. You step down, back the mower
from the shed, light a Number Seven,
puff hands-free, perfect diagonal rows of emerald Golf-Green symmetry. We
observe these Saturday dad rituals, safe distant,
from our corner by the fence. Sudden boom, leaden clouds explode. We beeline
for the old Ford Meteor, your pride and joy,
permanently parked, strictly off-limits. We know her soft grey cloth interior
is warm and dry and smells like dust—we’ve sought
secret haven here before. Then, you’re there, on the driver’s side, life large,
rain-wet, bringing bluster, scents of Juicy Fruit
and cigarette. We don’t dare breathe. The Meteor rocks in sideways-driven sheets.
A flash illuminates your face. “So, this is where you hide.”
A rare half-smile. “We’re safe in here. Old Blue’s grounded by her rubber tires.”
On cue, a sky-split fork of fire. In the rearview mirror,
your eyes find mine. Do I imagine a quick wink? You glance back, drop your
hands to the big wheel, at exactly ten and two, the way you never do,
and pretend to steer, as if you plan to take us on a drive, as if to make believe
a road trip’s something you might actually consider.

by Brenda Gunn (66 years)
Edmonton, Alberta

HONOURABLE MENTION

I'll See You

I wonder where you sailed to
when your body said goodbye.
Did you keep your childlike nature
and that twinkle in your eye?
Can you hear us thinking of you
and wishing you were here?
Are you lingering close by
to those of us who hold you dear?

I'm sure I saw you in the sky,
soaring high like eagles do—
a fleeting glimpse.
I don't know why,
deep down, I knew that it was you.

You know, I always will remember
our mountain valley drives,
from early May into December,
admiring how nature thrives.

You used to gather beech nuts
and drink water from cold springs.
You picked fiddleheads and berries
and corded wood for keeping warm.
So free at heart, you always knew
that nature would provide—
that you could weather any storm
and take it all in stride.

Are there fishing spots in heaven?
Do moose and deer travel your way?
I bet there aren't evil mosquitoes
or pesky flies to shoo away.

As the months and years flow by,
this well of tears will have run dry.
Then, I may simply ponder,
when I close my eyes at night,
if you shine among the stars,
beyond the body, into light—
having healed all earthly scars,
fully beaming with delight.

I will keep your memory true
until we meet again,
and for now, I say,
“I’ll see you,”
even though I know not when.

by Anne Dorcas
Montréal, Québec

HONOURABLE MENTION

Surrender

my man surprised me
with a squeeze from behind
playful affection riding rolling over me like waves
crashing my resistance
releasing
my crank of crankiness

I give way bend to joy
surrender to sacred silliness
I turn into him smiling in spite of myself

big
falling
thank you I mumble my face buried in his shoulder
I upturn my face to tender lips waiting
I let him in

by Mariette Jones
Windsor, Ontario