

FIRST PRIZE

The Silence behind the Door

Stepping tiredly through the front door, I'm greeted by the pure, sweet call of Lorelei's humming as it drifts from behind the half-closed kitchen door along with the sugary scent of gingerbread. I can't help smiling and forgetting all the trials of my day at the sound of her.

My bag still weighing heavily on my shoulder, I cross the living room to the kitchen door. Leaning into the frame, I peer at the glorious image of my would-be wife. The shutters covering the glass doors panelling the whole back wall have been drawn up and secured. Lorelei stands at the counter facing the window with her back to me as she rolls out the gingerbread. The golden light from the setting sun catches in the reddish-brown curls piled into a sloppy knot on her head and illuminates her pale, freckled skin.

"What's too beautiful to look upon until the moment it's vanishing?" I enquire softly, disrupting her singing.

"The sun, my love, what else?" she answers without missing a beat or even starting at my sudden appearance. I grin at her back as she asks, "How was your day?"

"Wearying, but I feel better now that I'm home." I glance sidelong at where the oven mitts lay on the counter beside the door. "What about your day?"

"Not that wearying, but I'm still happier that you're home too," she trills as I fish inside my pocket to produce a ring fixed with a shining white pearl.

Traditionally, engagement rings are set with diamonds, but I know Lorelei has a fondness for pearls. Quietly, I slip the ring inside the oven mitt before saying, "I'm going to put my things upstairs. I'll be down in a minute."

"All right!" she calls after me as I depart.

A moment later, she's resumed her humming. Something I love about Lorelei is that she never allows silence to fall. Years ago, when I'd first arrived at this house and asked for sanctuary, she confided in me how terribly lonely she'd been.

The house was secluded on a rocky edge of the sea, too far away from the nearest village for anyone to travel. As a house spirit, she'd been unable to leave without being given a gift from the owner of the house. The previous house owner had failed to do so before dying, and so, she remained here.

She told me that the silence would often grow unbearable, so she'd pass the hours by walking along the stormy cliffs, singing to give herself something to listen to.

I understood this aversion to silence. Before coming here, I'd lived with my mother deep in the woods. She'd resented my existence so thoroughly that she refused to speak to me beyond what was absolutely necessary. Why she felt so strongly was as unfathomable to me as the endless depths of the sea.

Unwilling to live another moment in that silence, I fled her house the first chance I got. Honestly, I'd meant to go a lot farther than this, but when I stopped for the night in Lorelei's house and heard of her own determined attempt to fill the silence, I knew we had to stick together, at least for a little while.

So, with her authority as the house spirit, she made the property mine. I attempted to give her gifts to set her free, but she only laughed and said she was happy here. We filled the next three years with songs and riddles and late-night murmurings.

As I walk back to the top of the stairs, I notice her merry tune has stopped. I descend the stairs again, hoping she hasn't gone to put the gingerbread in the oven yet. Approaching the kitchen door, the sweet scent of her baking still wafts out, but her song remains absent.

There's no sound at all.

Hesitantly, I approach the door, but a moment before reaching it, I grow worried. "Lorelei?" I call out, but to no avail. "What waits at the end of the world?" I wait, but Lorelei doesn't volunteer to answer the riddle. Finally, I step forward to push open the adjacent kitchen door.

The room is empty. The oven mitts have moved to the counter beside the stove where the gingerbread now bakes. The glass doors hang wide open, allowing a chill breeze to blow through them. Beyond the tiny kitchen, I see the sun setting the sea on fire over the steep cliffs. Lorelei is gone.

There is silence.

by Sadie Brummund

Prince George, British Columbia

SECOND PRIZE

Trouble in Paradise

As far as intergalactic super spiders go, Trevor was pretty mediocre. Standing at three metres tall and weighing as much as a Toyota Camry, Trevor was a regular size. Trevor put on his spider soldier suit one leg at a time. His wife, Carol, was neither tremendously beautiful nor fascinatingly ugly. She was quite regular, for a super spider. Trevor was a little self-conscious about the size of his fangs; they were on the smaller side. There was a saying in spider culture about the size of a spider's fangs and the ability of a spider to reproduce. It doesn't translate well, but it's not too hard to guess.

Trevor scurried into the kitchen, where Carol was making pancakes. They didn't eat flies. They were mannered beings. Insects were beneath them. No, these pancakes were made out of humans. Humans had become a staple in all intergalactic space spider diets.

"Trevor, get down from the damn roof! Every morning with the fucking roof!"

Trevor threw up four of his eight arms. "Sorry, sweetie!" He scurried down the wall onto the floor. "I always forget! It was never a problem in the war!"

Trevor sat down at the table. He picked up his newspaper. The great human-spider galactic crusade had only recently ended. Trevor had been home for a little less than a year. He was struggling to adjust to the rules of everyday life. Boundaries and social norms had been broken down during the war. Trevor had committed incredible acts of courage: murder, more murder—really just murder; but he had murdered a lot. He had devoured entire villages of humans.

Other spider soldiers cheered for him during the war. Trevor was a war hero. And now, he was home and struggling. Carol seemed colder than before. Perhaps it was Trevor who had changed, he wasn't sure.

Carol smashed around cupboards and dishes, with her long, various arms. The humans she blended in her large bowl screamed and cried and begged for something called God to come save them. Carol wasn't sure who God was, but she was sure she would give him a hearty whack with her spoon if he tried to come into the kitchen.

Trevor talked about his job at Invasion Station, which had to be downsized after the war was won. "A lot of spiders are going to lose their jobs. I think I'll be okay though. I'm a veteran, it would be hard to fire me."

Carol just said, "Mhm," over and over from the kitchen. She was off in her own little world. "You know Kathy's husband?" Carol said from the kitchen.

"Yeah, John. Of course, I know John. Everyone knows John." Everyone knew John because John was an asshole. He stood six metres tall and had legs like telephone poles. John was hot shit in high school when being huge mattered. These days, no one cared. They were too busy living their lives. He always made fun of other spiders. He would say things like "Nice legs, tiny. Where'd you get those? The short spider store?" *That guy is an absolute dick*, Trevor thought to himself.

"Well, Kathy said that John and his team just colonized a star."

Trevor put down his paper. "What do you mean he 'colonized a star'?"

Carol looked around the corner from sink. "That's just what Kathy said. Somehow he and his team were able to."

"And you didn't ask any questions? You didn't go 'Hey, you know, a star is awfully warm; what the fuck would he even colonize?'"

Kathy screamed from the kitchen, "I don't know! Why don't you go ask her?"

Trevor rolled his eyes but remembered what his therapist, Dr. Planet-Destroyed, had said: "*She's been through a lot, too, Trevor. You should try and show some kindness.*" Trevor got up from the table and hugged Carol. She tried to pull away, but Trevor wouldn't let her. "What's wrong? You've been on edge ever since I got home."

She began to cry. "I just. . . ." She breathed in slowly. "Do you think humans can feel pain?" Trevor laughed. Carol hit him. "Trevor, I'm serious."

Trevor reassured her, “Honey, humans are the worst thing to ever happen. Look at how they treat everything around them. They destroy everything. I don’t believe they can feel anything, but even if they can, does it even matter?” Trevor pointed to the bowl of mashed people. “I hope they can’t feel. If they can, they’re the worst things in the universe.”

by Ahron Balatti

Parksville, British Columbia

THIRD PRIZE

Passing Windows

Albert Balcogne fell from the roof of his church on a summer evening when the voices of the children playing in the street below reminded him that adventures at dusk could carry energy and drama enough to last a lifetime and sometimes lead an old man to believe he could still scale dangerously high places.

He had looked after the repair of the church for sixty years, and before him his father had practised those duties. He believed he loved the church better than he had loved his wife; for though in trust, comfort, and intimacy, they felt of a kind, the church could still please him by surprising him—which once again it did.

Securing the freshly painted cross into its base and tightening the replacement bolt with his awkward arm, his right foot slipped on the cornice piece and his leg followed, his lower body then collapsing in structural obedience to its weaker members. His chin struck the edge of the mounting frame, his teeth bit his tongue, and his mouth filled with blood as he landed on the steep pitch and began to slide. If he had followed his normal practice and tied himself off, he would have been drawn up taut, shaken and childishly penitent for his overreach. But, he hadn't, and as he lost the air in his lungs from the impact, his thoughts raced from what was lost above to what waited below and the chance at living that lay between.

Memories—of shingles replaced, holes patched, objects retrieved, and a fire extinguished—all came to aid him now. He knew an iron pipe passed through the roof below and to his right, so he flipped himself onto his back and dug his boot heels into the gritty roof. He looked and saw the pipe further to his right near the roof line. He flipped again, onto his stomach, while spreading his arms and legs wide. Rigid, muscle and bone ready for impact as best they could be, he raised his chin, hands, and boots in the hope of capturing the pipe in his outstretched limbs.

It passed an inch beyond his reach, and in his custodial mind he noted that it, too, needed painting.

Airborne, he remembered too late the possibility of grappling the eaves that fled upward past his eyes. He thought of the ladder that lay against the other side of the church, leaning against the edge in exact opposition to the place he had come off. Even at the very end he maintained the habit of an honest life by choosing, as always, the wrong side.

He tilted his head back and looked up at the cross. His father had built it from the rosewood tree that had been felled to allow room to bury the parish's war dead. His first time on the church roof had been as a boy helping the older men set it in its place. In that high view he had learned the relationship between the light-filled sweep of ascendancy and the braking action of fear, a lesson he was to repeat throughout his life—and again now.

In acceptance, reply, and worship, he brought his legs together, spread his arms, and drove like a dagger down.

As the cross disappeared beyond the roof line, in its place rose the pointillist colours and narrative weave of the windows. He raced by faces that stared back with encouragement to surrender as if to say, "Love and serve. Memory will keep you alive forever." He took in each face, each bent knee, each arm lifted to both plead or admonish. He recognized his brother in one face, his mother in another. His friends and enemies and those who had held his eye for a time then moved on. His father watched him pass with pride. The women who had taught him love sang a single note of passion, his wife carrying above them all. With his will, his love and the love of those who held him in their hearts, he pressed his spirit against, then into the glass and was accepted. As the colours began to dance together, his memories sailed from his mind to come home to his heart, bringing a closeness he drew around himself.

He looked up and saw the cross move again into place as, like trumpeting thunder racing before a dream of light, he broke.

by Edward DeMarsh
Toronto, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

The Girl in the Cage

She woke at 7 a.m. every day.

Her routine flowed smoothly; after all, she had been following it for years.

First, she went to the kitchen for her breakfast. A cup of black tea steeped to the colour of tar as it waited for her to finish. She carried the tea into the living room to drink while she stood at the front window looking down at the street.

Finishing her tea, she went to the bathroom to draw a bath. She sat stiffly in the tub for fifteen minutes, letting the water lap gently against her breasts.

Leaving the bathroom, she moved directly to her bedroom and selected a blue dress from the closet. She put it on and admired herself in the mirror without a care that it was the same dress she had worn for the last three months.

Once dressed, she went to the front window to look down at the street again.

Purdy's Market was on the corner across the street. She could see it was busy. Customers were squeezing and feeling the fruits and vegetables.

She knew the quaint bookstore just past the market would be open now. She smiled at the thought of browsing through the cramped rows of books.

Turning quickly from her reverie, she marched resolutely to the front door. Her left hand gripped the doorknob while her right hand grasped the security chain above.

The pain engulfed her before she could open the door. A giant hand squeezed her lungs together. She couldn't breathe. Gasping, she gripped the doorknob tighter to hold herself erect while her other fingers clawed at the security chain until they bled.

Tears rolled slowly down her cheeks.

Within a minute, her pain receded. She felt a release, and her arms fell numbly at her sides.

Turning slowly, she walked back to her bedroom to hang the dress neatly in the closet.

She went back to the living room to sit and watch the street below.

Her routine flowed smoothly; after all, she had been following it for years.

She woke at 7 a.m. every day.

by Nancy Clifford

Saint John, New Brunswick

HONOURABLE MENTION

Stupid Trucks and Stupid Green Eyes

It is nine o'clock in the morning, and my hair looks as if it has been through three hurricanes, my shirt is covered in something oddly similar to ketchup, and I have fourteen minutes to make a forty-five-minute drive.

"I will get to the airport when I get there. I'll call you when I know more." I end the call and toss the phone on the seat beside me, my frustration mounting steadily.

The car in front of me slows to a crawl, and I find my anger bubbling. "Could you go any slower? Why is everybody on the road a complete idiot?" I yell, despite the improbability of anyone actually hearing me.

Then, we stop. No red lights or accidents up ahead, just pure stupidity causing this traffic jam.

Inching forward slowly, I keep looking at my clock. I definitely will not be making my flight. Still, I have to get to the airport as soon as possible if I have any hopes of getting home for Christmas.

And that's when I see it, a small opening up ahead that I could sneak into with a bit of manoeuvring. So, I do what any frantic individual would do: I gun it.

Cue splattering of epic proportions. Apparently, I had the idea at the exact same time as another person with a very large, stupid truck.

As I step out of my car to examine the damage, I realize there is no way I will be making it home for Christmas. I squeeze my eyes shut tight and flail my arms in the air several times in an attempt to get rid of my frustrations.

The sound of shoes walking towards me comes to my left, and I huff angrily. "Can't you just let a girl pretend she's beating someone up alone?"

A deep voice answers swiftly, "Given that it's Christmas time and all I want to do is make it home for the holidays, I'm going to exhibit some Christmas spirit and be kind. But in all fairness, the accident was your fault, and the least you could do is act civilly."

My eyes pop open, and I find myself staring at a handsome green-eyed giant. This does not curb my anger, however, and I find myself raising my voice despite my racing heart. "My fault? I made a perfectly legal lane change, and you and your giant, idiotic truck rammed into me because you weren't paying close enough attention."

Green Eyes takes a step back and puts his hands in the air in mock surrender. "Relax, Red. And just so you know, there would have been no accident if you had made a proper lane change, so my case still stands."

I open my mouth again to defend my driving but am stopped by a police officer with a request for my statement. My jaw tightens; I head over to recount what actually happened.

About a half hour later, the police have left, and I'm stuck staring at my dented car. Someone comes to stand beside me, and I let out another irritated huff.

"Should I request police protection or can I trust that you won't bite my head off again?" Green Eyes grins, his eyes twinkling.

I give him an eye roll followed by a fierce glare.

Green Eyes lets out an amused laugh.

"Are you always this patronizing?" I spit out.

"Are you always this angry?" he retorts with a smirk.

"*Argh!*" Letting out a frustrated cry, I plop down on the side of the road.

"I'll take that as a yes. It's actually kinda cute though, like a furious little bunny."

Punching the air once more, I stand and stomp away.

Green Eyes chuckles once more. "I'll have my insurance company call yours. Maybe you'd enjoy yelling at me again in a different location."

I mimic strangling someone with my hands all the while keeping my glare trained on the idiot in front of me. “And how exactly are you going to do that? You don’t even know my name.”

He gives me another smirk and holds up a piece of paper. “I have my ways.” Then, he winks and climbs into his stupid, giant truck.

I glare at his retreating form long after he has disappeared from sight.

Stupid Green Eyes with his stupid truck.

by Ashlyn Lund
Edmonton, Alberta

HONOURABLE MENTION

Fishing

The sky was a blissful blue, the water was clear and calm, the air was sweet, and Dylan was grumpy. He sighed loudly in frustration, but it was lost over the burbling motor of the boat as it cut across the mirrored surface of the lake. He shot his father a scathing look to show him he did not want to be there, but his father was looking contentedly out across the tranquil lake and missed it. Dylan sighed again, this time in defeat. He checked his phone through its waterproof pouch, though he didn't know why he bothered: no service. He brought up a game, but the battery warning blinked on. *Perfect*, he thought, shoving it roughly into his waterlogged bag.

Every summer, his father had taken him on this fishing trip, and every year since he was ten, Dylan had hated it. The bugs were bothersome, the boredom was unbearable, and he always managed to get a sunburn. He could have been spending what was left of his precious summers with his friends before he graduated in two years; but here he was, trapped and bored.

"Peter and I used to camp up here every summer," his father said, killing the motor as the boat glided to a standstill.

Dylan rolled his eyes. He had heard every Peter story half a dozen times, though he'd never met the man.

"One time, there were a couple of girls camping nearby. We stole their clothes while they were swimming, then rowed out and pretended to throw their stuff in the lake." His eyes twinkled with the memory. "They were angry, but we bought them dinner afterwards. That's how—"

"How you met Mom," Dylan finished flatly.

"Yes," his father replied quietly.

There was a long silence between them, which his father filled by preparing his fishing rod. He cast a few lines then offered the pole to Dylan.

"I don't like fishing, Dad," came his hostile reply. How many times must he tell him?

His father took the pole back without a word and continued casting.

After a few minutes, he got a bite and began the dance of predator and prey, reeling and slacking the line with a well-practised hand. Suddenly, the line went slack, and he reeled in the empty hook. "Got away," he said, though he did not sound disappointed.

Dylan didn't understand why his father loved to fish so much; what was the point if you weren't going to eat it?

"Felt like a big one," his father went on. He smiled, looking out over the water. "One year, in this very spot, Peter caught a huge jack; he wrestled with it for nearly half an hour before he got it into the boat. As soon as he took the hook out, the slippery bugger jumped back into the water. It must have weighed—"

"Thirty pounds or more," Dylan recited, his temper reaching its height. "Look, Dad, if you and this Peter love fishing so much, why don't the two of you come here instead, so you can stop ruining my summers by dragging me here year after year?" Dylan thought he would feel better after finally releasing his anger; rather, it hung in the air between the two of them like a dark cloud.

His father cast another line across the water. "Peter died twelve years ago today. Car accident." He reeled in his final cast and began to bitterly dismantle his rod.

Dylan sat, stunned. He felt stupid and embarrassed. Of course; it made sense now. Why hadn't his dad told him before? All these years Dylan had been the ungrateful stand-in for a lost friend. He wanted to tell his father that he understood now; he wished he could take it all back, every summer, redo them without all the bitterness tainting the memories. How do you take back what has already been done? He would apologize. He could tell his father he didn't want to leave, that the water and trees and clean air really were beautiful, that he did actually love this time with him, that his company was enough for him. He opened his mouth, but the motor cut him off as it growled to life.

"You can fish some more if you want; it's a nice day," he tried to shout, but his words were swept away with the wind.

by Michele Simpson
Wadena, Saskatchewan

HONOURABLE MENTION

Ice Sculptures

They were master works of art; *that* could not be denied. It was too bad that they were not made to last for years. Once spring came, they would melt away into pools of waters, lasting only in pictures taken when they were just carved. The four ice sculptures had won the winter festival contest easily. They were so lifelike.

The sculptor was new to the contest. None of the other local contestants, veterans of the competition, knew him. And he pretty much shut down any attempts at conversation that they would try. He was as mysterious and as frozen-faced as his artworks were.

Curiously, no one had seen him make them. They must have been done late at night or very early in the morning. None of the people living by the park had heard the sound of the chainsaw during the night in question.

There was something else mysterious about these sculptures. You could not see through them. They reflected back the sunlight from all sides and corners. A few of the competitors speculated whether he had added some shiny substance into the water of the ice that he had carved, causing this strange effect. One had looked into the rules for the competition to see whether such an addition could disqualify the sculptures, but no mention was made of such a restriction.

In a bar, after the results of the competition were declared, several of the sculptors were drinking and complaining that this was not the town they knew and had grown up in. This new town was one where strangers could win local contests and several teenagers, “I think there were four of them,” said one of the ice artists, could go missing, with no one seeing where they went to. Yes, the town had changed a lot from the one they had known.

by John Steckley
Bolton, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

The Secret Menu

The diner, located in the middle of nowhere Saskatchewan, had a tattered, paint-faded exterior with two rusty gas pumps for sentinels. Chris groaned and stretched as he stepped out of his car, thinking, *I travelled all that way for this?* There was a wood smoker out back that smelled of seasoned meat roasting, which soured from a putrid smell running through the air as you walked closer.

It was a shack, one gravel road in and one gravel road out. A person wouldn't know it was there unless they caught the sign hidden by brush or blew a tire. The closest town was more than three hundred clicks away, making it a dismal stop before venturing back out into the dried-up vegetation and sandy strata.

Chris sipped on his coffee grounds, waiting. The people seemed redneck enough, but the diner made you ask yourself if you'd received your shots lately.

His friend, James Devro, had not yet arrived, which was unusual; he always arrived on time, especially when food was involved. James, a self-declared foodie, made a point of trying everything and had heard about this hole-in-the-ground. He got off entertaining Chris with "insider secrets" about restaurants, like how some Asian restaurants didn't serve just chicken balls but traditional delicacies too. A few Canadian restaurants followed the trend, serving up deep-fried cow nuts, moose nose soup, or scorpion pizza.

James figured, *Leave the wives at home, have lunch in the badlands, followed by the Saskatoon Jazz Festival. Sounds like fun.*

Chris agreed, minus the idea of eating cow nuts. *Wild meat? Okay. Cow nuts? F- that!*

They agreed to meet at 2:00 p.m. Chris drove in from Airdrie, James from Battleford. Last person there paid, and Chris made damn sure he wasn't paying.

Chris's phone vibrated.

"Be there soon. Order the special. . . ."

Chris texted back, "Hope you brought cash! =P"

Chris looked for the waitress, who was leaning against the wall playing on her cell phone. He motioned to her. "I'd like to order two specials please."

"All right, two specials coming up." She smiled, smelling of pot, cigarettes, or something, forcing him to lean away. "More coffee?"

Covering his cup with his hand, he replied, "I'm good. Actually," he interjected, "I would like your other special."

Confusion replaced her smile. "Other special?"

"We heard you had a second menu . . . and wanted to try your 'catch of the day,' so to speak."

"Ohhh, I see," she said, amused. Biting her nails, her eyes darted up to the cook, who gazed back. "Let me go ask our cook what he has. Be right back." She walked back into the kitchen, the cook listening closely. Chris watched her jot something down before she came back to the table, a sly smile on her face. "We have the *wihtiko* special."

"The wheat-ah-wah?"

"The *wihtiko* special. It's a Cree word for 'meat eater,' so it's a meat sampler with boiled prairie oysters, horse stew, half a hunter's sandwich, coleslaw an' bannock."

"Lovely. . . ." He grinned. "I'll order two of those please."

The delicious smell of meat and spices filled the air. *Maybe the food is good after all*, he thought. His nose wrinkled, smelling something unusual. He sighed, shaking his head, *James is trying to kill me.*

When the plates arrived, Chris asked for a clean glass and fork, pushed aside the two steaming orbs, and reluctantly bit into his sandwich. Pulling at the juicy meat with his teeth unsure at first then savouring the taste in his mouth. It tasted like pork but different and

exceptionally delicious. *What is this?* he thought. Leaning back, he stopped chewing. *James should be here.* Then, something shiny caught his eye.

There, on James's plate, was a gold ring with the initials J.D. inscribed. *What the hell?* His eyes widened, lifting the ring. *Is this James's wedding ring? The wedding ring he handed him during his vows?*

The diner went quiet. The hair on his neck stiffened; black glowing eyes watched him.

He glanced up at the waitress moving towards him, different now, her nails elongated, shredding a furrow through the drywall, black eyes narrowing. "What's the matter? Your friend's not special enough for ya?" Her smile widened, revealing razor-sharp teeth.

The cook, also different, laughed through a lipless grin. "We have a new special!" he barked.

Chris stared in horror as a tow truck sped off with his car. The creatures howled in glee, falling on him, their black eyes ravenous with hunger.

by Mitchell Ross

Biggar, Saskatchewan

HONOURABLE MENTION

Rowan and Them

There was no way out. The storm would take them all.

Rowan grimaced, watching the freighter fight the storm. He flinched back from the glass as a wave crashed against the cliff, sending sheets of water spraying up against the lighthouse windows. The ship stood no chance. None. Rowan shivered as the wind rushed through the cupola. He'd tried. The crew had tried.

He could only watch.

Rowan watched, almost impassive now, as the ship struggled through the towering waves and churning sea. He barely twitched when, with a screech of metal-on-metal, pieces of the hull began to pull away and crash into the sea below. He did cringe, however, when he saw the first sailor fly off the ship's deck and into the ocean below, hit by falling debris. A gentle shimmer in the steely grey of the ocean was his only warning, before the soft, trilling song started.

They were here for the crew.

Moving quickly, Rowan fumbled through every one of his desk drawers. A soft haze fell over him, forcing him back to the sea. He blinked slowly, humming to himself. Humming along with. . . . He shook his head hard, slapping his cheeks, the sharp pain shocking him to his senses. He closed shaking fingers around his earplugs. Rowan jammed them in his ears, flinching as the world was plunged into silence, and went back to the window.

He took a deep breath and focused on the crew. He could imagine the tearing screech of the metal as the ship pulled apart. He could imagine the crashing of the waves. He could imagine the ship's mayday horn. But Rowan focused now, on the crew. He watched. He waited. What would they do? It was up to them now.

A glint of translucent green caught his eye amid the grey of the storm. Another. Then, an opalescent blue. Then, a shimmering silver. Another. Two more. All around the boat they swam, nimbly dodging the falling chunks of metal and debris. One by one, they slid through the water, calling out to the crew in voices that Rowan thanked every god he couldn't hear, holding their arms wide in welcome.

Rowan blew out a sharp breath as the first of the crew jumped. It always surprised him. But they always jumped. Rowan watched as, one by one, the crew succumbed, stumbling to the edge of the floundering boat and flinging themselves overboard. Now, he just had to wait and see if they found the crew wanting, whether he needed to clean up after their anger or send them a gift for their kindness.

You never knew with the merpeople. They were so quick to anger and so easily hurt.

Rowan watched, wrapping his arms around himself, as the merpeople, grey-tinted skin and green-tinted hair, curled welcoming arms around the desperate sailors. He let himself be captivated by the sheen of their scales for long moments before shaking himself free and hugging himself a little tighter.

It was up to the crew now. Their ship was lost, that was certain. They needed to keep the merpeople happy, keep them appeased. Rowan watched as, one after the other, the merpeople pressed a kiss to the sailors in their arms, cradled them close, and disappeared under the water.

He didn't know how long he watched the churning waves, nothing but silence ringing in his ears. He never knew. It could be minutes, it could be hours, it could be all day. It all depended on them, the crew and the merpeople. Rowan blew out a long, shaky breath. Then, he saw it. In the roiling waves, rolling and battering the shore, was a flash of colour, there and gone in an instant. They were bringing them home.

One by one, the merpeople swam close, their tails a shiny glint in the shallows, and dropped their sailors onto the shore, letting the waves pummel them the rest of the way. Again and again and again. Rowan watched them all. He kept his eyes on the beach, at the bodies piling up on the sand, outlines blurred through the heavy rain still hammering the glass. There was no movement—none that he could see, anyway. Rowan fidgeted, finding it harder and harder to

stay still, eyes constantly flicking from the rain beating against the windows to the bodies on the beach.

He still couldn't see movement. Rowan sighed, hauling on his rain slicker and boots.

Time to go see if. . . .

Time to go see.

by Katy Tearle

Toronto, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

The Record Player

My daughter's hands are so soft, so young—criss-crossed by nothing more than the gentle creases of girlhood. The ridges on her skin are as tender as waves, earthly grooves so finely traced, ripples of freshness that ebb and flow like stirrings of moonlight on water. As I place my palm in hers and slowly guide her up the creaky steps that ascend to the attic, my mind flutters back to a long-ago time, a time when my mother did the same for me. What was it like, to be that young? After all these years, the impression is there, pinned like a yellowing picture at the edges of memory, but it seems that the feeling has slipped from my fingers.

Her eyes are emerald bulbs of curiosity as I pry open the overhead door, placing her feet on a floor that's coated in sawdust. The room is a relic of something misplaced, the hold of a ship filled with silence and echoes and gossamer things that wither with time's procession. Slowly, quietly, careful not to disturb the sleeping ghosts, I make my way to the ancient record player in the corner of the attic.

Threadbare friend.

A melody swells, sickly sweet; a sailboat from girlhood that has drifted from memory yet never in a hundred years could my bones forget the tune of. Soundless as a sigh, it wraps itself like a child's blanket around our rigid, fear-chilled skin, caressing and healing and beautifying everything until all the darkness has evaporated.

My daughter's eyes grow wide. We dance.

When they come that summer, the air is thick, sultry with sweat and smoke. As noxious as a dragon's breath, it circles restlessly around their emblazoned shoulders and drums at their ebony chests, a hot Parisian joke that rebukes them for their nerve to trespass. Expecting fanfare? Think again. They cannot be accustomed to traditional Parisian summers.

The cosmos are staticky and silent, but their presence is an ear-splitting buzz. In a mere three weeks, it extends its banner over our dignified city like some kind of mannerless wildfire, like a primitive force that will raze and burn us to our roots.

Will they take any orders? Certainly not.

Will we?

The list grows longer with every week, with every day, sometimes every hour. First, they revert us into children of twelve—lights go off at half past ten! Soon to follow, before the harried merchants can raise their flour sacks in protest, bread evaporates from the markets. Fruit becomes a delicacy.

In the darkest days, when the seconds feel as dense and weighty as the Parisian heat, my daughter and I pass our hours in the attic, soaring on a tide of cream-coloured rhythms, playing that song and imagining we've turned into birds. We stretch our arms, robin-like, dreaming of far-off horizons. "Clair de lune" trickles down our bones like snowmelt.

December has struck when they finally call in the record players.

At half past three on a winter night when the world is as silent as dreaming, I wake to the sound of music.

I'm dreaming, I think—lucid dreaming—or perhaps I've gone to heaven. Lately, I haven't been so sure, but if a place like heaven exists, I imagine it's bursting with starlight and moonbeams and the echoes of "Clair de lune." For a moment, I recline on a pillow of sound, but quickly, the melody crescendos, clambering up to a treacherous apex that rattles the bones in my body.

I sit up in bed. "Good God."

As I ascend the stairs, "Clair de lune" swells, rearing up to a ferocious size, burning and blazing like the retaliative wildfire my country didn't know how to light. The sound is like

smoke, and it fills my lungs; but it's a strange kind of smoke because it's almost like breathing, like the first gulp of oxygen when you break from water after holding your breath for too long.

Time's up.

I open the door.

"*Shh*," my daughter says, pressing a finger to her lips. The girl is only nine, yet the knowledge of a century rests beneath her eyes. She places my fingers in her star-shine hands, and I feel the fear evaporate like morning dew.

A fearless voice: "May I have this dance?"

Peace. Freedom. Childhoods. These are the things we are never promised.

But we choose what our spirits cling to.

And love, to the death, is my choice.

by Jena Whiteside

Calgary, Alberta

HONOURABLE MENTION

The Dealership

The instant he was wheeled into the “New You” dealership, Edwin felt uncomfortable. *Why did I let Nyssa talk me into this?* he wondered. The showroom was filled with staged, picturesque scenes of “people” engaging in different activities. One display featured a group of men playing basketball with a vibrant inner-city backdrop behind them. Another was of a family of four, two older women sitting on a couch in their pyjamas, watching their young children tear open gifts in front of an immaculately decorated Christmas tree, pure ecstasy and glee on their little frozen faces. Every scene looked like the snapshot of a vivid 3D photograph, giving the viewer a fleeting glance at these people’s past lives. Well, not people anymore: Vessels.

“Vessel” was the term used in all the advertisements, at least. While they had once been living, breathing people, their consciousness, soul, whatever you wanted to call it, was long gone, leaving their still fully functional bodies up for sale. Despite his age, though, Edwin knew the slang term as well. His young wife, Nyssa, used it when she brought up the idea last week at dinner.

“Eddy, have you ever considered looking into one of those rag dolls?” she had asked as she gently punctured a few leaves of her salad with her fork.

“The what?” Edwin replied, taking a slow, deep breath from his oxygen tank.

“You know, those ‘vessel’ things? They say you can walk right into a ‘New You,’ pick out a body, and walk off the lot all in the same day!”

“Nyssa, darling,” his voice was calm but firm. “I’m seventy-nine years old, and I’m dying. It’s my time. I made my peace with that a long time ago, it’s time you did too.”

“Well, I haven’t made peace! We’ve only been married for a couple of years, Eddy! We’ve barely done anything, what with you confined to that wheelchair. Wouldn’t it be great if we could do something active for once, like skiing or swimming in the ocean, just you and me? Don’t you want that?”

Edwin hesitated a touch too long before Nyssa, frustrated by his slow response, placed her fork on the table, stood up, and walked out of the room.

A week later, they were at the “New You” dealership. Nyssa was fawning over a pair of muscular, dark-skinned men who were posed climbing a rock wall when an immaculately groomed salesman wearing a slim-fitting, two-piece suit walked up to them.

“Good afternoon, my name is Aatma. How can I change your life today?”

Nyssa jumped right in with her young, squeaky voice. “Yes, we are interested in your sporty, outdoor bodies. Do you have any recommendations?”

“Oh yes, those are some of our best-selling products, especially the early twenties’ models. If you are looking to walk right out the door and run a marathon, these are the Vessels for you! Of course, they do run a little higher in cost, because we have to frequently maintain their bodies to make sure they stay in top physical shape.”

“And how long will they continue to *be* in ‘top physical shape?’” Edwin skeptically asked.

“Oh well, that’s completely up to you, sir. After we transfer your consciousness and you walk off the lot, their physical bodies will begin to deteriorate normally, as all bodies do. With a little dedication on your part, however, they should be in top physical condition for at least another ten years!”

“Uh huh.” Edwin was unconvinced. “And all these ‘Vessels,’ where did they come from exactly?”

Aatma smiled. “Why, donation, of course! Just like when people agree to be an organ donor when they get their driver’s licence, every Vessel chose this. They knew that they wouldn’t be around to enjoy their young bodies, so they agreed to give them to us so that others, like yourself, could.”

“What about genetic diseases? Psychological disorders?”

“Every vessel comes with a full medical history and background check. That way, you know who they were before you become them.”

Edwin considered this as he took a deep breath from his oxygen tank. He looked up at Nyssa, her eyes clearly begging him to say “yes.”

Edwin sighed. “Okay, well, why don’t you show us our options and we’ll go from there.”

Aatma nodded. “Of course, sir. Let me start by showing you our youngest models.”

by Zach Keeseey

Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

HONOURABLE MENTION

Time Will Tell

The old house was silent except for the steady splashing of water drops hitting the sink's steel skin. *Drip. Drip. Drip.* Sunlight flooded the kitchen window as that faucet metronome marked the seconds, minutes, and hours. . . .

There were two other repetitive sounds: the old man's bulbous nose whistling when he exhaled and the wall clock ticking in sync with the dripping of the tap. Otherwise, it was quiet.

He sat on a rigid, wooden chair, alone at his kitchen table. Daybreak saw him ready to go: galoshes on his feet, Burberry overcoat draping his body, tweed fedora crowning his head—tilted slightly to the right. His gnarled hands rested on his favourite clay coffee mug. The mug was still warm but empty.

The right half of his face was clean-shaven. His hearing aid was in and on. The left side of his face sprouted chaotic, grey stubble, and his spectacles remained on the nightstand. If he squinted, however, he could still see. He sat there poised and purposeful, but something was wrong.

A lemon-yellow Post-it Note stuck to the fridge reminded him, “Doctor’s appointment at 10 a.m.”

“Yes,” he mumbled solemnly, “I must go to the doctor’s office today. That’s important.”

But he just sat there as though his galoshes were part of the vinyl floor.

Drip. Drip. Drip. Tick. Tock. Tick.

“I should fix that leaky faucet. I thought I did. It’s wasting water.”

He lifted his mug to his lips but only drank air.

“Did I already eat my breakfast?” he asked aloud. “Yes, I suppose I did.”

He massaged his face with trembling hands and exhaled a long, sad whistle. He turned his head slowly, left and right, studying the room.

“That’s the stove—for cooking. That’s the fridge. Those are tea towels, bowls, and spoons.”

His gaze scaled the wall. *The rectangular boxes—those are cupboards, full of dishes and food. What is that odd circular machine?* He squinted hard and pursed his lips. *It must be important to be dead centre on the wall.* The name of the object was on the tip of his tongue, but he could not say it or explain it at that moment. He squinted harder, trying to force his ailing memory, but nothing came. *It is round and ornamental. It has markings on it.* He sat there struggling to recall what it was.

Drip. Drip. Drip. Tick. Tock. Tick.

“I know you are important. I believe I need you for today . . . but damn it, I cannot remember why!”

He took another drink of air from his cold clay mug. He scratched the stubbly side of his face. With his coat on, indoors, he was overheating.

“I’m sitting in my kitchen, damn it. I know who I am,” he reassured himself. “I was married forty-seven years. Mona died last summer. I wish she were here. She’d know what to call that thing. She would know what it does.” His muscles were tense. His voice was shaky. “I was an aerospace engineer. I’m retired now. I have to go to the doctor’s office this morning. . . . That’s the stove. That’s the fridge. The tap is dripping. The sun is shining. What the hell is that circle thing? Why can’t I remember?”

He stared intently at the circle on the wall until tears of anguish slipped from the edges of his eyes.

Drip. Drip. Drip. Tick. Tock. Tick.

“I used to know what you are called,” he lamented. “I know that I need to know what you do.”

He sat at the kitchen table in his galoshes and overcoat in a cerebral fog all day. He kept taking mental notes of the stove, the fridge, the bowls, the spoons. . . . He didn’t feel the urine escape. He didn’t notice his trousers absorb it. His stomach rumbled. His gaze transfixed him.

Eventually, his chin bumped his chest, his fedora tumbled to the table, and the old man dozed off.

Drip. Drip. Drip. Tick. Tock. Tick.

His fingers spasmed, and he woke with a start!

“Good gracious!” he exclaimed. “It’s nearly ten. I’m late for my doctor’s appointment.”

Stiff and sore, the old man stood up. He snatched his hat and repositioned it on his head, tilting it to the right. He peeked into his coffee mug—all gone.

“Off I go,” he announced out loud and rushed out into the night.

by Maria CampbellSmith

Ottawa, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

The Shipwreck

As you look back on your life, you can mark certain experiences as events that forever changed your way of thinking. My brother and I will always regard the shipwreck as one of those occasions.

It happened on a stormy summer night the year that he was ten and I was eight. We had spent that summer dreaming of the glamour of shipwrecks and the promise of treasure. Role-playing filled our days. We were happy to hope that we might come upon riches one day and never need to work again. We were content to wish for an adventure. We were satisfied to wait for a shipwreck—until the storm brought one to our front yard.

A thunderstorm raged late that August night. Although we were supposed to be in bed, we were kneeling at my bedroom window watching the lightning flash over the ocean. The huge waves reared up to seemingly impossible heights before crashing onto the shore and rushing up the sand and onto our grass. The wind roared, driving sheets of rain against the house. The wind almost drowned out the incessant crashing of the thunder. We observed in awe.

Smash! We heard, rather than saw, the shipwreck first. The sound shook our bones and rattled every hinge in the house. A terrible screech rang out over the wind and the thunder. No other storm had ever produced such a hideous sound. What could it be? We did not even think to imagine that our summertime game had reached our home.

The lightning blazed again, and there was our shipwreck. A galleon had run up onto our yard, digging a trench through the sand and the grass. Ripped open, the hull spilled cargo and sailors. The sail hung off a cracked boom, swinging dangerously in the storm.

What happened next—my parents running out into the gale, ordering us to stay inside, the two of us ignoring them, the frightened sailors agreeing to take refuge with my family—does not really matter. What matters is that two children grew up that night. We saw the fear in the eyes of strong men; we heard the shock in the voices of experienced mates; we realized the anxiety and the pain that went with wounds and separation from family. Mostly, we recognized the selfishness in ever wishing such a tragedy on anyone for the chance at a fortune.

We never again played shipwreck, and to this day, whenever the wind picks up for a summer storm, my brother and I breathe a prayer for the men who will bravely face it on the open ocean.

by Anastasia Martin

Sudbury, Ontario