

FIRST PRIZE

Verisimilitude

"I hate ye: I feel my heart new open 'd."—William Shakespeare, Henry VIII

Black. You decided to wear black after all. Not because of any sense of respect. No! Because of the pleasure it gave you. You're finally doing what you want. Doing what you want for the first time in your wretched life. Doing what you want as you plant the last of your demons—demons that tortured you all your existence from birth. Tortured your body, tortured your mind—day after day.

You're driving the ancient Hudson Hornet—his Hudson Hornet. Damn thing is sixty years old—vintage. Never let you drive it when he was alive. Skinflint! Miser! You drive it to the graveyard, his final place of restless nightmares. Going to plant the old sinner. Going to plant him deep. So deep he will never get out. Plant him on top of your mother. Planted her last year. Planted them all: uncles, aunts, grandparents, and finally parents—the last of them—all gone.

Freezing cold day. Did he have to die in January? Never had any consideration for you. As usual—consistent with his rotten life—died to spite you. Get me this. Get me that. Not your fault you mixed up the sinner's medications. You were confused. He went into convulsions. Not your fault you took time to look up the number for the doctor. Police were suspicious. They told you about 9-1-1. How were you to know? But left you alone—alone to think about your future. Same thing happened with her, your mother. Didn't know about 9-1-1 then either. Short memory.

Clods of cement-hard earth rain down on the cardboard casket. You spared no expense. You lean over his grave. Wonder if the minister will ever finish the service. Goes on and on. Clowns gather round the casket.

Didn't he look nice against the satin?

Fools! Sinner died from the anger that burned inside him. Of course he looked nice. He's dead!

You're freezing.

Will the minister ever finish the service?

Clowns! Tell her to hurry up.

Stupid cow, end it! He's not getting any deader.

Service nearly finished; sinner is headed for his recompense in Hell.

You pluck a red carnation from the bouquet sent from the church. Both were religious hypocrites—holy on Sunday—demons to their daughter the rest of the week. Made a martyr of you. Made you strong—strong as surgical steel.

When they each got ill from Alzheimer's disease you cared for them like a good daughter should—a good daughter, year after bloody year. Never any gratitude received. Never did you get one word of kindness.

Finally! She finishes the service. You pick up a big clod of earth and throw it with relish onto his casket. For good measure you throw another and then another. Careful! Clowns are looking at you. Minister has a funny look on her ugly face.

Goodbye!

Drive the Hudson Hornet back through country roads to the ramshackle cottage on the edge of the lake. Quiet! You can hear the whistle of the loon. Loon—your friend all these years. His whistle at night soothed your rage.

You enter the shabby place. This is home? You look around and see the detritus of your wasted life. Dirty dust-laden floors are covered in ratty, threadbare carpets. Decrepit furniture is falling apart. Walls are stained and dirty—stained and dirty from cigarette smoke and greasy dinners. You limp into the cluttered parlour clenching the red carnation. Burnt kernels of "No-Name Extra-Butter Popcorn" litter the floor—here, there. Popcorn bowl turned upside down like a turtle, a hill—an obscene mound added to the disorder. Drag yourself into the kitchen. Soiled dishes everywhere. You find a grimy glass. Fill it with water for the flower.

Only pretty thing here. Was pretty once.

You open the fridge, pull out a Coors Light and crack it open. His beer! Never let you touch it. You savour the smooth silk of the ale as it slides down.

Good!

Freedom! You are free. They're all dead—grandparents, parents, aunts and uncles. You no longer have to devote your life to looking after elderly and ailing family. You can live, travel, party, and enjoy the rest of your life.

World, look out! Here I come.

Arthritis is acting up again. You hobble into the bathroom and gaze into the mirror.

Who is that person? You wonder.

Who is that ancient hag staring at you from inside the mirror?

by John Corvese (73 years)

Burlington, Ontario



SECOND PRIZE

Selfish Love

I shut the car engine off and replayed the last conversation with my wife in my mind, swallowing the taste of bile. She thought me generous and caring, but I knew the motivation behind my decision; admittedly even I had to twist the logic, but the root was still selfish. Heaving a sigh, I stepped from my car and walked up the driveway to knock on the door.

Perhaps the only person I truly ever despised opened it. Not that I hated Patrick for himself. Charming, good-looking, and kind, he was hard to hate, but I had my reasons.

A smile bloomed on his face. "Danny! It's good to see you. Where's Sharon?"

I forced a weak smile. "At home. . . . This late in the pregnancy she likes to keep her feet elevated."

He nodded quickly. "Come in. Megs will be excited to see you."

I nodded and stepped into the house, slipping off my shoes before following Patrick into the kitchen.

"Danny!" Megs exclaimed. As always, my heart lurched at the sight of her before I smiled. In moments her arms—normally toned with muscle, now thin—wrapped me in a hug. I returned the embrace. It was over too soon and I forced myself to let her go as she asked, "How are you? How is Sharon?"

"Good, everyone is good," I replied, taking a seat.

Patrick joined me, making small talk while Meghan readied a kettle of tea.

As soon as she sat, I let our conversation drop and fixed her with my gaze. "I heard you are taking dialysis treatments."

Megs nodded, her blue eyes studying the table as she picked at a placemat. I noticed the shadows under her eyes and the hollowness to her cheeks.

"One kidney has stopped working completely," Patrick explained while I kept my eyes on her. "The doctor says the other is only at five percent and that's dropping quickly."

"Do you have a donor?" I asked her.

"Her blood type. . . ," began Patrick.

"Is AB negative . . . extremely rare."

Both looked at me with wide eyes until Megs grinned. "Your memory always amazes me."

I ignored the comment and studied her eyes that despite looming death still sparkled with life. "I am AB negative also . . . and to the best of my knowledge I have two working kidneys."

Intakes of breath until Patrick exclaimed, "Thank god!"

"Thank Dan," corrected Meghan, her eyes never leaving mine as Patrick shifted in his chair.

"Yes, Dan, this is so incredible . . . so wonderful."

"Patrick, could Dan and I be alone for a bit?" Meghan asked.

"Yes, of course." He surged to his feet, oblivious to our locked gazes, quickly placing a kiss on her cheek before sweeping out the back door.

Once he was gone, she cocked her head. "Why are you doing this, Dan?"

"Because you need a kidney."

"No, why are you really doing this?"

"You know why."

"I can't take one of your kidneys."

A part of me wanted to be angry; instead I snorted. "Don't be absurd, of course you can."

"You haven't let me go, have you?"

I closed my eyes a moment. "I have never stopped loving you."

"Then I can't take one of your kidneys."

"Megs, . . . I also love Sharon. If you both needed a kidney, I would give one to each."

She blinked as a tear trickled down her cheek. I reached across the table and wiped it with my thumb as she asked, "Why?"

“You need a working kidney.”

“Why have you always loved me?” she whispered.

“Because—” I shrugged, not having the strength to explain it. Instead, I said, “In a way it’s selfish. I am proving my love . . . my worth to you, which I suppose is the root of my generosity.”

Her eyes narrowed before she shook her head. “Cut yourself some slack, Dan. You don’t need to prove your love to me.”

The unasked question hung between us, *Why don’t you love me?* But even after all these years, I refused to ask it, because I knew she didn’t know. It just was the way it was.

I stood. “Have your doctor contact me. I would like the surgery over before the baby arrives.”

She nodded, tears leaking between rapid blinks. She stood and rounded the table, grasping me in a hug before planting a wet kiss on my cheek. “You’re a good person, Dan. You’ve always been a great friend.”

I swallowed the emotion choking me. “You’ve always deserved it.”

by Chad Weiss

Maple Creek, Saskatchewan



THIRD PRIZE

Ice Chips

On my sixtieth birthday I was introduced to a world of privileges. No-fee banking, movie discounts and, in my town, reserved skating for seniors. So, I attended the local arena, eager to join my fellow Zoomers who marched, or rather glided, against time. Instead, I found myself lacing up amongst a group of aging pensioners who identified more with Frank Sinatra than Led Zeppelin.

However, I admit to being impressed by the skating ability of those golden-agers. At first, a few left me in their icy wake as they sailed by. Of course, that was to be expected, it having been thirty years since I last strapped on the blades.

But, as the weeks went by, I felt my old hockey legs returning. By mid season, I was easily the best skater on the ice. And the most aggressive. My fellow retirees were content to enjoy a relaxing spin around the rink, chatting with their friends. Not me. I treated each session as a workout that demanded burning legs and a sweaty brow. I was definitely the cock of the walk.

And then the “other guy” showed up. He was a few years older than me, late sixties I’d say. But, oh, he could skate. Silver hair flowing as he glided effortlessly around the rink, he reminded me of an aging Guy Lafleur.

The other guy became my nemesis. I watched with grudging admiration as he coasted gracefully around the ice surface and then, with a few quick strides, switched gears to accelerate from blue line to blue line.

He skated with ear phones draped over his head, no doubt driven by the beat of a rock tune he had downloaded from the internet, while the rest of us followed the rhythm of *The Skater’s Waltz* crackling over the arena’s PA system.

I was particularly annoyed he didn’t seem to notice me.

Then, one afternoon, I sensed his presence behind me as I circled the north end of the rink. I could hear his blades cutting the ice as he matched me, stride for stride, up the length of the ice surface. Then, as I began to round the turn at the opposite end, he exploded and flew by me in a heartbeat.

Aha, he’s testing me.

I reacted instantly and was immediately on his tail. He increased the pace, but I stuck to him. Rounding the far turn, I cut inside, and leaning sharply to my left, I pulled ahead of him.

Eat my ice chips.

The race was clearly on, although we had not exchanged a single word or glance. I could hear him breathing heavily as the effort took its toll. My brow began to perspire. The sweat rolled off my nose.

We skated side by side, weaving in and out of the elderly skaters. They soon realized two lunatics were engaged in a speed-skating competition and, out of fear for their safety, drifted to the centre of the ice and watched in silent amazement.

We had the ice to ourselves. What had started as a private struggle was now a spectacle to be witnessed by a handful of disapproving antediluvians.

As we whizzed up one side of the rink, I heard the Zamboni roar to life, signalling our ice time was about to expire. That’s when my adversary turned to me with a gunslinger’s glare and snarled, “Next lap wins it.” He took off.

I leaned forward and dug in, ignoring the protests from my burning quadriceps. The other guy showed no signs of slowing, but I stayed in his slipstream, my eyes riveted to the back of his North Face jacket.

I imagined we were attached by a rope I reeled in with every stride. By the time we rounded the final corner and headed for the finish line at the opposite end, I had caught him.

We raced up the ice, shoulder to shoulder, totally spent, neither of us giving any quarter. Then, with twenty feet to go, our skates locked together and we were thrown forward, crashing

to the ice in a tangle of flailing arms, legs, and steel. I heard the crack of his neck as we slammed into the boards.

I lay on my back, scanning for broken bones. My breath formed an icy shroud above me. The other guy was prostrate, his head at an unnatural angle. Blood trickled from one nostril.

I looked into his lifeless eyes and whispered, "I win."

by David McLeod

Peterborough, Ontario



HONOURABLE MENTION

The New System

Dr. Williams placed her clipboard on the counter of her office and hung up her white coat. Flipping off the lights, she walked into the lobby of the clinic.

“Good night, Annika,” she called to the woman behind the desk.

“Night, Destiny. Don’t forget your patient scanner.”

Smiling, Dr. Williams handed the digital clip with her title on it—Dr. Destiny Williams, Beauty Specialist—over to the secretary. “Thanks. See you tomorrow.”

Dr. Williams took her parka out of the staff closet, slipped into her boots, and walked out into the brisk evening. Passing several of her colleagues getting into their hydro-cars, she strolled onto the sidewalk and began walking towards the bright LED lights of downtown.

Dr. Williams was thirty-two years old. She had graduated top of her university class four years earlier, Class of 2271, and had immediately been welcomed into the Stanley Clinic.

Beep. A message came in on her phone. She pressed the area covering the chip embedded under her skin, and the message played through the microscopic speaker implanted in her ear: “Hi, honey, just letting you know I’m taking you out tonight for our fifth anniversary, and it’s formal. Love you lots.” *Beep.* Dr. Williams smiled and pressed her phone again to turn it off.

Thinking of the upcoming dinner, Dr. Williams paid little attention to her surroundings. Overhead, she did not notice the *magnettrain* losing control. A technical failure. Nor did she realize it had begun to tip. Destiny Williams only looked up when the shadow of the enormous metal transport blocked out the sun. She didn’t even have time to scream.

“This is no good! Why is the magnettrain failing?” the scientist exclaims. He is hunched next to a computer, reading pages of data rolling down the screen. Next to him is the DNA specialist in charge of developing the genes for babies who will become civil servants.

“I’m not sure. We haven’t viewed the conductor’s or engineer’s files yet. Neither is due to be born for another six months,” says the specialist.

“We can’t afford to have so many casualties. It would cause people to question the New System again. Remember when that food warehouse was broken into a few months ago? That joker could have gotten the food at any time, and he knew that—he just wanted fame. People panicked that a war was coming. Some even suggested bringing back currency—all because of a baby overlooked before birth, then missed again when it was born. We can’t afford mistakes.”

“I’ll tell my monitors to take extra care with anyone who will have anything to do with the magnettrain. You’re right, of course; when everyone is used to such perfection, even the slightest mishap can sway opinion. Anyway, what about this baby, Destiny Williams? What is its due date?”

“It is going to be born on January 23, 2219. The genes we entered into the computer for this future were—” The specialist checks his clipboard. “—G7-4457 and H153.”

“It seems to be an excellent addition to society so far. What will happen if the magnettrain functions properly?”

The specialist types a few sentences into the computer. It instantly calculates a million new possibilities, for everyone who will be affected in some way by Destiny Williams. The entire predestination of the planet changes, beginning at the point in time when the magnettrain had malfunctioned in the previous calculated future. The two men then analyze the fresh data resulting from Destiny William’s tweaked DNA.

“The rest of its life seems average. It has two daughters, stays with its husband, *etcetera*, *etcetera*. . . . Hey, look here! She joins our team!”

“Really? Does she discover the program accidentally, or do we search her out?”

“We seek her out. These genes are a go, then?”

“Right. On the mother’s next prenatal visit, knock her out and inject them into the fetus. Make sure you don’t forget the cranium shock; last time a mother woke up without it, she

remembered everything and tried to go to the authorities. It was nearly impossible to keep the program a secret. And don't forget to fix this error with the conductor, or engineer, or wherever else the problem lies with the magnetrain. We don't want Destiny's potential to go to waste."

by Lynnéa Bartel Nickel
Edmonton, Alberta



HONOURABLE MENTION

Just an Old Soldier

World War II changed my husband. That is the truth. Even though I never knew him before the war, I know it changed him. How could it not? But, I am not at liberty to say how it altered the course of his life or manipulated him from adolescence to manhood. Probably because I can't pick out the definitive moment that transformed his personality and I suspect he can't either.

All I know is the war affected him deeply. I imagine it happened in layers. Many layers. One stratum indistinguishable from the next, like a sunburn that penetrates the skin—it doesn't matter that each layer is raw and sensitive or which one stings the most. The whole thing just pains you; aching you at the time, then leaving a permanent and damaging effect on you.

There are two types of veterans: ones who talk about the war and ones who don't. He was the former—a *talker*. But it was thin, surface talk. Superficial chatter meant to pass the time or perhaps a way to control the conversation. I'm only speculating.

Casually he spoke of young men, friends of circumstance, friends out of necessity who were killed in one way or another. No wavering in his voice. No detection of sadness. But, if you listened closely you could hear in his tone how he had surrendered long ago, as if to say, *Ahh . . . such is war.*

The dark, haunting issues are unavoidable, though, when you parade your past in casual conversation. People will just ask. Even innocent children will ask.

Karl had been asked to speak at the small public school three blocks from our house on Remembrance Day. The arrangements had been made by the Legion when the grade four teacher, Ms. Dwight, inquired about getting a "real life" WW II veteran to speak to her students.

Dressed in uniform and crested with his honours from a lifetime ago, he stood in front of the students, silent. I feared he would ramble as he did so often to me, our daughters, our friends, our church. But this was worse. Silence. It made him look tired and old. You know your spouse, you recognize mannerisms undetectable to the average eye. I once diagnosed his canker sore just from the way his tongue moved across the inside of his lower lip.

So when the students opened fire with "How many men have you killed?" I accepted the slight tightening of his jaw was meant to take that blow. Still silence. He opened his mouth, thought better of it, and closed it. Tightening once again. It pained me to see him crippled by a question he had skirted over for so many years. Unfortunately, avoidance or even braggadocio would not satisfy the needs of the children, their need for the truth.

They say after a question is posed groups of people become uncomfortable after only six seconds of silence. I will confirm that statistic. I shifted in my undersized chair, trying without success to meet Karl's eyes. His nose was prominent, almost too large for his face, while his chin jutted out proudly. Somehow, though his features were harsh and dominant, he was handsome in his uniform both in my memory and standing before me now.

He began, "None, but I came close. . . ." I know he kept talking even while his voice trailed off in my head, but I couldn't bear to hear his words.

For him, the war was everywhere, in everything. Something as simple as a chocolate bar would remind him of a towheaded boy from Holland. A roast would somehow make its way to a story of mutton prepared for him by a ruddy English woman. *Mutton*. That became our Sunday word. Sometimes during a long and convoluted story I was even bold enough to say, "Oh, would you just get off the war already?"

And don't even get me started on flies. If one got in the house it was like Poe's raven, an ominous reminder of lifeless friends. Sometimes it would be hours before he came back to me.

The children's applause untied me from my thoughts. It was clear Karl was relieved when the little pigtailed girl in the front thanked him on behalf of her class. He smiled and said bashfully, "Oh, I'm just an old soldier."

Right there, looking at him then, I knew with certainty the war changed him. But how exactly? I still can't say for sure.

by *Kate Hahn*
LaSalle, Ontario



HONOURABLE MENTION

Reflection

The final bell echoes in my ears as I'm swept into the current of students surging towards the large double doors that have kept us confined all day. The door is breached like a dam trying to hold back a flood and the impatient teens pour into the streets. We move as one body with a single-minded goal: get as far away as quickly as possible.

In minutes we disperse and I welcome the peace. The street isn't empty, of course, but it's considerably less packed than it is when the adults finish work. At the very least I am able to walk forward without constantly bumping shoulders with people—unlike at our school that was built for 500 but now has over 900 students. Of course, that is to be expected. Everything has been overpopulated since “The Flood.”

The Flood happened when I was just a baby so the details are fuzzy. Basically, people used to live recklessly, knowingly damaging the planet. Eventually, it was too fragile and things started to go wrong. Animals died, crops failed, droughts and floods hit, and diseases were rampant. There used to be ice at the top and the bottom of the world and that ice caused The Flood. As it melted, the sea levels began to rise and swallow coastlines. Many people fled, but there were stubborn ones who wouldn't budge and they disappeared with their homes.

When The Flood was over, nearly half the land was gone. There were too many people in too little space. It was a tough time but people didn't give up. That was when the Planetary Action Alliance was created. The Alliance worked to clean up the mess left by The Flood and our ancestors. Then they started the Regulations on food, income, electricity, and almost everything. All excess went to the Alliance, trying desperately to reverse the destruction. Everybody also contributed five dollars daily to the Alliance. To make room for refugees, most buildings were demolished, skyscrapers put in their place. Trees were planted wherever there was room, trying to replace oxygen tanks. We did as people have always done: adapted and moved on.

I slow my pace. My eyes trace the shining glass buildings reaching like fingers into the grey-brown sky. It gets so claustrophobic sometimes, living in shadows. I try to picture a blue sky, but it seems farfetched. I swerve to avoid a boy who passes with a glare, his eyes hollow. They remind me of another small boy from this morning who tried to sneak his sister past the guards so she wouldn't have to pay the Fee. He tried to explain they only had enough for one Fee or his sister couldn't eat, but the guard just took the money and beat the boy for his insolence.

The rules are very strictly enforced. It seems unfair, but it's necessary. All money collected goes to the Alliance who works to reverse global warming. So far most of their plans have failed miserably but they keep working. Today, they revealed a new project. We watched as giant mirrors were launched into space, hoping they will deflect the sun and stop further damage. Our optimism for their success has diminished though.

I'm nearly home when I can tell something is wrong. The air around me seems to be shimmering. I look up as thousands of pieces of glass fall from the sky. *The mirrors must have shattered on their way to space*, I realize. The pieces vary in size from specks to shards larger than my head. Buildings start to shatter as the larger pieces collide. I am rooted in place until a piece the size of my fingernail embeds itself in my arm.

I start to run and spot an ancient brick building. I race into the covered alley and collapse against the wall. I ineffectually try to dig glass from my flesh and instead look up to watch the mayhem in the streets. People are screaming and running, clutching family members and body parts, everything with a slight red tint. The initial mess from the mirrors is worsened by the now collapsing buildings. It seems only the few brick structures have been left intact.

I realize nobody else has discovered my little safe haven. I begin shouting and grateful people race past me out of the violent rain. Everything is commotion, but I stay, silent and motionless, watching as the world hopelessly falls to pieces again.

by Jessica Bortolotto
Tecumseh, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

Home Fires

Carol tried hard not to think of him. It hurt too much. She never thought loneliness could be so painful. It racked her entire body. The farm chores kept her busy. She promised him she would look after the farm in his absence. In a trance, she went through the day-to-day motions of feeding the kids, the livestock, and herself.

The children stopped asking where their daddy was and when he was coming home. There had been no letter for months. The neighbours helped when they could, but they had lost two sons and reminded her of unpleasant things.

What did she know about farming? She was a city girl before she married John. Her parents begged her to move back to the city with them, but she had made a promise. She convinced herself if she stayed, and kept the farm going, he would return.

The baby cried. Carol held her close, inhaling the sweet scent of baby powder. *Poor little thing, she doesn't even know her daddy. How could he leave me with three young children? He said it was to do his duty? Isn't his duty to me, the kids, and the farm?* Carol shook the thoughts from her head. She didn't wish to be angry. Of course he had to go. She was proud of him.

He looked so handsome in his uniform the day he left. She wanted to hold him one more time; hold him and never let go. But with his buddies all around, he wouldn't have liked that. She kissed him quickly, smiled, and made her promise.

The baby slept. Carol laid her in her cot. Did she look like her father? She wasn't sure. She couldn't remember what he looked like anymore. All the pictures of him had been put away, even their wedding picture. An unbearable pain pierced her heart every time she looked at them.

Some things she would never forget; like the way her body responded to him and how she felt safe and secure in his arms at night. With him there, nothing could hurt her. With him gone, everything hurt.

"Mom, Mom! Come quick. There's a fire in the barn." John Junior ran into the house.

Carol picked up a bucket by the pump and filled it with water. She handed it to her son and said, "Quick! Pour this on the fire and come back for another." She filled a second bucket.

She couldn't let the barn burn down; it had to be standing when he returned. She promised to look after things. Carol ran into the smoke-filled barn and dumped water on the smouldering hay. The smoke filled her lungs and made her eyes sting.

She grabbed a horse blanket and started beating the flames while the children brought buckets of water to douse the hay and wood floor. The flames died, but she kept beating and beating.

"Mommy! Mommy! You can stop now. The fire is gone." Her daughter tugged at her sleeve.

She leaned back against the barn wall and slid to the floor, exhausted. Holding her head in her blackened hands, Carol sobbed for the first time since she'd said goodbye to her husband.

by Darlene Foster

Delta, British Columbia



HONOURABLE MENTION

Atherion's Story

The young boy pleads with her, his soft brown eyes searching her face for answers. “Am I so ugly?”

She feels a terrible ache in her chest. “You are not ugly.”

“The way they scream when they see me. . . .”

“They’re ignorant. They don’t understand.”

“But I want to play with other children,” he says, holding both of her hands in his. “I want to be with you.”

She shakes her head and tries to smile. “It’s best if you stay here, my darling.”

“But why?”

“Because it’s not safe out there. You’ll see it’s not so bad. There is so much to explore here! And I’ll come see you every day, and bring you food and books. We’ll tell each other stories. I’ll bring you news of the city.”

The boy thinks about this for a moment, kicking at the ground. “Am I to be all alone?”

“I will come every day, I promise you.” The agony rises in her chest and she wants to scream. Damn her husband. And damn the scientist who has built this place. Damn all men and their lust for power! But she can’t let her son see her fear. He must not know what lies ahead. Not yet. The candlelight bounces off the walls. It is warm and dry at least—and safe for now.

Her mind drifts to the day he was born. He’d brought the rain. After two years of drought, it had finally come in huge sporadic drops, and then built to a crescendo. Despite the pain of labour, she recalls vividly the sweet perfume of moisture and dust as they carried her to the birthing room, the lace curtains at the window moving with the breeze after months of stillness.

The midwife had warned her the birth would be difficult, that it would likely kill her or the baby—or both. Towards the end of the pregnancy she had not been able to walk from the pinched nerves in her back. Her pelvis creaked when she sat. And when the labour had begun, she was afraid it might be true. Hours went by with little progress, but then . . . sharply, with only two pushes, he was out. The midwife handed him up to her, his body hot and slippery. She saw right away his lovely strong head and enormous eyes with their long lashes. She had given birth to a son. A son! It seemed impossible he was real and they would both live after all. She would name him Atherion.

She was overwhelmed with happiness, wonder and pride, listening to the baby breathing in his cradle, checking him when it became too quiet. In the morning she had gathered him up to feed him, stroking his face until he woke. His eyelids opened a crack, blinking, and then widening. He had gazed at her steadily, as though they were still connected, still physically one.

“Are you sorry you ever had me?” His head is on her lap as she sits on the floor of the chamber. The rest of his body is curved around her, his tail covering her feet.

“No. Never. I love you more than anything.”

“Where do I come from?”

“The gods. Like all of us.”

“Even me?”

“Especially you.” Silently she curses her husband again, and his enemy, Aegaeus. It was their greed that had done this. And yet, she could not bring herself to curse Poseidon himself. He had given her this special boy.

“What happens to us when we die?”

“Zeus will make us one of the constellations in the sky.”

The Minotaur smiles and closes his eyes, contented at last.

As she walks back to the palace she feels herself shrivelling inside. The boy is innocent and yet his life has been doomed since birth. To be kept in the labyrinth, cut off from all that is normal. To be set apart as if something to be feared. It’s true, those who enter the corridors fall

in fright at the very sight of him. They see only his horns, and the hideous union of boy and bull. She has heard rumours Theseus is on his way and is certain to kill him.

She stops to look up at the night sky, and says a prayer for her son. If only they could see him for what he truly is—a person, like any other. If only they could see his capacity for love, his loneliness.

by Julie Ross

Salmon Arm, British Columbia



HONOURABLE MENTION

Lore of the Lights

I wanted to scream but no sound came out of my mouth. It wouldn't have mattered anyway. There wasn't anybody around to hear me. The shadows kept coming, racing around me, circling me, slithering up my skin like insects.

I should have listened, but like always, I didn't. It was too ridiculous, who would believe it anyway? I was sorry now. But it's too late. They have me.

It had been such a perfect night. Caleb and I had walked hand in hand for hours along the lakefront shore. The moon floated perfectly along the water, and the warm breeze had rustled the waves gently along the rocks. I hadn't wanted the night to end; Koko had warned me to be home before the moon was high.

We had parted at the end of the trail. He had gone east to his parent's cabin, and I had skipped along the shoreline towards Koko's house.

I shouldn't have bothered to search the northern sky. I shouldn't have dawdled. But my heart was singing as my arms still burned with Caleb's touch, and the stars called to me.

At least, I thought it was the stars.

At first I barely noticed the haze of lights setting above the stars. Then they began to move and swirl deceptively smoothly across the sky. I stopped, tilting my head, perplexed by the change in the misty sky.

The fog-like swirls began to shoot across the sky in streams of ribbons. Faster and faster they danced, spreading like waves lapping onto the shore. As I watched, slivers of colour streaked into the haze of white—a string of blue, then a blade of red. Slowly, the construction switched, until the colours outmatched the white, racing one another past the oblivious stars.

I stopped, mesmerized. They were singing—a cracking, splintering sound mixed with the whoosh of air passing over my head. I could almost hear their voices.

I knew better. I had been warned. Many times. I could hear Koko's voice, "Never whistle at the lights."

"Why not?" I had asked.

"They will swoop down at you," she'd answered in her voice that implied *no argument*.

I had laughed. "Koko! Do you believe in the Easter bunny too? Maybe he'll deliver us pizza."

She had sadly shaken her head and sighed, in the way grown-ups do when they have no hope for the younger generation. But I couldn't stop myself. It was almost like the voices were daring me to answer their songs.

I whistled. A single note at first, then an entire childhood song embedded in my memory.

The floating lights paused, hanging in the sky like a ghost over an empty grave. Then they began to glide once again, drifting slowly towards the ground . . . and me.

I could see them separate from the atmosphere as they hovered over the Earth and crept towards me.

I tried to run; a futile effort. Within moments they enclosed me, surrounding me in a cloud of glowing embers—soft as silk, menacing as rattlesnakes. They slithered across my body, squeezing their tentacles around my skin and choking my face with their eerie, glittering fog.

I coughed and tried to sweep the damp hands from my skin, to no avail. In desperation I threw up my hands and screamed into the night air, "I believe! I believe! Just leave me alone." I sobbed, falling to my knees.

The lights grew silent all around me, and their slithering slowed ever so slightly. The wind grasped their song and lifted it above, into the empty sky. *You believe, you believe!* it sang, and with a whoosh it laughed—an eerie chuckle that sent shivers of fear into my soul.

"I believe," I whispered back. And it was a vow.

With one more swirl around my feet, the lights twisted up my body, around my neck, and vanished back into the empty vacuum of space once again.

The night grew unnaturally silent as I stood there. No sound, not even the waves whispered against the sand. Slowly, I wound my way around the beach and up the path to our home.

Koko was standing on the porch, her face lifted to the stars, “You all right?” she asked. Her wrinkled face peered intently into mine. “Anything happen on your way home?”

I grinned, “Nah, nothing. Everything’s fine.”

by Melanie Ironstand

Shortdale, Manitoba



HONOURABLE MENTION

Counterweight

“What’s the point of all this?” Cathy sweeps her hand around at the vast cathedral interior, filled with milling tourists. “I mean, think of the cost of building this place! It’s disgusting, really, the waste—all the money could have been given to the poor, or hospitals, or something!”

Marty looks around, seeing her point, thinking, *She’s right, in a way. But not right, too.* But he merely says, “I guess they were just trying to impress.”

Cathy snorts. “Well, they managed that, at least.”

Marty nods, fingering his guidebook, vague disappointment creeping over him. York Minster Cathedral was the place he had most wanted to see. With its flying buttresses, pointed arches, and vaulted ceilings, it was one of the world’s most magnificent examples of Gothic architecture; faith made stone. An architect himself, he had been eager to see all of its wonders.

But now, with the roof soaring over his head, he feels the familiar melancholy he hoped would have been met head on and conquered here in this sacred space. Surely here he could find the answer to his daughter’s death? Would not God answer his *why* here?

He glances at his wife, seeking distraction from his thoughts. Cathy is beside him, peering at the intricate carvings of the choir screen. Her curls glint with grey now, but she is still as slim as she was when he first married her.

But more fragile. Last year a drunken fool snuffed out their daughter’s incandescent life, and the bearing of that pain had just about crushed her.

Marty bore it too. It had scraped out the inside of him until there was only a shell left, a mere shadow of a man. Eventually most of him had come back, but he was not the same—the pieces of him more jagged than before, leaving spaces inside he got lost in, sometimes.

Neither had Cathy escaped unaltered from grief’s merciless winnowing. She had a harder edge, now, her sweet optimism washed out of her by her tears. It tore Marty’s heart she should have suffered so, and he could not fix it.

She would not have asked the question . . . before.

But it gets him thinking. He looks up to the cathedral’s soaring ceiling and wonders at the builders. Wonders how many of them had lost their children to disease, war, or accident. *Why did they do it? Why honour a God who kills our children?*

The vast, aching emptiness inside him echoes the vaulted space above. He shakes his head, ready to move on. Even here, his why is too big to be answered.

“Upee, Daddy, Upee!” The excited squeal pierces through the crowd’s murmurs. Startled, he turns, and sees her: the little toddling girl, her hair blonde and straight as his own lost girl’s had been.

She used to say that to him, just like that, and this other father, he mimics his own long-ago response: stooping down, laughter in his eyes, he swings her easily aloft and onto his shoulders.

Her fingers twine in his hair, her face lifts up to all that space, giggling.

Marty catches his breath, feeling those long-ago fingers in his hair, the slight weight on his shoulders, the greater weight of his loss crushing him anew.

Suddenly the choir begins evensong and the sweet pure notes lift up into the immense expanse above, his spiralling grief distracted now by the beauty of the shimmering voices. The music soars. “Glory to God. . .,” the choir sings, and the tourists hush, listening.

And in the middle of that song, in the middle of that soaring stone, it comes to him, a small reminder. That this is life. The sorrow and the light, the joy and the dark, all of it a swinging pendulum pulling us up and pushing us down until we cannot breathe, unless our staggering steps can take us to the centre, to the counterweight—to enter the empty space and find ourselves filled. That space represented here, by all this stone.

Marty’s eyes blur. His hand reaches for Cathy’s, and she turns to him, surprised. “I love you,” he says, urgent.

Their eyes meet, and she smiles, sad. She squeezes his fingers. “I know.”

The music swells, and then is over. The crowds stir, and bustles again.

But they stand still and quiet a moment longer, the sound of a little girl's voice fading now as she is carried away on her father's shoulders.

by Lisa Smith

Drayton Valley, Alberta



HONOURABLE MENTION

Ghosts

Andrew had been married to Meredith for a mere fourteen years when death had interfered with their well-laid plans to grow old together. She had been thirty-seven and he had been forty. They'd had no children, but they had been blissfully, seemingly impossibly happy. He missed her like hell.

Which was why, nearly ten years later, without any malice, Andrew wanted nothing more than for Meredith to hurry up and die already.

The afterlife was more interesting than he had anticipated, and more lonely. Andrew had always expected he and Meredith to die soon after each other, but if she lived as long as they had planned, he might be waiting another forty years. Patience, it seemed, was not a trait he had miraculously acquired posthumously. He remembered trying to wait a demure six months before proposing to Meredith—he had managed to hold off for nine days.

How odd, he thought, *that even with all of the world's secrets and wonders available to me, I am as preoccupied with Meredith as ever.* Unhealthy, perhaps, but what of it? Besides, presumably he had eternity to explore the universe, and he didn't want to get so far ahead of Meredith she couldn't overtake him. The older, more experienced ghosts were several planes beyond, drenched in too much understanding to be accessible to him.

Thus, he was drifting through his plane, separated distinctly from the living world and less distinctly from other ghosts of his level, paying little attention to anything at all, when Meredith suddenly died.

Andrew felt it before anything else, the presence he had been longing for. She came into the ghost plane very close to him—for he always hovered at the intersection of planes nearest to her—and a moment later he heard her gasping. Ghosts don't breathe, of course, but often the new ones try to. He gazed at her.

She looked around at last, her whole being in visible form, as the fresh ones often were. Quickly Andrew transitioned into the same form so she could see him until she learned to use her new senses. He grinned.

"Oh," was Meredith's first word. "Oh. I thought I was drowning. . . ."

She looked so forlorn, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her forehead. He remembered, simultaneously, thousands of other instances in this same position, encircling her, his lips to her brow. His happiness soared, but she wriggled out. Perhaps the new senses were too much for her.

Her face looked sullen as well as confused when she pulled away. "Andrew, you're dead," she whispered. "So I must be . . . dead. But I don't want to be."

Now he was confused. *You don't want to be with me?* he thought to her.

"With or without you, I don't want to be dead. I love living."

His form distorted and thrashed. *I can't be alive!* his being screamed.

"I want to be alive whether you are or not," she said, gently, though her tone did little to soften her meaning. "I miss you, but I don't need you. It's been ten years. I . . . I've moved on."

Being visible was suddenly too much effort for Andrew. Existing was too much effort for Andrew, yet he did, and probably always would. He wondered in passing if ghosts could commit suicide. He fervently hoped so.

Meredith winced as his pain lapped at her like the ocean. Her mind dwelt for a moment, unexpectedly, in a little honeymoon cabin on the Pacific. "Andrew, I didn't mea. . . . I'm sorry."

He could barely hear her. She could barely hear herself. Time is odd in the afterlife.

Meredith felt as though she had been there for an eternity when she had been dead only seventy-eight seconds. She wondered if she really could be content with Andrew in the afterlife.

Andrew, free-flowing still, clinging to her, felt that hesitation, grasped at it, hoped with it.

And then Meredith was coughing up water at her local beach, her chest being compressed by a perfectly ordinary young man in a lifeguard uniform, Andrew's anguish a mere whisper at the edges of her mind.

For a split moment Andrew could still feel her, and her relief at leaving him was overwhelming. His hurt was too large to be happy for her, too large to be contained. He flung himself into the universe, into knowledge, wanting to leap through the planes like hopscotch, so she would never catch up again.

by Carolyn Barrett Barnes

Wilberforce, Ontario



HONOURABLE MENTION

A Thursday Appointment

“Mr. Micheals, there is nothing I can do. Your father is on tomorrow’s schedule and that is all there is to it,” Roxy firmly replied to the angry, red face on the other side of the glass.

“Do you have any idea of the troubles I went through to get my father here today? Now that he knows, I’ll never be able to get him to come back! What do they expect me to do?” the middle-aged Mr. Micheals exclaimed.

“If circumstances require it, Dr. Kail will make house calls,” Roxy stated in the calm, professional manner she had perfected over ten years of working as a government nurse. “In the meantime, if you do not remove yourself and your father from my reception area, I will be forced to call security.”

Mr. Micheals narrowed his eyes at her as he gauged the seriousness of her threat. Roxy raised her eyebrows in challenge. Shoulders sagging, Mr. Micheals conceded defeat, turned around, and left with his father in tow.

Dead people are so much easier to work with. Roxy sighed.

Turning her attention to the list of glowing names on her electronic clipboard, she smiled. *Time to get to work.* She closed down the main reception area and walked through a set of gleaming steel doors, assignment in hand. Each of Roxy’s fifty clients had already been placed in their designated private rooms and were now waiting for her.

Smoothing a slim hand over perfectly styled blonde hair, Roxy entered the room of her first client. He lay before her in the standard mechanical bed all the rooms had, surrounded by soothing pastels, fluffy pillows, and a cluster of loved ones. There was a small panel on the wall at the head of the bed from which extended the white cord of a call bell and a clear tube with a capped end. The client’s chart stated he was one hundred and thirty years old but the robust man on the bed did not look a day over ninety. Reaching for the band fastened to his wrist, Roxy checked to make sure the numbers there matched the ones in his chart. Mistakes were final in her line of work.

Roxy continued on with her routine checks. A central intravenous access port protruded from the inside of his upper arm providing direct access to the heart. Connecting a syringe to the port, she flushed his line with sodium chloride to assess its placement so the necessary medications could act as swiftly as possible, ensuring minimal discomfort during the entire procedure. Pleased with the line’s placement, she pulled the clear tubing from the wall and connected her client to the facility’s central lines, hidden within the walls around her. Satisfied, she smiled gently and continued on to repeat the process in the next forty-nine rooms.

Rounds completed, Roxy settled herself behind a desk in a large, spacious office. Fifty little screens showed fifty people in the beds with their vital signs being meticulously recorded and on display as well. Underneath the monitors on a flat surface were various switches and dials with neat little labels requiring key-card identification to operate.

Looking at the clock to document the time, Roxy flipped the first two switches. In the rooms, lights were dimmed and soothing sounds filtered in. Mood set, another set of flipped switches released Lorazepam into the central lines of her clients followed by Hydromorphone. Flushes of sodium chloride in between medications kept fluids flowing freely within the endless lengths of tubing. Fifteen minutes later, her clients were all deeply relaxed if not completely asleep.

Another glance at the clock and Roxy’s thin fingers carefully turned a dial to slowly release a lethal dose of insulin directly into fifty blood streams.

Over the next five minutes, she carefully checked the vital signs of all her clients, verifying brain death had occurred in all before casually flicking the final switch. Potassium chloride rushed down the lines to flood the arteries of her clients, effectively ending their lives in compliance with the government-issued date.

Almost simultaneously, the *beep-beeps* dropped off to chorus into a single, steady, dull tone. Fifty heartbeats silenced, never to beat again. Fifty lives ended in less than thirty minutes by the hand of one nurse. Roxy shut off all the monitors, rechecked her hair, and walked away from the desk.

Maybe I'll call in sick tomorrow and start my weekend early.

by Natasha Yatsallie

High Prairie, Alberta



HONOURABLE MENTION

The Draw

Harry sat at the bar, listening to the faint sounds of the piano playing in the corner. As he turned around to leave, the swinging doors burst open and a stranger walked in. Harry couldn't tell who he was; the stranger's hat was pulled down low, and the rest of his face was covered by a dirty old bandana.

The man looked straight at him. "You Harry the Thunder Hand?"

Harry hefted himself up off his bar stool. Thunder Hand, the nickname had risen in fame alongside him. He had earned it for the loud, echoing sound rising from his pistols when he fired, the thunder that followed his lightning draw. That had been years ago but still most people feared his skill, though every so often there was some new gunslinger who thought he could match him. This stranger must be another.

"Yeah, I'm Harry." He turned and spat into the spittoon. The sound echoed throughout the saloon and silent patrons waited to hear the stranger's reply.

"I'm here to challenge you."

As though they were one, the whole saloon turned to look at Harry, who simply nodded. The stranger turned and slowly headed back out through the doors. *Slowly like an old man*, thought Harry. If his hands were as slow as his legs, there would be no problem in beating him. The townsfolk followed him out of the saloon to watch the draw take place.

The two men walked to opposite ends of the street and turned to look up at the clock tower. Everyone knew Harry's rule of drawing when the clock chimed. The two men stared down the street at each other, hands hovering over the pistols at their sides. Harry clenched and unclenched his fingers, trying to loosen them up. He felt stiff these days with the shadow of too many years cracking the pistol in his hand. Sadly, he couldn't just retire and settle down on a quiet farm. There would always be someone who wouldn't be able to feel they were good enough until they had beaten the best. But Harry didn't want to die before his time either. He had no idea what to do, but that was a problem for later. The current problem was down the street glaring back at him, waiting for a possible strike at fame.

Harry became puzzled as he studied his opponent. He was clenching his hand as well, but instead of his right hand, he was working his left. It didn't matter, as long as Harry drew faster. The clock chimed and both men's hands shot to their hips and pulled up their guns. As the watching town folk expected, Harry was faster, but the stranger's movements just trailed Harry's. As the echoing roar tore out of Harry's hand, it was followed by a second crack from the stranger's gun. Harry watched the stranger's body whip around as his bullet buried into the chest; he saw the gun go off. That almost always happened, and the bullet would whiz off, usually to embed itself into the side of some building. Not this time; the stranger had been fast, nearly as fast as Harry, and he felt the bullet tear into his shoulder, breaking bone. Harry felt his arm burn and then the pistol dropped from his numbing fingers. He bent and picked it up with his left hand, his right hand useless now. He swore under his breath. *It won't be long now before some youngster comes and kills me.*

He was brought back by the gasp from the crowd who gathered around the fallen man. Harry walked over and looked down. The stranger's hat had been knocked off, and it was his face causing the shock. Lying there dead in the street was Wild Bill Fire, a man of legend. He had disappeared years ago after a draw in Tamora. Many thought he had died, so why had he shown up today? Harry looked down at Bill and noticed his right hand for the first time. It was drawn up tightly, as though the nerves in it had been badly damaged. Harry looked at his own, noticing how similar the two were already looking. Then it dawned on him. He unbuckled his holster, switching it for Bill's, and placed his thunder pistol back, on his left hip this time. He bowed his head for a moment, then turned, got on his horse, and slowly rode out of town.

by Nicholas VanExan
Tweed, Ontario