

FIRST PRIZE

Final Moments

When death branded your eyes a milky white,
There was no turning back.
Terrified that you would hear me,
I sat motionless as they moved you from stretcher to bed.
What empty words could I offer you? Everything will be all right?

The unmistakable smell of tuna sandwich
Emanated from my shoulder bag,
Betraying my presence.
Your head turned blindly in my direction
For a questioning second, before settling on the pillow.

I watched you in silence
And lamented losing you and, in effect,
Losing myself—for, I would never again
Be somebody's daughter,
Just a woman of questionable origin.

Finally, as your breath came—settled and steady,
I made my escape from your death chamber,
Like a creeping coward
Afraid to face the truth of life—
Comforted by blinding tears.

I didn't know it then,
But the day of dying came.
Meandering the aisles of Dollarama,
Looking for things I did not need,
I bided my time before I went to you.

In the final moment,
I decided not to go,
Fearful that my mind would play tricks,
Like when the subway tracks called to me
With twisted promises.

I stopped at a pile of lavender towels,
Dissolving into a deluge of tears.
At that instant, I felt you go.
You had waited for me to come
And only left when you knew I wouldn't.

My phone rang, shocking me into the present,
Into bright lights and synthetic smells.
A strange voice told me my mother had passed,
A lavender towel absorbed my primal scream.
An electric shiver passed through me: your final embrace.

by Melanie Flores
Toronto, Ontario

SECOND PRIZE

Parallel Lives

Fleet-footed, rosy-cheeked—
I sizzled with power and lust
in the strawberry season.

And, on the edge of the ravine,
I listened to the greenery
in the birch tree susurrating
loudly and proudly above me.

We sang duets, the leaves
and I: *Ageless, Seasonless,*
Deathless tunes; stanzas
unblessed with the fleetingness
of time.

How insolent it was to think
we could outfox the clock.

Now broken leaves float
away in the bracken:
brown, leathery, with
veins like bruised straw.

I, not far behind:
parchment skinned,
my bent blue arteries
filled to bursting like
clogged oxbow rivers.

I hope we meet again, the tree
and I, in green woods where time
is stilled.

by Jessie Lee Jennings
Windsor, Ontario

THIRD PRIZE

How to Leave the Farm and, Incidentally, Your Marriage

Tell no one. Plan ahead.

You have waited twenty-three years for this time,
and sometimes, the waiting felt like the punishment it was.
Sometimes, leaving seemed a remote dream, a fairy tale,
like winning the lottery.

So, now, in your mind, say goodbye—
goodbye to the soft noses and silky sides of the baby calves,
pushing and shoving to be first fed;
goodbye to the clutch of bantam chicks
trailing their proud mom around the barnyard,
peeping softly, tiny puffs of golden fluff;
goodbye to the hours and years of hard work
invested in building a dairy from a few pigs and cows;
goodbye to the rich loam of the garden,
waiting to be seeded;
goodbye to the spring smells, the summer heat,
the autumn colours and the winter cold,
played out year after year
behind the sweat and tears, the fear and anger;
goodbye to the mud! God, you will not miss the mud:
caked to the cows' udders, the truck and tractor wheels, your boots,
and tracked into the house, the milk house, and every vehicle.
Decide what you must take away: precious pictures of each child, each grade;
the small box of treasures made for you;
Mother's Day cards, birthday letters, Dad's obituary.
Take the cedar chest your dad made,
the "Wear-Ever" pots your grandmother gave when she no longer cooked,
your sewing machine.

Pack carefully, and put the lid tightly on the memories that could keep you here:
the skating rink below the hill, levelled with the tractor blade
and flooded with the hose from the milk house,
echoing with the shouts of kids skating and perfecting their hockey skills;
the flowerbed in the front yard, ringed with railroad ties,
filled one Mother's Day with a tractor bucket full of rich soil
from the dirt pile in the barnyard;
the familiar black and white bodies of the Holsteins
lined up along the feeder in the pasture, contentedly eating silage,
tails swishing away the flies in some unheard rhythm.

Explain to your kids—now, young adults—why you feel you must go.
Try not to be astonished when they ask why it took so long to leave.
Hug them, hard.

by Dolores Brent
Edmonton, Alberta

HONOURABLE MENTION

\$4.99 on a Sunday

My depression comes like breaths,
You don't even realize its presence.
It comes in waves at a time,
Like a washed-away shoreline,
Pebbles of used-to-be boulders scattered over abandoned seaweed;
"Get back! The tide's coming in!"
My father squeezed my hand for the last time on his deathbed—
Or, at least, I imagine he did.
On Sundays like these, my dad made fish sticks;
No, not your supermarket box fish stick.
I mean the real fish sticks, with crispy bones and scales.
My dad left eyes in and everything:
Flour-battered, oil-popping.
Little girls don't write down recipes fathers will always be there to make,
So I never bothered to take note of just how much flour he mixed in to reach that golden beauty,
How he would lay fish beside fish, heat hot enough to get that perfect crisp.
I didn't bother to squeeze his hand when I burnt myself trying to see just how hot
Oil on fish sticks could get.
On Sundays like these, my dad wouldn't be taking his last breath
Or squeezing my hand for the last time—
Or, at least, I think so;
Or, at least, I wish so.
We'd be in a familiar kitchen,
Frying googly eyed fish in popping oil,
Squeezing little girl hands,
Kissing little girl fingertips,
Washing away pain like a tide to a shoreline,
"Get back! The tide's coming in?"
Breaking boulders into pebbles
That scamper across seaweed that leaves the ocean behind.
My depression comes like aisles,
In supermarkets with stick fishes in frozen boxes,
For \$4.99 on a Sunday.

by Tasia Scott
Ajax, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

Long Distance

you remain a stern photograph
flat fading unflappable
gathering our small upheavals
into benign barriers
your walls of righteousness

you are so careful rarely allowing
the felonies of fierce determination
to break the flower of your face

I still surrender to your voice
reflections in the distance
of your absence and I hold
this small talisman—a paper printed
substitute for flesh—
a shadow of the haunting memories
of pearls and warmth within
the fabric of our awkwardness

now we seem as ghosts
speaking insubstantialities
shedding the secrets of togetherness
echoed passages where words
alone can never be enough

I cannot dissect the meaning in your voice
loosely held cradled by my ear
so many hesitations even though
this lonely distance seems abridged

extensions of time refolded history
where now I only hold this photograph
of our lost and separating lives

I can only whisper what I wish
come home
and help me make this fading image
return to fullness flesh and blood

by Hans Devos
Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

dove

A white dove
flew out of the speeding car window,
its beak on fire.

My eyes lied.
It was your mindless hand, ditching your
cigarette. And just

like that!
You set the silvery, drought-stressed sage
and sprawling cypress hills

ablaze.
A biblical roar of hell flame erupts. Rainy
palls of soot

force our flight.
Bird throngs seethe blindly; moths immolate;
and a high-hoofed panic

of fleeing deer
have no fear of me, dazed in the night,
half dressed, slippers

worn through, tipped
from my nest with few possessions,
spitting ash of olive branch

from my misocapnic lips,
not a living thing left on my mountain's
acid, smoking breast.

by kerry rawlinson
Peachland, British Columbia

HONOURABLE MENTION

What Love Is: A Poem in Three Parts

Part One

It's two-thirty in the morning and once again
I'm in the bathtub
trying to relax,
trying to heat myself up
so that I may fall back to sleep,
when I suddenly realize
how thirsty I am.
I just can't bring myself to leave
my now perfectly warmed
rose-scented bath.

Part Two

This is the moment where I wish
I had a partner to whom
I could whisper softly
through the open door so
as not to disturb our neighbours,
“Darling, Darling, wake up! Can you
please bring me a tall glass of cool water
along with those juicy-looking figs
that we bought this evening
from St. Lawrence Market?”

Part Three

Love is a verb.
Love is not kissing your wife's picture
while extolling her virtues.
Love is getting out of your comfortable,
cozy bed at two-thirty in the morning because
you hear Love's voice in the guise of your wife,
breaking through your slumber,
imploping you to please bring a tall icy glass
of water with some figs to the bathroom
for your beloved.

by Katharine Love

Toronto, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

The Trout

A lone trout inhabits our pond,
curious about the crayfish,
the rotting leaves by the stone steps.

I approach: a flick of the tail,
and it plunges effortlessly
into the unfathomable
depths of the watery black hole.

Back in the house, as I listen
to Franz Schubert's sublime quintet,
I wonder: *Did the fish arrive
by divine magic, as some believe,
the wave of a wand, a god's hand,
the virgin birth of creation—*

*or drop, a stray fertilized egg
from the palmate of a mallard,
the sheer necessity of chance,
the mere chance of necessity?*

The next year, my trout is not there.

by Geza Tatrallyay
Toronto, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

Alone on the Internet

I turned off social media because
I don't want to watch the
end of time,
its endless feeds
that hunger for
gullible eyes.

I turned off
TV because it watches me thinking
myself into
catatonic states,
complacent to the lullabies
newsmakers opine.

I turned off the
radio because it's all tell with jack
to show for its
efforts,
a Wild West of its own opportunists.

I turned off
the cruelty and
picked up a
pen,
sought refuel against high-
pressure lows and old loves whom I know
would rescind our
earliest
acquaintance.

I haven't the
faintest idea where they have been since
then,

so I write to
my darlings instead,
only to end up
alone on the
Internet,

as the former
and latter merge.

So, I turned
off my heart because all that I heard
was static,
burying itself in
a garden of silent majorities.

by Nicholas Gagnier
Ottawa, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

Delilah

I bound you tight with bowstrings, and you did not learn,
You stupid beast man, that I didn't love you, but
I loved the silver coins that shone in moonlight so.
You never shone like silver, hero, not to me.

I bound you with new ropes, and in the morning light,
You burst them, laughing, and you smiled up at me—glad.
I hate a childish man. You are no use to me,
All flexing muscles, grinning blandly in the sun.

I wove your hair in ugly braids; you shrugged and laughed
And shook them out in front of me, so easy. Fool.
For whispers, sweat, and bed sheets later, it was cut,
And there you lay, lamb-soft, all ready to be sold.

They burned your eyes, but you were always blind;
So quickly lost to woman, whispers, wine.

by Katherine Palakovic
Hamilton, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

Prison Wine

The wine is locked up in the cantina in the basement,
Where I used to run from thick black crickets,
Where I fell in the dark water around the sump pump,
Where end-of-the-world rations

(Cookies, crackers, soups, band-aids, sponges,
Tomatoes we used to jar ourselves)
Sit in freedom or boredom—does it matter?
The wine is what she wants.

She loves wine, and why wouldn't she?
Its bitter, gum-parching dryness
Coats her palate kept quiet for years,
Each day a testament to her devotion.

As Jesus turned water to wine,
Drank till his heart burst and resurrected,
He never shared with her; though, she was a good disciple.
She sees his body on the surface of the dishwasher.

I asked her if she would drink it all at once,
If the wine were unlocked and she could take it.
She tucked her gnarled hands into her elbow bends.
“Oh no,” she said with assurance. “Oh no.

“What's the point of drinking it all at once?”
Things last because she knows how to make them:
The marriage, the sewing, the knitting,
All the different kinds of needles.

She's eighty-nine now, dementia eating her brain,
And they still lock the wine in the cantina,
With the end-of-the-world items: the old rubber boots,
Her dead husband's tools and bike.

by Vanessa Shields
Windsor, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

Dad

Living in a world somewhere
Between here and tomorrow,
He is ageless,
Trapped in a ninety-year-old's body.

Mom, his loving wife of sixty-one years has passed on,
Three years ago now,
But she and the family and most of his friends, too,
Are memories he speaks of in the present tense.

His "boys" come to visit when they can
At the "home," a sterile world
With a room, a closet, a wheelchair, a bed,
And a bedside table with mementos and family pictures
Of a vibrant life,

When the world was full of possibilities
And plans
And the people he loved.

Now, he sees and hears
Them in his mind,
As if they are with him still.

And, he is happy,
As he busies himself for another day,
With the chores of a life well lived.

Forever in motion, he's
Now searching for Mom,
The love of his life,
And waiting for God
To take him Home.

by Robert Palo
Ottawa, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

Bodies at Sea

This story is one of many
repeated throughout the centuries
about the bodies at sea.

Some leave their loved ones to find a new life.
Many bodies at sea.
We wave goodbye to no-one as we leave the empty shore.
My brother and I at sea.
Hand in hand, we help hide each other's fear.
He's here with me.
We're all touching and sweating and crammed.
Warm bodies at sea.
His musk . . . an overripe orange with garlic, like Father's.
He's here with me.
Whirlpools and lightning storms adorn the turbulent waters.
Warm bodies at sea.
Breath like sour apples always cloaked in smoke.
Was it like Mom's?
We're hungry and touching and sweating and crammed.
Warm bodies at sea.
His scrawny arm hides stories and wraps around my shoulder.
He's here with me.
Blistering bodies. Piss and shit on our legs. Too nauseated and frightened to care.
Cold bodies at sea.
Ammonia wafts from his pores. Acid on his breath. His head rests on my shoulder.
He's here with me.
The shoreline is seen from a distance; our future isn't far away.
Cold bodies at sea.
They're rotting black and blue—and tossed overboard.
Forgotten at sea.
His tangy musk. His decayed smell. His fruity breath. His final breath.
Only remembered by me.

This story is one of many
repeated throughout the centuries.
So please remember to welcome
the bodies at sea.

by Nolan Janssens
Vancouver, British Columbia