

FIRST PRIZE

Remembering Corporal Yeryk

Daniel Yeryk sits looking into his bedroom mirror. Looking back at him is a man he feels he no longer knows. He studies the face carefully, searching it for signs of the energetic, quick-witted and determined young man he had seen standing in this very mirror only a year ago. The features are the same, only now they are thinner. A new scar, shaped like a Nike swoosh, is embedded deep in his left cheek, as if affirming its existence in an inventory of body parts.

Two eyes return his stare, still blue as ever—maybe bluer now against the ruddy complexion, a gift from the constant exposure of his arid, treeless post in Afghanistan.

Daniel stretches his neck up, using his arms to lift himself high enough to see if the legs of his uniform are tucked tidily enough under his thighs. He debates leaving them hanging, but then he thinks he would have to attach a pair of shoes at the ends to complete the illusion.

“You are looking very handsome in your uniform, Corporal Daniel Yeryk,” says his wife, Kate, entering the room. She kisses his cheek as she reaches past him for her purse, and hangs it on the handle of his wheelchair.

“Are you sure tucking is the right thing to do for a classroom full of six-year-olds?” Daniel asks her.

“Of course,” says Kate. “Can you imagine Joey’s reaction if you left them hanging today after two months of tucking?” Kate exaggerates a puzzled look, which makes them both smile. “Are you prepared? Do you want to rehearse anymore?”

“No, and no point,” says Daniel. “Why am I so nervous to talk to first-graders?”

“Tough topic,” says Kate with a wink. “You’ll be fine.”

“Daddy!” A ruffle-headed Joey runs to the door of the classroom to greet his parents. “Mrs. Scully, this is Daddy, his real name is Daniel, but you can call him Corporal Yeryk. You already met my mom lots of times.”

“Welcome!” says Mrs. Scully. “We are so happy you agreed to be interviewed by our class, Corporal Yeryk. Come in, we’re just beginning our Remembrance Day activities.”

“Daddy, you can fit in here by me,” Joey says, pointing at a large space that has been reserved in a circle of small chairs. “Mommy, you can sit next to Daddy—right there,” he continues, pointing to an empty chair.

“Thank you, Joey and Mrs. Scully. We already feel welcome,” Kate says.

Daniel looks on with a grin of wonder, watching his son take charge.

“This is my Dad, guys,” Joey says to his classmates as his parents get settled. “Remember I told you he has no legs. Now do you believe me?” Joey gives a proud, firm look at one child in particular.

The girl appears distraught for a moment and then replies with conviction, “No! He’s tricking us. He’s faking!”

“Charlotte!” says Mrs. Scully. “Mr. Yeryk, I’m sorry, I . . .”

“It’s okay,” Daniel says, surprising himself with a chuckle. He clears his throat and addresses the brave, pigtailed child, “What makes you think I’m faking, Charlotte?”

“Because, if you don’t have any legs, why aren’t your pants empty?” Charlotte asks in earnest. “It looks like you’re just sitting on them.” She looks around the circle for support.

The others sit gaping. Joey looks truly shaken.

“He’s not faking! They really are gone!” Joey says to his classmates, then turns to face Daniel. He says in a calm, demure manner, “Daddy, we have to show them.”

Daniel, stunned, and working hard to keep himself from laughing out loud says, “Okay.” He can feel his heart pumping as he reaches up underneath his thighs and undoes the neat folds slowly, one by one, allowing the pant legs to fall, wrinkled and without feet at the ends. The class is silent, except for a small gasp after the first pant leg drops.

Daniel looks around the circle at the students, one of whom looks like he might begin to cry. He reaches down and puts his hands behind the hanging pant legs and begins to flip them back and forth. The near-tears youngster lets out a belly laugh, beginning a giggle-fest that comes on like a storm after a heady humid calm. Daniel then grabs the pant legs and makes them walk, run fast, and do the cancan.

In his son’s laughing face, Daniel finds a glimpse of the man he had been looking for in his mirror.

by Karen Sylvia Rockwell

Belle River, Ontario



SECOND PRIZE

Your Son

Being a mother you start to notice things, like when your son inexplicably joins you on a trip to the local store. He offers to push the cart for you, casually dropping items into it—mouthwash and facial cleanser and hair gel and body spray—and you purchase these items for him while he stands beside you gawking stupidly at the blonde cashier. Then, outside in the parking lot, your son catches a glimpse of himself in the reflection of a car window, and he touches his hair with the tips of his fingers until the puff on his head is satisfyingly flattened.

Yes, this is your son, fourteen and pimpled and pale and twenty-one pounds below the standard body weight for a boy his age and height. He starts waking up an hour early every morning before school to exercise—push-ups and pull-ups and sit-ups—and then he stands half naked in front of the mirror and flexes, winking at himself, flirting with his own likeness in an attempt to see how he might look when delivering a line like “I love your smile, the way it makes your nostrils flare. It’s cute. I can tell you have a good heart.”

Your son, who has never before cared about his physical appearance, suddenly cares about his physical appearance. He showers and combs his hair and splashes water on his face and brushes his teeth and pops in his retainer and lays his clothing out on the bed, pairing and repairing garments until he finds himself feeling satisfied, colour-coordinated. He is no longer basing his wardrobe on comfort, but on style, vogue playing an integral role in the decision-making process, meaning he stops wearing the purple sweatpants, the yellow Hawaiian shirt, the straw fedora, and the puffy pink sweater his grandmother bought him (the one with the Disney princesses sewn across the chest).

Your son, he asks you if there are any jobs you need performed around the house, preferably ones that pay. After you generously give him fifty dollars for painting the kitchen cabinets, he goes to the mall, spends the entire fifty on a collared shirt, one with short sleeves, pliable fabric, and a small alligator patch atop the left breast. It’s a shirt your son will iron, preserve, and never wear while eating spaghetti. Then later on, with his new shirt folded neatly nearby, your son does jumping jacks in his bedroom—tired, sweaty, inept—so you bring him a bottle of Gatorade. He says, “Thanks, Mom. This should replenish my electrolytes nicely,” only he mispronounces the words replenish and electrolytes. In fact, there’s no way he even knows what either of those words mean, but you still love him. You love this boy so much it makes you feel happy and sad and crushingly worried. Yes, you will never stop worrying for him, ever.

Your son, he finally tells you about the girl at school. You pretend to be surprised. Her name is Hilary, and your son says she’s really nice looking: brown hair, brown eyes, olive skin, flared nostrils, a mole on her neck. “And the mole’s kinda big,” explains your son, “and some people might not like it, but I do. Don’t know why. Just do. It’s pretty, in a way.” You listen and nod and appreciate your son telling you these things, and that’s when he says he’s planning on asking Hilary out on a date. You smile. Any girl would be lucky to date your son, and you tell him this, and he shrugs, smiling also.

The next day you drop him off at school, and you wish him luck, and he’s wearing too much cologne, and there are stains on the armpits of his new shirt, and you could almost start crying out of love for this boy. You drive to work, sit at your desk, press your pencil so hard against the pad it breaks. You think about your son, standing beside Hilary’s locker, imagine him nervous and excited and infatuated by the mole on her neck, and you hope to God he will never have his heart broken. Your son, your baby boy who is no longer a baby, the one who looked

up at you all big-eyed and chubby and toothless, who made you laugh, and who still makes you laugh. You can't wait until you get home tonight, to hear his voice.

"Mom," he'll say, "I asked her. I did it, Mom. I asked her."

by Mark Jordan Manner

Aurora, Ontario



THIRD PRIZE

It's Cold out in Space

"The radio's broken," he explained when she moved her hand from dial to dial, clicking on silence, static, and more silence. Snow rushed past dark skies, spilling over the windshield like stars flying against spaceships going warp speed, like you'd think it would look like out in space.

She rustled through the glove box, looking for a cassette.

"That's broken too."

"Oh." Leaning back in her seat, she tilted her head up, watching starflakes drag by. "I wonder what it would be like to just drive forever."

"I think I'd get a bit tired." He glanced at her out from under his glasses.

"How long have we been driving so far?"

"About two hours."

The windshield wipers were now sweeping away stars as fast as they could, though most bounced off when they hit the glass. Some stars accumulated against the side windows and on the front of the car. Most of the stars stayed along highway barriers, in drifts.

"I just want to save all of the stars."

"What stars?"

"All of them." She pointed outside to white stars covering everything they touched.

"Where would you put them?"

"Does it matter?"

"Yeah." With one hand on the wheel, he tried to adjust the windshield wipers until he realized they were going as fast as they could already.

"It's not fair to them, bouncing out all over the place like that. Thrown away."

"They're not bouncing anywhere. They're all still up there."

She cleared her throat.

"What?"

"Pull over."

"Are you crazy?"

Turning around, she began rustling in the backseat, pulling out empty water bottles and soda cans from the trash bag.

"Leave that stuff there."

"Pull over."

He continued driving, straight ahead into more stars.

"It'll be fine. You should rest a moment anyway."

He sighed. Soon the dull clinking of his right blinker filled the car as he found a spot on the shoulder that didn't look too bad. As the car crushed stars, coming to a stop, she opened her door and tossed out all of the containers, following immediately after them.

"Put your coat on!"

She slammed the door.

Dancing under the stars, dancing through the stars, she held out opened bottles while she spun around and around, catching star after star, no two alike. Holding out her tongue, she caught stars on the tip. Small, but much colder than she had anticipated. Stars melted on her skin, but stuck to her sweater. She was almost mid-calf deep in stars now. They were wet, coming up, over, and into her shoes.

The mechanical grind of old power windows cut the silent stars jagged.

“Come on, it’s cold outside.”

She jumped down, collecting more stars from the fallen ones on the ground—the fallen ones needed the most saving. Dragging bottles through piles of stars, quickly capping them up so none could escape back into the galaxy.

The car started up again, headlights on her, illuminating more stars as they floated to the ground. She lay in the stars, touching all of them, feeling their crispness on her neck, feeling them soak into her clothes, into her.

Large hands were on her, yanking her up. She clenched onto the bottles.

“What are you doing? You’re all wet. Get back into the car so we can warm you up.”

“No, lie down with me. I want to float.”

“No one is floating—”

She yanked her arm free, pulling him down with her in the process.

“We are floating. Lie back.” She spread out on the stars, buried her head in them, getting them caught in her hair.

He slowly joined her, looking up at the sky with her.

“Watch. The movement—the world is passing.”

He was silent, watching, first her, then the stars as they fell. He watched as they fell in white circles, covering his eyelashes, his nose, his shoes. And her.

“I always wondered what it would be like in space.” He blinked, but there was nowhere for the stars to go anymore.

Her lips were cold, chapped under the stars. She tried to tell him she knew it would be cold, but nothing moved. She was glad they weren’t wearing jackets. She knew the stars didn’t want them to escape either.

by Lindsey Rivait

Windsor, Ontario



HONOURABLE MENTION

The Key

The Key. Nice title, but the key to what? Allison wondered in frustration.

Why choose this particular word? The solitary word on the page admonished her.

As a writer Allison understood the problem. Since Peter's death six months ago the juices would not flow. The word festered; a neon sign telegraphing to the world Allison's creative essence died with her husband.

She turned off the laptop and buried the offending title to a story she would never write.

Allison padded to the terrace of her room overlooking the famous caldera of Santorini Island in the Aegean and gazed at the aquamarine sea. Twilight settled over the land. The air had freshened and a tender breeze drifted in from the sea. She heard in the distance the teasing sounds of native music. Far below a large sailing ship with ivory canvas stretched to bursting departed Santorini; a silent spectre gliding across the placid water on its journey to some distant and exotic port. She had spent her honeymoon on Santorini.

She turned and glanced at her duffel bag. Hidden inside were the sleeping pills, bottle of twelve-year-old scotch, and a clear plastic bag. *Tonight I join Peter.*

She put a light-coloured frock over her bikini, grabbed a towel, and ambled along the labyrinthine alleyway. The delicious aroma of frying fish and grilled lamb saturated the cooling air of early evening. She sat at a small outside table of a taverna with a stunning view of the sea. The blood-red sun stained a bullet hole into the pristine indigo sky and illuminated with an amber glow her lovely face. Allison held up a glass of ouzo and toasted her last night on earth.

She navigated down to the beach and sat on the black volcanic pumice. The gods had thrown a universe of unbroken sand along this coast since the beginning of time.

What mysteries of the cosmos lie buried here? . . . How odd! The beach is deserted and the silence surreal. Have I wandered into another dimension?

She waded into the tepid water and swam like a dolphin through the salty ancient sea of legend. Ulysses, Achilles, Agamemnon, and all the heroes of venerable Greece passed through these waters.

It is right to come here.

A strong swimmer, Alison glided effortlessly like a mermaid through the water and felt she could travel like this forever. How she would love to keep swimming and never stop, letting the sea swallow her, keeping her for eternity in its liquid embrace.

Poseidon, take me into your home.

Exhausted from her swim she lay on the beach, still warm from the heat of the day, water sparkling like diamonds on the tanned canvas of her body.

She got up and strolled along the empty shore leaving footprints in the black sand.

Allison noticed an object just beneath the sodden crust of beach. A minute sparkle revealed its hidden presence. She bent down and picked up an antique bronze key with two ancient words engraved on its shaft. The thing radiated a sensation that made her uncomfortable. *Shall I throw it into the sea?* she wondered. She rubbed the surface to reveal more of the letters. Then she saw him. A naked man physically the model for Michelangelo's David waded in from the sea.

She did not sense any fear but asked, "Who are you?"

"I am Poseidon. You called for me. I heard and felt your pain."

"What do you want of me?"

"Nothing! The gods have sent me to release your pain and grant you any wish you desire. The key you hold unlocks a box given to humanity by the Greek gods of antiquity. Tell me your wish and it will be fulfilled."

She thought of Peter and their love for each other. She thought of how they made love on this very beach. *To love and be loved is the key.*

Allison reflected on her long dead mother who possessed great wisdom and insight. The woman spoke to her now: "Allison, be careful what you wish for."

With a sigh she placed the key back where she found it and covered it with the black volcanic pumice. She turned her back on the muscular god and continued her stroll along the beach leaving deep footprints in the sand. With resolute stride Allison marched towards the setting sun on the distant horizon and her destiny, her footprints in the sand stretching to infinity and beyond.

by John Corvese
Burlington, Ontario



HONOURABLE MENTION

Compartmentalization

My father liked gadgetry. Things like separating quarter-inch jacks from phone cables, disassembling electric razors, and compartmentalizing timepieces onto velvet cloths. My mother studied classical philology. Things like deconstructive parsing and Shakespearean taxonomic approach. I was taught young to see the world as being in entropy, and that if I could reduce floating chaos to torpid absolutisms I could find peace in understanding.

In my apartment there is a table—long, wooden, and rectangular—scarred from metal bits slipping from my dad’s thick fingers, which grew to shake more and more with age. It’s also marked where my mother bled dark ink through papers she worked on. The table’s top and edges are chipped, dented, and stained multicolour from my and my sister’s young indifference to its aesthetic virtues. After the truisms of the chaos had set, I salvaged it, and fought with my landlord successfully to allow the oversized piece into my top-floor loft.

I am, at risk of sounding arrogant, a foremost authority on cultural anthropology. My speciality is twenty-first century decadence; call it an organic career choice.

The university sent me to this ruin site with 2F7, a machine with a child-like curiosity. 2F7 is industriously sorting through a pile of crumble, collecting and cataloguing items with an advanced comprehension of ancient cultural relevance. It jettisons scrap into a separate pile of reclamation. Where we are is uncertain, but there isn’t much here in the way of salvage. I only know the world as a series of numbers and typographical symbols, and that, like rubble, all starts to look alike after awhile. My cigarette burns effortlessly in the day’s dry heat as I skim over my mandate from the department. The brim of my hat juts far and around my head and is saving me from a harsh, corrosive burn. The world is silent aside from 2F7’s running parts, the whisper of my cigarette, and the squeeze of blood at the back of my skull.

Johnny.

“2F7.”

2F7 lifts his retrieval parts I refuse to call arms, and shows me a concrete slab engraved in human artifact. I look closely and am surprised a chunk this size wasn’t reduced to small fragments.

I don’t register the symbol.

“It’s a heart—not many people do.”

I’m having trouble parsing your sentence. Please explain the noun.

“You wouldn’t know it. It was lost in descriptive politics. Love and love symbolisms have been made extinct; same with hate, because the two are, in the end, one and the same, so they’re not absolutes, and we try to speak only in absolute terms now.”

Thank you, Johnny. I like working with you.

“You’re lucky. Dinosaurs like me are about the only ones who still know that. Do a historical inquiry of this region, will you? We’re looking for census data on a marriage between David and Julia, and then data on any living relatives.”

Certainly.

I burned my cigarette down to the nub, the millions of poisonous particulates outweighed by my sizeable disregard.

Mary Anne Rushmore. 44.67°N 63.61°W.

“Set that apart from the university catalogue for me please.”

2F7 wheels the slab to our rover truck and sets it in the box.

“Thank you.”

Her face is full of beauty, curiosity, and melancholy. She nearly drops her coffee when, to her ire, she realizes the old guy with the concrete piece is whom she’s meant to meet.

“Mary Anne,” I presume. “I’m Dr. Doherty, from the university. Thanks for meeting me.”

I set the stone down on the tabletop next to us, and shake her hand, soft and supple against mine, rough and tired and covered in stone chaff.

"I don't trust many people, but you did a good job at sounding normal on the phone. . . . So, why did you call me?"

"I found this. It belonged to your grandparents. It means a great deal and it's yours to keep."

She glides her index finger along the ridged groove of the heart. "What is it?"

"You kids don't know anything these days, do you?"

She smiles. "I suppose not."

"I have to leave, and I'm leaving this with you, but—be careful with it." I start to go.

"Dr. Doherty."

I turn. She's standing.

"Is it dangerous? Is there something I should know?"

I crack my first smile in years. "Nonsense," I say. "There's nothing to know."

by Timothy Gerwing

Edmonton, Alberta



HONOURABLE MENTION

Shiver

She stepped off the 4:30 from Oshawa, wearing a white pillbox hat and a red cherry dress. Her sandalled feet were black with summer dust. An un-smoked cigarette lingered, unlit in the fissure of her fingers. She was an eccentric sight between the masses of cuff-linked businessmen pouncing forward with such fusion of purpose; an oddity, too, between the few other women, ruddy creatures of different farm stock, who excelled easily at faking their own happiness.

She carried one single bag, a threadbare black briefcase, faded white at the edges. It was this she set at her side as she drew a lighter from the breast pocket of her dress, the lip of its flame meeting the tobacco kiss of her cigarette with several furious clicks. Leaning against the washed stucco wall of the Oshawa bus station, she seemed to relax slightly, her shoulders and body sagging into a calming pattern of tidy exhalations.

It was late in the summer. The sky had become a waxy thin stain of greased blues and greys, and the world around her echoed with the smells and sights of things she was not familiar with; she had never been to the city.

Her formative years had been spent in a white brick grange, bordered by onion fields for miles, the green crowned vegetables ending only where the shadows of the boreal trees began. Her solitary link to the outside world had been found in the snaking intestine of an industrial railway track, which broke through the planted fields until merging with the dark gorge of forest, the banshee holler of the train whistle heard long after the last graffiti-swollen car had been swallowed by the trees.

Many of her adolescent dreams had been peddled in the aisles of those onion fields, a few feet from the train, hidden from sight. She would sit so close she could feel the breeze created in her hair, so close it was almost possible to picture escape—beautiful escape from the fluid viscosity of those hot, languid afternoons and the bearish hand of her father, the meek tolerance of her mother and sisters, and the armpit smell of growing onions.

At the station, she paused, prickled. Someone was calling her name. Taking a last drag, she tossed her smouldering cigarette into a trash can, tensing. The moment she had feared with dreaded anticipation was unfolding. His voice, surely *that voice*, calling her name over the rush of the station traffic, was a voice carved from age and time, ripe with willful certainty.

She spotted him walking towards her. He was taking great, loping strides, his brown eyes darkly focused under thick branches of untrimmed brow. He appeared exactly as her parents had described. A big man, they had told her the night they came to her bedroom door announcing their plans for her. A nice heart, her mother had mused, almost envious. Capable of respect, warned her father. They were perched on the edge of her bed. Her father's hands were stained red from the soil. Her mother looked down at the floor as she spoke.

For two weeks after, she had done nothing but scream in refusal, despite the pleas from her mother, the mocking of her sisters, and her father's threats. She cried until her voice turned into a cracked resemblance of sound and her throat burst into flames of infection.

At the station, her fiancé put her suitcase in the bed of his truck, and then guided her to his car with one hand hovering on the small of her back.

His elbow hung out the window, one hand on the steering wheel. Occasionally he would look over to where she sat staring through the window. She ignored this, glaring out at the passing landscape of thickening forest with a malignant tumour of dread swelling in her throat.

At home, he dropped her suitcase on the front porch. A white-muzzled dog licked her hands as they walked through each room. Summer flies crowded on the windowsills. In the master, she sat on the edge of the bed, overcome. Her sunburnt shadow glared back at her from an antique mirror. Her fiancé, who had been hovering close, sat next to her, placing a hand on her arm.

"Welcome home," he said, laying a stubbly kiss on the crook of her shoulder. She shivered. From passion or fright, she did not know.

by Hilary McLennan
Port Hood, Nova Scotia

HONOURABLE MENTION

Memories from Heaven

The scientists didn't realize their mistake until the first fallout came drizzling out of the sky. It was barely noticeable at first, small dots of material landing gently onto the major urban areas. When the substances were examined closely these learned men were in for a big surprise. Each piece had some kind of printing or picture on its surface, although under powerful magnification the markings proved hard to define.

Then larger pieces came falling like flakes of a wet snowstorm. They floated through the air and planted themselves on everything, not melting, rather just lying there until they were scooped up by curious onlookers. This time the images were large enough to make out with the simplest enlargement. To everyone's wonder they contained illustrations of movies, television shows, video games, and all manner of electronic media. The scientists knew this was important.

When the streets of New York ran an inch deep in clips of *I Love Lucy* and old Marx Brothers films people began asking some serious questions. Still the scientists were baffled.

Next came the noise, soft at first but then building to a crescendo of unbearable proportions. The lucky ones were serenaded with the classics and good old rock and roll. Those less fortunate had their lives shattered with elevator music and popular show tunes. Every dog with a sense of hearing began to howl and hide behind whatever object was available.

Scientists continued to perform their tests. The frequency and intensity of the bombardment continued without abating. Stores sold out of head phones and ear muffs. People were seen trying to claw out their ears. What had started as simple images became holographic sequences of Lawrence Welk reruns and Freddy Kruger movies. Inside or outside, the sound and light show shattered lives. Church congregations met to pray for blessed silence. It did not come.

Working feverishly in sound- and sight-proof conditions, the scientists finally made this amazing pronouncement. The explanation for the phenomenon was simple enough. For a hundred years humankind had been pumping out various kinds of audio and visual images. Some of these had indeed travelled into space as previously believed; however, now horrified scholars realized the bulk of these signals had become trapped in the Earth's atmosphere.

In layman's terms, the air was full, saturated with all the sound and visual pollution it could carry. Like the heavens on a hot, humid, summer day, they had reached the point of no return and started raining down on the Earth. Unlike such a storm, the source of the saturation was unlimited and so the tempest had no end. Yet even as this startling discovery was announced, people continued to inject increasing amounts of litter into the sky.

There were notable tragic, yet ironic incidents. The CEO of a large oil company was crushed under a ten-foot poster for the World Wildlife Fund. Several riders were trampled by their horses when they fell over images of the Royal Family on a fox hunt near Sandringham. Leaders implored the public to stop using mobile phones, Blackberries, MP3s and other electronic entertainment. All radio and television broadcasts were halted. Cloud seeding was used to bring down the remaining refuse.

In the end the world was saved. All of the rubbish from space was gathered up and stored. People began to use their devices again, but this time with restraint. Laws were passed to limit the output of electronic media. As with all disasters, there was a silver lining. In the ensuing years there was a brisk trade in the sale of entertainment nostalgia memorabilia.

by Stephen Porter
Toronto, Ontario



HONOURABLE MENTION

Freedom

Roger awoke to the heavy drumming of winter rain on his tent. He shivered and pulled himself in his mummy-shaped sleeping bag away from the tent's edge that leaked. It wasn't pitch black in his tent anymore, so he knew daylight was trying to poke through the heavy cloud cover. He was luckier than some, he figured. At least he had the tent, which he'd rescued from the dumpster last summer. And he had an old bicycle, too, so he could travel the streets, looking for cans and bottles he could return for cash. Not bad for an old bugger.

He pulled himself reluctantly out of his bag and put on his only pair of boots. They were somebody's discarded work boots, with steel toes. Kind of heavy for walking, but way more waterproof than the last pair of used sneakers he'd had. He was still wearing his only set of clothes and his only coat that he never took off, along with the aviator hat that kept his head and his ears warm. Once the boots were tied he was ready to start his day.

Roger emerged from his tent with his rickety bicycle and pushed it gingerly through the brush to reach the path that would take him from the bowels of the park closer to the more used areas, and then to the street. Once he was out of the mud, he'd be able to ride and he would quickly travel the streets that had garbage pickup today, scrounging all the cans and bottles he could from the blue recycle bins as he went. When he had three or four garbage bags filled to overflowing, he would head to the closest grocery store or liquor store to return his finds for cash. He was lucky he lived in Langley. The city divided the garbage pickup into four different areas, with one section of the town designated for pickup each day Tuesday through Friday. The other three days, he scavenged from the dumpsters in town. . . . So for most days of the week he had an income, of sorts. It was enough to buy the rum that kept him warm at night.

He went to the shelter for a free meal every day. But he wouldn't let them talk him into staying there to sleep. No way. He hated crowds. Couldn't stand to be around that many people. All the noise drove him nuts. It was all he could do to get through the half hour it took to get a meal. He couldn't imagine all that ruckus for hours on end all night long. And no, he didn't want anything to do with staying there permanently in their attempt to get people off the street. He didn't want anything to do with those judgemental bastards down at welfare either, thinking they were doing so much good by making you feel like you're no good if you don't have an address, or any relatives to vouch for you, or any ID from the frickin' province. And he sure as hell wasn't going to let the Sally Ann shove any fictitious God down his throat either. He didn't believe in God.

If there had been a God, he wouldn't have lost everything. God died twenty years ago. The day he got the pink slip. The day he left the mining camp to come home for a break after working three months to make good money to support his family—only the break was permanent. And then coming home to find his wife had split with his three kids. What God makes that happen? So he goes to the pub to drown his sorrows and after a couple of hours heard some fire sirens. By the time he made it back to his house, it had all been gutted by the fire. And then the insurance wouldn't pay up for it because nobody had been living in the house for the last thirty days. So don't talk to him about any God. He didn't need to suffer all those sermons for a place to stay. He had his freedom, and nobody could ever take that away from him. He started humming "Me and Bobby McGee" as he pedalled through the rain.

by Lisa Hatton

Langley, British Columbia



HONOURABLE MENTION

Solar Eclipse

Audrey planned for this day to be her last. She saw no point in going on. Her life had become abysmal. Nobody called except telemarketers and people taking surveys—as if her opinion counted. Many of her friends were dead; the others had gradually disappeared from her life.

Outside, the rain poured down like it had for months, or so it seemed. She couldn't remember the sun anymore. The sun had disappeared like her friends.

When did her life change? How did it happen? She remembered that once she had laughed, and sang, and danced. The sun used to shine. A different person—another life.

Outside got darker.

Was it after Charlie died? She felt sad then and cried a lot. Her friends rallied around her, took her out, kept her busy. She had a good job. She got through it.

She poured herself a bowl of cereal and went to the fridge. Three drops of milk dribbled from the milk carton. So much for that. She certainly wasn't going out for more. Why bother eating anyway? She wasn't going to be around much longer. No point in getting dressed either. Nothing fit. She looked down at the heavy body covered with a threadbare housecoat that refused to close in front. Where did this body come from? Clearly it was not hers.

Maybe after she retired. . . . Was that when her life went to shit? When the sun went into hiding? She spent the last few years submerged in a virtual fog.

She lumbered to the mailbox. Nothing of interest ever came but checking the mailbox was a habit. Her spotted hand shook as she inserted the key. The door swung open and a multitude of flyers tumbled out. She left them on the floor of the apartment lobby. Someone else could pick them up and throw them away—someone who was going to be around tomorrow.

She began to close the miniature door when a flash of colour caught her eye. It was bright blue, so bright it hurt her eyes. As if someone had suddenly turned on the overhead light while she watched TV in the dark. She squeezed her eyes tightly and then opened them. The patch of blue remained and beckoned like a neon light outside a downtown bar.

She reached in and took out the small rectangular object. A postcard? She studied the picture of dazzling blue water and clear blue sky. A lone tree overlooked the scene and a white sailboat floated in the sun. Sun! She thought she would never see the sun again. Her body suddenly felt warm all over.

The unexpected jolt of sun was from her old friend Lillian, one of the disappeared. She lived in Aruba and wanted Audrey to come and spend some time with her.

Audrey checked her savings account. Charlie left her a decent amount of money and she had barely touched it. She took a shower, put on some makeup, and ventured outside. She called the travel agent, bought a new housecoat, some clothes that fit, and milk for the next day's breakfast.

The rain stopped and the sun emerged from behind a cloud.

Her last day could wait.

by Darlene Foster

Delta, British Columbia



HONOURABLE MENTION

Leaving

There's a girl sitting behind the wheel of an old ginger-coloured Chevy Malibu, trimmed with patches of rust around the edges of the trunk and the wheel wells. A pretty brown-eyed girl, she looks through the rear-view mirror, sees all the boxes filled with dishes and a toaster and pots and pans and even a few staples like pasta and salt and pepper and instant coffee in little jars—things she knows will come in handy when she settles into the tiny studio apartment she rented just minutes from the college where she will study print journalism for the next two years.

The boxes fill up all the space in that wide, wide backseat where she made out with boys who kissed her breathlessly and squeezed her breasts with clumsy fingers while parked at the beach at night with the sound of the waves filling up the car. But she is not thinking of that as she stares past all the boxes stacked one atop the other so high they nearly obscure the rear window, but not enough that she can't see her father through the tiny space left in the middle.

He is standing behind her car in the driveway.

She watches him, catches glimpses of him as he moves around back there, bending this way and that. "Just checking things out," he'd say if she asked, "just making sure the old jalopy will stand up to all those miles." Three hundred and twenty-seven, to be exact. But it should; it came back from the garage with a clean bill of health just the day before.

He bends again and straightens up, then lifts a hand up to his sun-kissed face, and rubs his temples and forehead as if he is washing away stubborn traces of dirt clinging there. It breaks her heart to see him like this because she knows he is trying not to cry just as she is right now.

She blinks away the tears that are standing in her eyes and forces herself to look beyond her father at the house where she grew up—a house he'd built himself, using round pine logs and stone for the jutting chimney. She thinks about her mother inside, all alone in the kitchen with the brown Mexican tiles on the floor, clutching the glossy beads of a rosary in one pale hand and a coffee mug in the other. Praying for her.

She remembers the teary goodbye earlier, the hug that went on and on as if they'd never see each other again. But of course they would. She was only going to college, not moving to New Zealand, she'd told her mother.

She wipes a tear now and wonders if there are some on her mother's cheeks also, as she watches her father continue his inspection of her car, moving around to the front now, tapping the hood with his calloused knuckles and kicking at her tires with his heavy work boots.

It's time to go.

She climbs out of the car. He turns to her, his face all funny-looking, his eyes bright with unshed tears, and she rushes to him, wraps her arms around him tightly and lays her cheek against his chest. She can hear his heart beating fast as he pats her back and kisses the top of her head. Then he releases her and pushes her back towards the car. She pretends not to notice the tear sliding down his cheek as he goes back to his inspection. She turns and climbs back behind the wheel, and uses her fingers to wipe away her own tears.

It takes a little while, a minute or so, until she can get herself under control, and then she is able to turn the key in the ignition and slowly roll down the driveway to the street. She looks at her father one last time through the tiny space in the rear-view mirror, past all the boxes filling up the wide backseat. He is just a tiny stick figure waving goodbye at her now from the top of the driveway.

When she turns onto the street and reaches the corner where she can no longer see him, she wipes the last of her tears and thinks how sad it is that there can be no new beginnings without endings, without goodbyes, without leaving.

by Sonia Suedfeld

Langley, British Columbia

HONOURABLE MENTION

Sailing Away

Coming awake, I listened to the water chuckling along the hull of our thirty-five-foot sailboat. It was daylight, well past dawn, so John, my husband, must have missed checking our position with a morning sight. I heard the genoa foresail flap in the lee of the mainsail because of the slackening southeast trade wind. John's berth across the main cabin was empty.

"John?" I called. No answer. *He must be on deck.*

Again the genoa slatted in and out, and immediately there was a rattle on the foredeck. Looking out the hatch, I glimpsed the cat leaving the cockpit heading for the bow. In seconds she was back before a wavelet splashed her. In her mouth was a flying fish, which had fallen to the deck after being caught in the genoa. Muff slipped down the companionway and hovered protectively over her breakfast. I checked the cabin floor to see how many fish she had caught in the night. Only one patch of small round scales was in evidence. Muff beat John and me to the flying fish every time.

Leaning around the canvas leeboard of my berth, I couldn't see John anywhere in the cockpit. Rising and stepping around the cat, I looked out the hatch at the soft blue South Pacific sky dotted with fluffy, trade wind clouds. The boat was moving easily along at three knots and the wind vane self-steering gear was holding our course.

John and I had left the Galapagos two weeks ago on rollicking southeast trades headed westward for the Marquesas Islands. At first we sailed almost 150 nautical miles each day, but the trades were slowly lessening. We seldom had to touch a sail, just day after day of the type of cruising every blue-water sailor dreams about. Even with the diminishing winds, John's dead reckoning put us within a week of our destination.

We had left Costa Rica and the North American continent in June. Halfway to the Galapagos Archipelago our GPS failed, another electronic failure at just the wrong time. Fortunately, instead of having to turn back, John taught himself celestial navigation using the sextant to pinpoint our position on the chart; something else I couldn't master. After cruising around the misty archipelago, at the end of July we filled the boat's water tank and headed west.

Climbing the three steps into the cockpit I scoured the whole deck area. *No John.* I turned and shouted down the hatch, "You can come out now. Enough of this trying to scare me." No response. Rushing down into the cabin, I checked the quarter berth. *Empty.* I flew forward through the head to the V berths. *Nothing.* He was gone. Running past the startled cat back up into the cockpit, I climbed onto the dinghy atop the cabin. The main was set way out to starboard and tied so it couldn't gibe across sweeping me into the water. Staring aft I searched the waves for a bobbing head. The mid-ocean swell was two metres high with a long distance between crests. Squinting into the sun's glare off the waves, I realized how futile my efforts were.

Returning to the cockpit to grab the binoculars and then wedging myself against the mast on the dinghy, I began to examine the sea astern section by section. *Nothing.* I kept watching because there wasn't anything else to do. It was hopeless. I was alone, abandoned. My legs turned to jelly and they collapsed, my body limp and my mind in turmoil. Shivering as if plunged into ice water, I sensed a threat from the ocean I'd never felt before.

When John and I started our open ocean cruising we agreed to be sensible about the risks we'd take; however, in these placid waters of the tropical Pacific, we didn't even wear our safety harnesses when adjusting sails at night. Feeling despair, I carefully slid down to the deck, hanging on with white knuckles and crept back to the cockpit.

"Meow," announced Muff asking for more breakfast. She climbed onto my lap and started purring.

Burying my face in her fur I wept. "Oh, John! Why did you do this to me? How could you just vanish? Should I go back and tack upwind to search for you? Or should I sail on? What choice do I have?"

With a heartbroken sigh I told Muff, "It's only you and me. Let's get some breakfast."

by Margaret McNeil
Powell River, British Columbia

HONOURABLE MENTION

The Feeding Ground

He had been driving too long. His eyes were heavy. Beginning to blur. He needed to stop and rest. But where? He was in the middle of nowhere as another Maritime night deepened.

Then, there it was, rising from a dusty parking lot that touched both the civilization of the twisting road and the primitive time-worn land. A roadhouse. Weathered grey shingles. Perfect. One drink. A rest. Then back on the road.

Unable to believe his good fortune, he swung the car into the parking lot. He parked, dust settling like a shroud over his car. A weather-faded sign hung over the door: The Feeding Ground. *Strange name*, he thought. But he didn't care. It was someplace.

He left the car, brushing his hands through his thinning hair and made his way to the door.

Shadows lived inside. Blue-white cigarette smoke drifted like Maritime fog. A jukebox in the corner was playing country music full of twang. He caught the eye of the bartender. The man smiled. "What can I getcha?"

"Whiskey. Straight up, a double." The bartender nodded and was gone.

He took the opportunity to look around. There were six other people, four men and two women, scattered in the shadows, staring at him unblinkingly. Curiosity? Maybe. But there was something else in their eyes. He looked away, not wanting to name it. Not sure he could.

The bartender brought the whiskey.

He drank half greedily, throwing money on the stained bar, looking at the sign above the bar: The Feeding Ground. "What's with that name?"

"It's a local reference," the bartender smiled, a private joke he didn't intend to share.

He shrugged, ignoring the barman's evasiveness. He raised the glass and drank. It burned all the way down. He looked at the people. Still staring, ravenously. He decided he would finish and leave. The place was too damned weird and it was getting under his skin.

When he looked back, the bartender was leaning across the bar. *Had he been sniffing me? No*, he decided. *That was foolish.*

The bartender bared his teeth in a feral smile, saying, "You want another?"

"Yeah," he replied, shaken, watching as the second whiskey was set before him, peering at the bartender out of the corner of his alcohol-fogged eye. He was really feeling the whiskey. His vision was out of whack. Had to be. The guy behind the bar looked like he was changing.

He averted his gaze, afraid. He could not have seen what he thought he had. He concentrated on his trembling hands. He drank deeply. He saw the hands of the clock nearing the midnight hour. *The time*, he smiled drunkenly, *when monsters come out. Ridiculous.*

He finished the second drink, nodded at the bartender, and stood to leave. There was no doubt now. The bartender was changing.

"You okay, mister?"

"A little dizzy," he said, needing the air outside.

The bartender's face had lost its connection with humanity; it stretched and contorted, the jaw elongated, the nose a thin sliver, the eyes silvery, full of hunger—the starving kind. As he watched, the bartender's tongue—rope-like, black, reptilian—flicked out. He closed his bleary eyes, knowing when he reopened them the drunken hallucination would be gone. He turned, holding on to the stool for support. He opened his eyes, now facing the shadowy room.

His breath choked his lungs. His bladder contracted, and he lost control. He knew he was making a mewling, pleading sound, but he couldn't stop.

The others, once men and women, had also begun to change. Snarling carrion creatures, thin and starved, sat in their place, still staring, but with new eyes.

Behind him the bartender announced midnight had come: feeding time.

The creatures rose, coming forward, stalking him. He wanted to close his eyes and pretend the things he was seeing were not real. But he didn't. He couldn't. He dropped his glass. It shattered into jagged pieces on the bar top, one of which flew up and nicked his cheek, making it bleed. Bright red. Copper scented. Leaking invitation.

That was when he felt the first leathery tongue lapping at his cheek, tasting him. He managed to scream once before they fell on him. The Feeding Ground ran red with blood and the smell of ruined flesh.

by Jude Cain

Moncton, New Brunswick



HONOURABLE MENTION

Mercy Killing

I touch his wrinkled hand as his faded blue eyes, full of pain and desperation, hold mine. "It's okay, darling; it is almost time," I murmur. He can only nod weakly. We had discussed this when he was stronger, agreeing that I'd assist him in ending his life when the disease's progress became unrelenting and his pain unbearable.

Although he can no longer speak, I know what he wants me to do. I fill the syringe with morphine, flicking the needle to remove any air bubbles. I watch his eyes glaze over as I expertly find a vein in his wasted arm. He takes his last breath, his elderly face softening in death.

After sharing this scenario with the man on the bed in front of me, I begin to rage. "That is how it should be. After a lifetime of togetherness, I help you end your suffering in one final act of deep everlasting love. But noooo. . . ." I draw out the last vowel coated with sarcasm through pursed lips. I hold up the syringe to check the dosage. I glance at his face, which remains youthful despite his approaching middle age; his eyes a sharp, steely blue.

"But no," I repeat, spitting out the words, drops of saliva hitting his face. He flinches as if struck. "We will never grow old together. In fact, you will never grow old." I attempt a smile of smug satisfaction with face muscles stiff and frozen from disuse. Smiling does not come easily these days due to my overwhelming emotional pain caused by his proclamation of loving someone else and wanting a divorce. He has left me no choice.

He begins to struggle again. Doesn't he realize the bindings I've used are too strong? I have thought this through carefully, from acquiring the morphine to placing Valium in his drink, and dragging and binding his unconscious body to the bed where he now lies. He mumbles something through the gag and I rip it off, anticipating his pleas for forgiveness.

Instead he smiles at me, crooning, "We've had a good life together. I'm glad we made it through that difficult period way back when . . . so thankful I never left you. Instead our love just grew stronger." He ends with a catch in his voice as his eyes suddenly begin to fade and soften and his face rearranges itself into a multitude of wrinkles. I am overwhelmed by his sudden transformation, my mind desperately searching for a trick . . . another deceit.

"I killed you back then," I stammer, staring at the syringe in my hand.

"No, my love, we worked it out and have grown old together. Now I've asked you to help me die. We thought tying my hands would make it easier to inject me, but I need to be as close to you as possible. Please unbind me so we can embrace as you do this last thing for me."

I refocus on his face; my brain pulsating in a kaleidoscope of images where his features morph between middle and old age—I can no longer differentiate between our past, present, and the future I had envisioned. Finding myself increasingly confused and shaking, I mumble, "I have to sit down." Putting down the syringe, I try to remember how many Valium I've taken today.

From a vast distance I hear him talking about our life together and the children and grandchildren we have.

"You're lying! We have no children, let alone grandchildren," I whisper, even though I'm no longer sure of anything.

"You're upset; please let me comfort you." He takes a deep breath before continuing, "I can fight the pain long enough to put your mind at ease." His voice has become so quiet I have to strain to hear him.

The hurt I've been experiencing does suddenly feel as old and heavy as my mother's musty raccoon coat that I desperately want to shed once and for all. As I kneel in front of him, he smiles at me sweetly. I slowly untie his wrists.

Once freed, he stretches his arms towards me, then suddenly lurches, grabbing the syringe from the bedside table. Before I can react, I feel the needle piercing my neck.

He shoves me to the ground, laughing as he sneers, "You're right, we never will grow old together."

by Brenda de Greef
Toronto, Ontario