

FIRST PRIZE

Slowly

I sit across from you at a small wooden table, calmly sipping at my coffee.
I look through you, and you look through your phone.

If this had been fifty years ago,
You would be buzzing away about
How much you loved feeling the ocean kiss every inch of your skin
As it engulfed the last traces of day;
How beautiful you thought daisies looked
When the sun tickled at their petals;
How much you enjoyed our mornings at the coffee shop,
Tranquil and nonchalant.

You would complain about
The small strand of hair that kept escaping after being tucked behind your ears,
Hundreds of times—over and over;
The broken grandfather clock,
Which shrieked without warning,
Making you jump and almost spill your coffee;
Missing the bus
And having to run after it for five blocks.

You would tell me about the books you were reading
And how upset you were when they ended.

You would hum to me the melody
Fluttering in your head since last night.

You would talk of your big dreams and small plans.
You would smile and gently touch your hand to mine.
We would sit at this small table and confess everything and nothing to each other.

Yet, this is now.
I sip at my coffee, and you look through your phone.

by Vlada Kozachok
Vancouver, British Columbia

SECOND PRIZE

The Vanishing Point

Train tracks bisect this town
Rail intersects sticky black asphalt
Insects bite warm flesh
No red lights flash
No warning bells sound
Arms remain uncrossed
Still
I look both ways
 southeast to where the white moon rises in the humid silvery-blue summer sky
 northwest to the setting sun that makes cool steel reflect fiery tones
 remembering a previous molten state

I gaze out to where the Earth curves
Away from me
Searching
For the vanishing point

 somewhere
 out there
 it all comes together

I ache to pivot at this crossing
Make a hard left
Turn, keep walking, keep moving, keep going

We used to flatten pennies on these tracks
 one cent has no value
 the penny, with its warm copper glow, has vanished

Flattened mosquito spills my wandering blood
I would not flatten like a penny but ooze out onto the road and rails
Arms at odd angles like the wings of this mosquito
Whose journey I have ended abruptly

They lit controlled burns along these tracks back then
 reduced the potential of sun-bleached grasses to fuel wildfires
 prevented wind-fanned flames started by a single spark, wheel striking rail

 I could control burn my feet
 singe my wanderlust
 prevent spontaneous ignition

I have been out there
Past where the Earth curves
Away from me

Nothing holds me here

by Cheryl Ann Harmsworth
Wadena, Saskatchewan

THIRD PRIZE

The City inside You

There is a city inside you
and I will learn to navigate
every street and back alley
and secret shortcut.

I will learn to read you
like an illustrated map,
memorizing every attraction
and noteworthy stop.

I will know you better
than you want me to
and I will turn your city
into my home.

by Robyn Petrik
Maple Ridge, British Columbia

HONOURABLE MENTION

Viral Malady

bloated
from this self-inflicted affliction
the addiction
of injecting pixelated interpretations
smeared with glossy topcoats
of realism
into the calcifying arteries
of consciousness

the viral
liable contagion
scrolls covert infirmaries
of withered self identities
leaving each host
for something more current and attractive
the infection of popular belief

this self-inflicted affliction
of social-media-induced heartburn
from ingesting sugar-coated diets
high in processed images
supplemented with one-sided ideologies
and myopic objectivity
stings
while unconsciously mutating
from perspective malnutrition
and fragmented intuition
until gut feelings
no longer contain the enzymes
to digest
either beauty
or reality
in its genuine and complex form

by Miwa Hiroe
Valemount, British Columbia

HONOURABLE MENTION

Grow Up

Opportunities scream from the
mouth of responsibility,
the shadow that has found
its home on my shoulders.

He licks his fingers
made of clock hands,
to put out the burning
flame of my youth.

He swings his immortality
in front of me,
like the pendulum in
my grandfather clock.

He hears my young
bones growing infirm,
when I squander my
time as I desire.

He turns forward
my clocks in the night,
while I dream of
jump-rope and hopscotch.

He cackles at my
yearning for childhood,
to feel its wholeness once more
before adulthood drains me.

He whispers to the world
to make me forget the smell
of garden soil and honey,
the smell of my adolescence.

He knows I ache for the
timeless idea of youth,
for it is he who makes me
so afraid to grow up.

by Anne Beingessner
Calgary, Alberta

HONOURABLE MENTION

Element

And then I heard it, whistling in water
Soaked from the ink that scribed the first charter
Sealed with the wax in the crate in the basement
In a state of surreal through cardboard and pavement
Hands stained black from the can that we sprayed with
Billows of smoke in the booth from the shameless
Pillows get soaked from the eyes of the nameless
Watering dreams as they long to be famous

Fate came with fine print and paper-thin margins
Enacted by pawns and unscrupulous sergeants
Resources spent on the peasants and varmints
Sharpening blades of the swords they do harm with
Shields made of glass reveal chests that are heartless
Shards in the yard from the arms that lunge farthest
Dead in the grass, red in the darkness
Winds blow the leaves from the trees when the bark splits

Desolate fields harvest ashes and rust
Credulous meals for the masses who lust
Petulance steals from chastity's bust
Decadent heels, immaculate husks

Back in the booth where words become verses
Stories are told from dire first-persons
Cheques are left blank, the snake has no head
The ink tells the tales of the poet instead.

by James Di Fiore
Killaloe, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

To Grandma

When I was sixteen, you told me
the story of your mother
crossing the Atlantic Ocean
destined for Canada
and celebrating her sweet sixteen
on the deck of the ship.

I was struck with awe
imagining the journey
that my great-grandmother took,
wondering how a story like this
was one I'd never been told.

Vintage pearl necklaces
lay in dusty jewellery boxes,
1950s skirts and blouses
fill abandoned bedroom closets,
Grandpa's old Mustang
rots in the garage.

Your home is a treasure trove
filled with family heirlooms
that I've never held
and stories I've never been told
as I watch your hourglass sand
trickling down.

I want to know how you
fell in love with my grandfather,
how you felt on your wedding day,
and how every time life
knocked you down
you still kept standing.

I feel time racing away from us.
So, tell me about your prized belongings
and the purposes they served.
Tell me everything I need to know.
Tell me all the stories of your life
before I lose the chance to know them.

by Angelica Lachance
Windsor, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

| Or |

I will forgive you during a Scrabble game | or |
when I'm reading a breathtaking line in a novel | or |
when I'm sucking on a cigarette I'm smoking on the front porch | or |
when I'm sobbing into her open coffin | or |
when I'm alone in the house that's on its final crumble | and |
I feel the emptiness of her gone spirit

I'm sorry I got so damn angry | or |
why couldn't you let me help you?

I'm sorry I blamed you | or |
why didn't you hear my love?

I'm sorry I stopped playing Scrabble | or |
what happened to the woman who taught me
how to love words?

One day | maybe |
I'll be able to say I'm sorry

| Or |

I'll bring out the
battered Scrabble game
with the dictionary from 1982
I'll put it on the kitchen table | and |
we'll play

in utter silence

by Vanessa Shields
Windsor, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

How to Heal

Remember.
Remember who, remember where, remember why.
Remember how.
Remember how it felt,
How you felt,
How the light fell,
How it all felt just right
For a time.

Remember the sunrise.
Remember early morning stillness and starry nights and the first buds that appear on the trees in spring. Remember long walks and life chats, forest bathing, and gentle ocean waves. Remember how good hot chocolate tastes on a cold day, how food is almost always better consumed in good company.

Remember their eyes.
Remember the words,
The fumbles,
The missteps, and the sometimes broken hearts. Remember the broken heart.
Hearts broken never heal
To form the same structure
They held prior to impact.
Words have impact.
Remember the words,
The words you thought would break you,
How words can touch
And words can take away,
How an absence of words
Can be just as powerful as anything
We have to say.

Remember to forgive.
Remember to let go.
Remember where you've come from.
Remember freedom,
Remember home.

Remember love.

Remember love.
Remember so you can close this chapter
And move on to writing the next one.

by Maia Thomlinson
Winnipeg, Manitoba

HONOURABLE MENTION

The Forest

The forest is surrounded
by a tall, glass wall.
Its pristine wall sparkles
invisibly.
They see the trees clearly
from the side they're on.
They don't see what lies
just in front of the life
behind the glass wall.
The barbed-wire fence
keeps them from passing
into the forest,
true freedom untouchable.
Some of us were born
just outside the forest
between barbed wire
and the spotless glass wall.
Unable to climb the fence,
we cannot acquire
the freedom our souls demand.
Unable to shatter glass,
we cannot join them
and see what they see.
Between barbed wire
and the glass wall,
they look at us
with curiosity.
They look at us,
not understanding.
They develop their theories,
hypothesize,
but never run the test.
They will never realize
how trapped some of us are
living our lives,
never completely out of the woods,
never completely in them.
They will never realize
how a limbo life exhausts,
how a limbo life stresses.
At most, they will see
we are witches at the edge,
connecting with here,
connecting with there,
connecting
but living disconnected.

by Danielle Wong
Pierrefonds, Québec

HONOURABLE MENTION

Glass and Oak

A creative exploration of living with an anxiety disorder.

I sometimes feel as though I am made of glass,
And I wonder what might happen if I were to
Shatter, break, burst, split, or crack.
And what if the pieces of me become
Sharp, edgy, jagged, and broken?
The unease is in believing that there are too many parts
To put back together.
I ask myself, “Why am I always in fear of being in fear?”
I used to be made of oak—
Strong, sturdy, tall, and able.
But then, the breeze in the forest changed,
A storm that only I could see.
The threat felt real, and I became convinced
That my roots were going to rot.

When the panic sets in, I feel each cell in my body vibrating.
My intake of oxygen becomes shallow and rushed.
My centre, which holds my heart,
Feels as if it is trying to pound its way out of me.
A knot of fear erupts from inside of me.
My gut squirms and tightens.
I am looking for an escape.
Muscles weaken and vision blurs.
Rationality doesn’t just go out the window,
It crashes with a weighty force.

All that is clear is that I am afraid—
Unnerved, disquieted, panicked.
Before I knew it was coming,
I was glass—a vase, a window, a crystal ball on the edge.
I am told that I am safe,
That the only enemy I am fighting is myself.
I am told to calm down, to just breathe,
To get over it, to man up.
How do you show others the storm you live in?

I live in a snow globe,
In a constant state of waiting for the next moment that my world gets shaken:
Isolation, anger, frustration, and desperation.
Constantly living in a state of survival:
Alertness, fight, and flight;
Tracing my steps, wondering how it is that I got here—
And wondering how it is that I get back.

I am told that breathing is your body’s way of telling you that you are okay,
That with each inhale, your cells refresh,
Your nervous system calms,
And for the moment that feels okay.

You have to learn that even if you do fall—
And there *are* too many pieces—that you still have the forest.
And the trees will ground you, pick you up, and plant you . . .
Until you grow again.

by Connor MacPherson
Huntsville, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

Torch Song

We're still in the grip of winter, for sure.
Snow on my patio I must endure
And a big patch of ice that won't loosen its grip;
It seems to enjoy watching me slip.

What can I do to loosen this blotch,
So I don't have to just sit, wait, and watch
Till Mother Nature responds to my furious bidding?
I can't stand this doggone tripping and skidding.

I've longed all winter to get out the fuel
To char a big steak. Oh, I'm starting to drool
At the thought of firing up my beloved "Q"
And cooking my meat to a medium hue.

I just need something to get rid of that ice—
Nothing fancy, just a clever device.
Somewhere in my memory, I seem to recall
A tool that I used way back in the fall.

Oh yes, a device that will produce a huge flame:
Tiger Torch it's called and quite aptly named.
It's a wee bit scary, but it works like a charm.
My neighbour used one to burn down his old barn.

It's a long stick with a hose and fuelled by propane;
A quick light with a match, and it shoots a huge flame.
It needs to be aimed in just the right way
Or that much-loved deck chair may just melt away.

A domestic flame thrower is a good description;
Now, before this causes a huge connoption,
T-Torch has its place in backyard events,
Despite seeming to make little sense.

Burn garbage, torch weeds, thaw pipes, melt snow;
If your cup is metal, you can heat up your Joe.
Held the safe way, it works like a charm,
But if it slips a bit, you'll thin the hair on your arm.

But don't call the user while he's hard at his task,
'Cause swinging around can render a blast
That can take out a shed or wither a tree
Or melt a screen door, causing family to flee.

But my, oh my, does that torch ever smelt
Ice pack that simply refuses to melt.
My patio is now as dry as a bone,
Thanks to the blistering flames that were thrown.

As I survey my yard while I cook up my treat,
Tiger Torch is a gem that I will handily keep.
If I had a huge tank with enough propane fuel,
In short order I'd have my own swimming pool.

by Barbie-Jo Smith
Calgary, Alberta

HONOURABLE MENTION

Weightless

Early one crisp, clear, cold December morn,
You, my precious, sweet daughter were born.
Gazing lovingly into your sweet blue eyes,
I inadvertently told you one of the biggest lies.
I told you that I would keep you safe,
Shelter you from evil and hate.
I whispered to you that your friends would be kind,
That everyone would love your heart, soul, and mind.
I filled you with stories of friendship and laughter,
I explained it was kindness, not looks that would someday matter.
What I didn't know . . . you would be teased for your weight
Or that children were capable of such intentional hate.
I didn't know you would lose your self-worth,
That you would look in the mirror and only see girth.
I was stunned at the first fat joke about yourself that you told,
Or was I disgusted people thought these were comedy gold?
You laugh at yourself first, beat others to the joke,
Using your own humour as a shield, an invisible cloak.
Because when others joke first, their words cut so deep,
Their words make you feel ugly, all you can do is weep.
Is it funny to hear a girl run herself down?
Watch the soul of a sweet, innocent child suffocate and drown?
Does extra flesh make you so much less of a person?
The more pounds that you carry, your chances of happiness should worsen?
I hear the pain behind every joke that you tell,
I see the tears that you swallow and pretend you are well.
An offhand remark, a comment or two, has damning effects;
Self-loathing ensues, and my sweet girl's sadness projects.
Cruel words don't just strike at the person you taunt,
They affect the families, they really do haunt.
Please listen, sweet girl, really listen! Heed what I say,
There will be no more jokes at your own expense today.
For today, you will look through my eyes and see what I see.
Today, from your chains you will be set free.
You will understand your worth and slowly begin to shine,
Feel the value of your soul and incredibly smart mind.
You make us all smile with your quick wit and charm,
Careful to never inflict onto others intentional harm.
Remember, my child, you do not measure a person based on their mass,
You measure them by each ounce of their kindness, courtesy, and class.
Pounds cannot measure your kind soul's greatness.
Always remember, sweet girl, true beauty is weightless.

by Sandy Totten

Belnan, Nova Scotia