

FATHOM

DALHOUSIE AND KING'S
CREATIVE WRITING
JOURNAL



Issue 39

2021/2022

This year's theme is...

GROWTH

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The publication of this journal took place on the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq. Dalhousie University and the University of King's College are located in K'jipuktuk. The Peace and Friendship treaties in 1725 established the relationship between the Mi'kmaq and Wolastoqiyik and the British Crown. The treaties did not include the surrender of lands. These treaties are the guide and rules for the ongoing relationship for all nations living in Mi'kma'ki. We stand in solidarity with Mi'kmaqi fishers.

The whole Fathom team wishes to extend a thank you to Sue Goyette and Mary Beth MacIsaac for their help and guidance in the creation of this journal.

NOTES FROM THE EDITORS

This year, we found ourselves navigating a world trying to recover from the various challenges thrown at it these past two years. While feelings of anger, grief, and resignation are still present, there are also feelings of hope that we can adapt to a post-Covid world and continue to live our lives to the best we can. That this is just another chapter, another lesson to learn, and move on from. I think that this year we all went through some form of growth and that is what this year's journal is all about.

There are so many people responsible for making sure this journal comes together seamlessly. I would like to thank our editors for their hard work throughout this year, their amazing ideas, and never-ending dedication. I would also like to thank Mary Beth McIsaac, Sue Goyette, and the English department for their guidance and endless support. Lastly, I would like to thank our co-Editor-in-Chief, Devarshi Shah, for all her work throughout this year in creating and publishing this journal.

Fathom has always been a space for people to express themselves and share their thoughts and stories and I'm so grateful that our authors and artists think of Fathom as a platform to do so. I would like to thank our wonderful readers as well, for always supporting and encouraging us.

Darshana S Saravanan, Co-Editor-in-Chief

This year was a unique blend of the old and the new. Everybody was learning how to live in the post-Covid world, a mishmash of in-person and online. For many, this year was about growth, growth of self, growth in attitudes in the post-Covid world — just growth in general. And this growth looked different from person to person, as you will soon find out after reading the wonderful pieces in this year's journal and looking through the amazing artwork. It's a difficult task, compiling all the wonderful submissions, both writing and art, editing, and putting them together coherently, but I was able to do it thanks to the help of many amazing people. I want to thank everybody on the Fathom Editorial team, who consistently showed up and led rich discussions on the submissions and worked hard with the authors to polish the final pieces. I'm especially grateful for all the hard work from our co-Editor-in-Chief and art director, Darshana Saravanan. Finally, I want to thank Sue Goyette, Mary Beth MacIsaac, and the English Department, for all their guidance and support.

Of course, it would go without saying, I'm immensely grateful for all the submissions to Fathom, for every writer and artist who put their work out there, without them, we would have nothing to publish. And to the readers of this journal, none of this would be possible, or worth it, without you. Thank you, and happy reading!

Devarshi Shah, Co-Editor-in-Chief

Index

Poetry

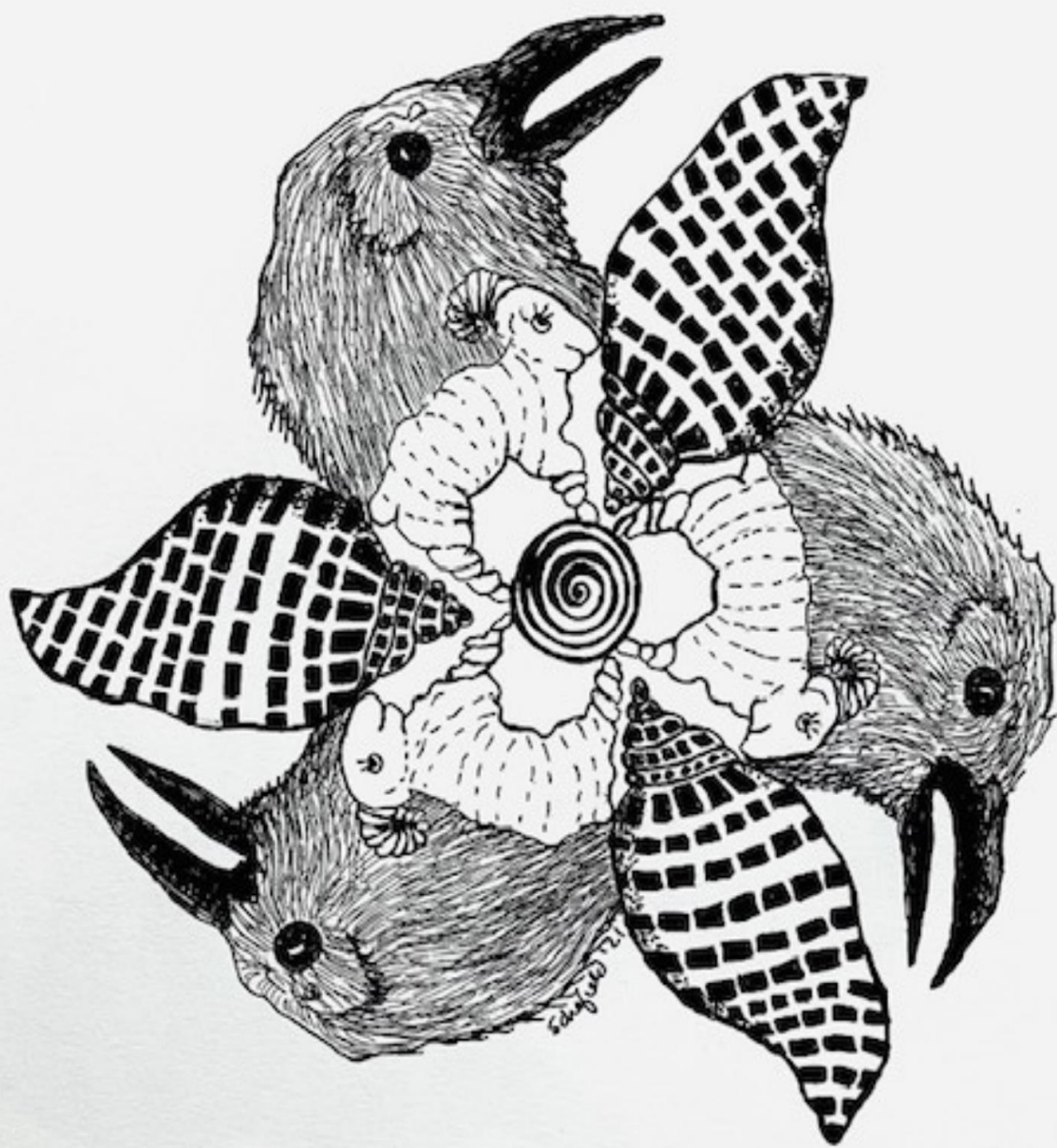
Alex Affonso	7
Dan Blais	9
Evan Buklarewicz	10
Mya Chidiac	12
Wynne Clark-Squire	13
Angus Edward Cochran	15
Olivia Colwell	16
E.J.E	18
Julia Evans	19
Lulu Groff	20
Jessica Hannaford	23
Sidney Heath	24
Luther Hewitt-Smith	25
Audrey Marie Hill	26
Emily Holt	28
Kerri Lawrence	29
Mary Legorburu	31
Madeleine McIvor	32
Ewan McPhee	34
Evan Mostovac	35
Natalie Porter	36
Alex Schofield	37
Emmy Sharples	39
Patience Sylliboy	40
Shahla Shamiun Tahia	41
Janani Venkat	42
Emma Ward	43
Emile Weber	45
Dawn Wehbe	47

Fiction

Alex Affonso	50
Mya Chidiac	54
Angus Edward Cochran	57
Jessica Hannaford	61
Audrey Marie Hill	64
Abeer Qureshi	66

Non-Fiction

Alex Affonso	70
Olivia Crawley	72



POETRY

Alex Affonso

Thief of Love

Once upon a day, I say

I was lost in love.

And love did come my way, I say

I was like a dove.

Then came the thief of love, you see

And stole my lover's heart.

He, to me, was like a key

But I, to him, a fart.

Once upon a night, all right

I was left alone.

And that's my present plight, all right

I am cold as stone.

So come my thief of love, I pray

And steal my lonely heart.

I pray that day I may then say

He is now the fart.

I waited, thief of love, for you

And still I have a heart.
But who, I knew, would woo a shrew
When she is but a fart?

So once upon a day, okay
I will be the thief.
Then I will have my way, okay
And bid goodbye to grief.

Dan Blais

Untitled 11.

Moving on is
enjoying that cherry cheesecake
even though it was her favorite
Soft, warm, and sour
Graham cracker crust
Crumbling across coffee table
Next to the cherry red
plastic cigarette roller
the snap and pull
click and light
Cigarette butts and roaches
snuffed out in the cheesecake tin
Fork a bit too close to the ash.

Evan Buklarewicz

Alone in 1217 Risley Hall

It is quiet, as it has been for hours.
The air is stagnant, the smell placid.
Then the abrupt clash of life against pane
and the sparrow lays there, still.
Is it dead? I wonder. I watch, for I have no one to ask.
Minutes pass
wind sweeps the stone
and the body remains motionless.
 Oh, it is then.
An unfortunate end to such a free creature.

The crows in the pale silent snow
tear at it
they pick its cold feathers
and fading insides.
Morticians making a meal
of a closed casket funeral.
The white stone is red
and I laugh, for it is the worst day of my life
I laugh because it reminds me of my nothing
I don't want to think about it
 If I think about it, I'll cry.

The frantic fear enters my limbs
the machine's march of the heart and lung
turns to a beast's ravenous run
within my ribs

 Let me out
said the spider to the web
and the mind screams in a thousand voices

To run out the door
To break down the walls
To do fucking anything

besides stand there and stare
in this corner at the door
terrified of the other side

But he stares, the mirror in the corner
back at the jester
and is disgusted
because how could I not be?
But the furrowed tension of the brow
fades back into a heavy sigh.

Now the silence
now the sorrow
for the sparrow
and it is quiet, as it will be for hours.

Mya Chidiac

Miserable

Summer is miserable. Except, it is mid-July, and you call me one day—no, one night—and ask if I want to go for a drive. Driving is the biggest thrill this town has to offer, and we are young, and the world is ours, and you make me feel like maybe I'm somebody worth saving. I say yes. Maybe a little too eagerly, in fact, because you crack some lame joke about how I can't live without you, how I must spend every waking moment waiting for you to call me. I tell you not to flatter yourself, that I'm only coming because there's nothing better to do, but we both know I'm lying. I can hear the smile in your voice when you say you'll be there soon.

You, who love this time of year, have humoured my endless rants about the piercing heat, bug bites, sunburns, and sleepless nights more times than I care to admit. To compensate for this misery, I put on too much makeup, and some flashy outfit I bought on a whim, and although I want to step out of my skin at the best of times, I am learning to decorate it well. You are in my driveway in a matter of minutes. I spend every one of them waiting by the door.

I get in the passenger seat of your car, and you smile at me, and there is something like forever in your eyes. You are beautiful. I don't say it enough. Your favourite song is blasting from the radio, and you are singing along with such carefree abandon that I try to join in, but I only know the chorus, and I am silently praying that you can't see how I falter. Pause. Stumble. And then we're at the chorus again, and mercifully, I am practiced at this point. I close my eyes as we drive off into eternity.

We stop for coffee. I don't like coffee. It makes my heart pound and my mind race, fast-forwarding through time as if this life were nothing more than a video game. Instead of coffee, I order some concoction of sugar and cream, hoping it'll mask the bitter taste in my mouth. It's cold, but the car is warm, and the condensation drips onto my lap as I laugh too loudly for far too long. You're still smiling. I find myself wishing that you'll never stop.

And then we're running along the sand as the sun sets, the waves crashing against our legs. It's freezing, but I hardly notice, or maybe I just don't care. The night sky is endless. It stretches, and stretches, and stretches on. And I think, distantly, *I am so tiny. We are so tiny.* So what's the point? What's the point of all this? But I look at you, with your eternal smile, and I hear the now-familiar music, and I down my too-sweet drink so quickly it tastes like water in my mouth. And I understand.

Summer isn't miserable. I am.

Wynne Clark-Squire

Step One: Irresolution

Fake it till you make it Fake it till you make it?
Fake it till you make it
till you make what? This illusive it
playing hide and seek, toying you
with its hiding spot that everyone
else seems to find so easily

Are you pretending if you don't know you can play
other roles? Always cast as

The Unsatisfied Foreigner
in
"NORMALLAND"

Starring:
Self-actualized bigots +
Big brained bimbos +
Boring people who know how to use their lips

Is love always this late?
a bus screwing the schedule
and leaving you in the rain

Soaked socks and chafed
hopes You feel acquainted
with anomie
more than most

The reviews are in
but you will not be mentioned
"★★★★★"
"A smash hit!!"

Have you still not learned your lesson?

Passion isn't dry skin scarring Lust isn't that small voice
red between your knuckles saying 'you can tolerate it'

Enter stage left, audience empty

Soliloquy strobe sunlights the stage

the lighthouse is sleeping +
soon you're virgin nocturnal
nursing nighttime
gnawing numbness needlessly
nesting in the soft spot of your
skull, the part where dreams
deviate + duped dates dangle
in the distance while desire

evades you.

The Creative Process

Artists are always acting as
Boats beaten back by breakwaters.
Currents constantly confronting ceaseless creativity.
"Dreadful!" "Derivative!" "Didactic!" decry denizens.
Expressive energies evanesce, ebbing evermore.
Fallout following fading faculties forthwith—

Genius grows grainy, gumming-up gizmos
Haphazardly hewing; heaving; halving; hemming.

Then If intelligent Intellect insufficiently inspires
Juxtaposing jaunty joys, jokes, jabs.
Kingly Knowledge kan't keep
Languishing. Long lost lamenting
Mavens must make more Muses.

Nevertheless,
Only
Persistent pushing
(Quasi-
Resurrection), rebirth,
Sustains success.

Therefore, thoughtful tinkerer, toil tirelessly.
Usually, un-sophisticated ultimatums underpin
Vanity. Vaunt-not. Verily vanquish
Wanton witticisms! Write whatever
Xanadu
You yearn
Zealously!

Olivia Colwell

A Peony Blooms in Late Autumn

Amid the leafless branches
A peony blooms in late autumn.

It has not
The sun's warmth— nor the rain's kisses...
Its siblings petals
Have long since scattered
Like snowdrifts and flour
On a counter in early morning,

This single peony
Unfurls its head
And reaches up to the sky
Trying to steal away a ray of light in its cheeks
So as not to be seen,

Undaunted it cups its hands
And asks for a gift from the clouds
Something to wash its face
Wash it down like milk
or orange juice

The peony's only embrace is the autumn wind
Whispering a lullaby
So the peony could soundly fall asleep

A peony blooms in late autumn.

A little too late for lunch
A little too early for supper
Far too late for breakfast

But this peony is beautiful
For a fleeting moment—
In a dying world

It brings a smile
To a passerby
Who is in need of a peony
In late autumn.

Before We Wake

At a distance
We appear so small...

Matchbox
sized
houses

Toothpick
telephone
poles

Nothing stirs.

Your bleeding,
seams

Are left undisturbed

Feeble blankets
Bandage your wounds.
And hide your safe havens

As you attempt to heal

Before the beast
Opens— its eyes

Are you happier,
While the world sleeps?

E.J.E

Ember

You took my words and twisted them into ink and ruin.

With each syllable, you set the world ablaze

and grinned as stories scorched, reduced to dust.

Yet

Somewhere in the ash and char,

I found it.

A single ember

Glowing fiercely

A pinpoint of rebellious hope

searing

Burning in my palm.

And from this I forged from blood

and fire and dust a sword.

Twisting apocalypse into redemption.

Julia Evans

Going through the motions,
Copying what I've seen.
Remembering my lines,
Scene by scene.

Arching my back
And telling you pretty lies.
Counterfeit moans
And phony cries.

But you cash the cheque,
Because I played my part
You kiss my neck and I fall
apart.

My breath quickens
And you mistake my anxiety for pleasure,
And maybe I've done the same,
Just in the opposite measure.

Now the scene has ended,
But the taste of rotten fruit still lingers on my tongue.
So my fingers have descended
And play my song, no longer unsung.

Lulu Groff

Brown Sugar

Sometimes she says *frivolous*, just to feel it. *Frivolous*.

The way it rolls slowly, from throat to tongue,
the sweet time it takes to come out fully:

Frivolous.

She loves her sugar.

Look, as she pulls the Red Path plastic sugar bag off the countertop
and scoops baby-hand fistfuls
in her baby-girl mouth.
All sweetness.

*Warm red Jell-O juice sucked from wooden spoons,
Grandma's kitchen full of cherry steam.*

She is so small that her little arm hangs
when she holds her mother's hand.
Too small to move when she pulls in frustration.
Back then, she begs for sugar.

*Milk skin peeled from dad's hot chocolate,
Sweet cream licked from deep-fried buns.*

She thinks this sugar-love *must* good.

This simple little sweetness,
this *feeling-nice-for-no-reason*.

This *morning Cheerios with brown sugar*,
This *ice rink cocoa from Styrofoam cups*.

When they were young,
they filled their plates to the brim with maple syrup.
They bought sweets to give away,
and walked home from school holding Freezies.
Family dinners finished with dessert.

But craving is a sickness these days.

No *quarter-for-eight hard candies at the dispenser*.

No *10 cents for a bright blue live wire*.

No *making friends by sharing gummies*.

Because sugar now is for *teeth-brain-gut rot*,
And mom said *no sugar* today.

No mention anymore that pain yields to sweetness.
No word that honey soothes a raw throat,
and no one knows to leave sugar at the spot their heart broke.

All these sweet things are *frivolous*,

and all this wanting is

shallow-no-good-foolish,

tummy ache and tooth decay.

bad-taste and gingivitis,

rot you from the inside out.

Something about *naïve girlishness,*

a family of pre-diabetics,

and the words *sugar-free* as commendable,

Because *good people say no* to sweet things.

Jessica Hannaford

sweet acid

garnet

a blooming tree encrusted in gems
shining beneath the summer sun
branches like hands needing to be held
pulling you into red
into honey
into him

grenade

your insides are bloody shrapnel
that no longer fit within your skin
he watches the explosion
a silver spike in hand
his name on your lips
and asks what did the damage

pomegranate

you rise from tear-stained earth
like tall wheat or barley
leaving him in the icy winter
you must learn to endure the acid
because one day
it will be sweetened by someone new

Sidney Heath

Deliverance from Dissection

If you hit me with a train
Would I be mad?

I'd hope it'd slice right down my brain
Kinda glad

Maybe then I'd understand
I'm not actually *mad*

Life is supposed to be unplanned
Unmanned and offhand

Believe me or not I've died first-hand
And it made me surf life with less demand

:)

Luther Hewitt-Smith

KNEES

bouncing
stern-faced
floating on
 distaste

Of wonderings by
the drawl of my eye

Watching
in restless guile
The words pursed
coined inside
untried

awake
 despite
a weathered caffeine high
strangers traced
laundry on the wire
folding days
hung to dry
little light
thoughts a maze

through the night
left to wade in
to myself
I break

 cascade
shuffling knees
tears from the breeze?

 ablaze
refrain my feigning
 I gain
again, some ground
a breath along the wind
Some sound

Audrey Marie Hill

Summer Rain

He was summer rain
His eyes were like the sky,
stormy with no delight,
but I loved him anyway.

He coated me in frigid hearths.
He became a freezing home,
but he kept my hands warm, I hardly noticed the cold,
because I loved him anyway.

He was the dreaded drink of earth
into which I stepped barefoot
and danced in flooded roads.
I loved him anyway.

Then the sun prevailed,
and dried his summer rain.
My tears could not replace what he'd made,
but I loved him anyway.

Turning pavement into mirrors,
to pictures of you and me,
I have never met a storm so sweet,
and I loved him anyway.

Your rain was not for me,
I was not so foolish to believe,
but a girl like me loved to dream,
and I loved him anyway.

His summer rain moved elsewhere,
another suburban street,
and I felt a distant burn beneath my hardened feet.

I loved him anyway.

How could I tell a cloud to stay with me, a dancer with stubborn feet?

For he was just a storm, with me for one whole day,
and I was just a silly girl,
who loved you anyway.

When spring comes, it will rain again
But today I will just try to enjoy
This warm autumn wind.

Emily Holt

Stuck Fast

I can't write a poem.
It's simple as that
They don't believe me?
Well, I may as well show'em

This is the part
Where my mind goes blank.
My cursor be blinking
But... nope. Still nothing.

I changed my rhymes there
I hope they can see
From paragraph to paragraph
Poetry plays hide and seek with me

Joke's on them!
Did they see I said paragraphs?
Not stanzas or verses
Or vice versa versus

Poor ol' Frost, Tenny or Milton
They'd cringe at this mess
This mess that is poetry,
If I'm brave enough to make that guess

Kerri Lawrence

Hailstorm Hold

You are in your body
You are in your body and you are your body
And your body is in the skin and your skin is falling off
Sloughing away like hailstones without rain, battering
your hands, your head your hair;

You are your body and you are your bones and your bones are in your skin though they cry to be released and,
your skin is peeling away like the bitters of an orange
beneath his gentle hands
You are in your body and bones and blood but under the cover of a mismatched lover you know that you are just

Falling apart.

And he is holding your hand, your bruised hailstone skin,
Falling apart, falling to pieces
And he is holding you but not holding you together
Hands around you, arms around you
You are in your bones and blood and you want out.

Holding you but not together, pulling you back, you are your bones and they are exposed to his cold hands, to the mapped planes of ice and hail and the endless trails of pale struggles in snow-bound storm-found lands that you couldn't hope to navigate and make your way out alive, Because you are your body and you are your bones and they are cracking and crumbling and undoing in the cold
And his hands are shaking, fumbling for a grip on your heart and soul
But he cannot hold on, and he is not holding you together, and you are still with him,

You are your bones, and you are falling apart apart apart apart from him from yourself from your hailstone hands and the pieces holding the two of you together, separate.

A part from him, given from him but not of him, and you wonder if that's enough to keep you together, a part spent to hold your bruised body while it knits itself back together
And while you learn to be content with your skin, and learn to feel whole,

And if you can't, he might, to a lesser extent, keep your hailstone hands safe, even if they are nothing more than exposed bones.

Vignette, Two Summer Days

As a child, I used to sit out on the balcony With
once-old-friends-of-mine
And we would eat candy coated seeds right out of
A jar
That my mother kept hidden
Either she never noticed or she maybe
Just didn't care that they kept disappearing.

We liked to pretend
That we were grown-ups
Eating seeds out on the veranda
Until we ran out.

I never could find that flavour again until I
discovered sambuca
And now I can't get the taste
Of eighty-proof anise seed
From my lips.

Mary Legorburu

I am not the same, identical woman:

I am a stranger in the skin that wraps around
These may not be my hands, these may not be my knees
I may be flesh and pulp
I am raccoon eyed
I smell of dollar store cologne
I am your cacophony
I can be smelted
And burnt
Into whatever you value
Nevertheless, i hope i am not the same, identical woman
Who i wrestled with until i couldn't breathe
And when the beautiful beast allowed me to lie
down i swallowed -
Some pills to help me sleep
And I, a smiling child, felt so much joy until
Claws and talons dragged me down
The beautiful beast confided
"I am not your saviour"

I don't want to slip through the cracks anymore
I want to feel the dew under my feet
And watch autumn howl through the trees
Whilst i pay homage to the leaf pawed creature that leaves his mark on concrete
And wave to the cat across the street
Here-
I am not the same, identical woman
I am shapeshifting in my youth
I am distracted
I wrestle less with thought
I keep forgetting...
I am that smiling child
I am that worried woman who wrestles in the night
I am none and I am all, simultaneously,
and i try not to fight it.

Madeleine Mclvor

The Cat and I

On lazy couch again,

the cat and I

live side by side,
boredom

trapped alone inside,
our world of walls
a sadness writhes.

The cat and I

sleep day to day,
in slum and glum
and outside shun,
from meal to meal
from bed to couch again.

The cat and I

curl over easy,
fold in blankets
something cheesy,
cuddle in our lonely
haze.

The cat and -

the cat is gone,
I scramble down
through the house
around around
where did it go?
The lumpy thing.

There a crack!

A light!

A breeze!

It found a way!

It must've squeezed!

But he has gone

where I cannot,

I shudder then

the cold is taut.

Wait... a sound?

A gentle meow

asking me to

follow now?

Here what's this?

Another crack?

Leading me

from the shack!

There he is!

There's my cat!

The cat and I

now waddle round,

through the streets

up and down,

happy as two

giddy clowns.

Ewan McPhee

A Prayer in Red

I hope you do not remember me
while you are still in the city,
but perhaps – when you have travelled far
from here
into the black emptiness,
into the blood-snow,
and finally end up in
the place of
infinite being
infinite knowing
infinite occupation –
you will remember this emptiness,
and think of me.

Evan Mostovac

"Their Irish Goodbyes, Part One"

Waking up in a foreign bed to a familiar voice and an unfamiliar touch.
Broken news from a secondary source, perhaps undeservedly.
Peering through the rifts of clarity from the stained-glass window.
Watching a solemn stranger knock on your door.

And then,
 like an arrow finding fragility in the failings of armor,
a question.

"Would you like to go to school today?"

A *no* here, a *yes* elsewhere.
School, a moderately tolerable distractor.
A day spent in blissful relaxation,
a day spent with utter focus.

Blackened concrete buildings.
Greenish overgrown grass.
Two juxtaposed moments.
One contemporaneous conclusion.

A moment apart, together.
The loss of innocence, the loss of mother's mother.
A siblingship rekindled by the splintering of familial bonds.
These were the days of our grandmother's passing.

Only fragments left.
Morsels, tatters, pigments, commotions.
But the feelings,
I know they will always endure.

Natalie Porter

Growing Up

An acorn, once it becomes a tree
Can never be an acorn again
It can never again fit smoothly
Into the palm of your hand
Now its branches stretch for the stars

An ending and a beginning
Something is left behind
And yet
Something is gained

Certainty hits
I can't go back now
I've come too far
I no longer fit in
The boxes that bear my name

The sweet taste of home
That I've longed for
Turns sour in my mouth.
Will they pare me down to fit,
Or will I do it myself?

Can a child
Never become an adult
In the eyes of those who knew her
Will I always be playing a part to them?

Alex Schofield

Liminal

Autumn days bound
into the undiminished.
The red lobelias lean, riverbanked,
their ecology is a not knowing,
A never wishing to impose,
A who to call in a situation.
They flag the flyblown fields, bully the air with virtue.
petals fold in mock discretion.

The sun measures long,
These proud doxies hum
beguiling elongated notes
for the flora fauna mystery,
for the pale mother,
for the lost half unbounded.

Seedlings swell from the scapula,
swimming in their skins.
Pulling up their skirts to flash powdered ambition,
pulling you under the chin to ride in the jump seat,
to bite hard in storms and rescues,
A train chase of come hither and sway, of touch and fill yourself in.

You grow old before consenting, your heart filled with
a fluttering tiger moth.
Your hands sketching through the light mist,
tips of fingers swollen,
chin buttercupped he loves me, he loves me not.
A Murakami fog hides your nature from itself,
eyes watering for candled light.

Mercy pulled on outstretched limbs
You sidle up,
Rub against shadow,
Dour palms turned skyward
As the philosopher king hands out threads of crimson, tangling tongues and
cupping sinuous ropes,
the line nuzzles quick and soft.

Red sway, reeds rustling right to left, as the tipping earth

Plays favourites, heaves gently into your script.
You dandle syllables, bones nestled in tapped-out words.
The anatomy of the world, the house parties on Sunday, the sale of baby shoes, never worn.
All can be stored in a three-room tent for the claustrophobic.
Or swallowed in a dry mouth, whispering echo down and grow.
Or found by the riverbank of red lobelia opening,

Emmy Sharples

Succulent

I thought my skin was hard.
I acted as though it was impenetrable
Like your words could not hurt me.
Lily of the Valley.
I did not know that someone so beautiful could be so deadly
That poison was slow to seep through the skin
And burned flesh from the inside out.
I never thought I would cry about you to my partner.
I thought my small body could last without fresh water
Until the poison dripped out with the tears.
Friends don't strangle friends with their roots, my partner said.
He was right.
It took me too long to love my short and hardy leaves
But I should have known that sweet-smelling bells were never really my thing.
I'm sorry, Lily of the Valley.
For silently turning the other way
But your words were blocking my sun
And I needed to grow.

Patience Sylliboy

Missing and murdered Indigenous women

Walking alone at night? Never!
You know I am an Indigenous woman, right?
Im 12 times more likely to be murdered or go missing,
I need to keep safe.
I'll go out but my location has to be sent to my dad.
oh, and my brothers.
And just to be safe, my friends too.
Do I have my pepper spray?
Where's my knife?
Let me cover up also,
I can't let them see my beaded earrings.
And what If I go missing, who will look for me?
My dad will.
My brothers will.
My community will.
But will the police? No, we've all seen the media.
"A non-Indigenous woman has been missing for 24 hours."
But what about the girl from my community that has been missing for a week? Why
doesn't she have a post yet?
What about the girl whose sister, mother and brother had to go find her themselves?
"A non Indigenous woman's killer has been found and he's in jail."
But what about the girl from my community that has been gone for 12 years?
Why isn't anyone looking for her killer?
Why are their lives so much more important than ours?
We need to hide our identity to feel more safe, isn't that a shame? They
wonder why Indigenous women are on the street,
Why would we try to succeed if Canada already tells us how our lives will be?

Shahla Shamiun Tahia

Petty cash vouchers

For company
For isolation
For incentivizing the validity of your own consent,
delayed or constant

For each dish you clean
And each person you let out of your life

And each breath you take when you're overwhelmed
Each bottle you pick up from the floor
Every glass you put aside to clear the space around your couch

To sleep in your bed someday instead

To be fully rested so that you can work
(Not) for meritocracy or a self-capitalized system of worth
But for shiny shoes and glistening food
(Picky like a crow yet thrifty like a bird)
For providence, so close to the sound of providing
For paying off these debts your parents see as investment
For the secrets that make drownings out of weighted affection
And your protection
To yourself & what you perceive as freedom
But mostly
Your permission
To leave it all behind
if this isn't a face of happiness you recognize.

Janani Venkat

Goodnight to the Garden

Open your eyes.
Watch your aching toes slip into
the warm soil as your Mother's song lulls
you to sleep.
You are weary but *you are ill, you are not digging well* so
you must uproot your limbs,
must displace your body with
gardening shears.
One fragment of stainless steel lacerates each ankle. Fluid leaks from punctured tissue.
Then trudge across the land.
Toward Betterment. Progress.
Isn't this what growth is?

Close my eyes.
Bloodied bones twinge with breath's graze.
Feel the night's sweeping silence mould
around my throat under
my ribs over my
petioles cannot move cannot
breathe but—
The putrid odour of tired flesh.
Wind's listless groan as she is subject
to yet another image of decay.
Leaves expire under moonlight.
Why am I digging in a graveyard?

Now I realize
that my roots remain.
Dead from digging, withered away but
when I look down, the rotten soil consoles me because
when I press my feet down, rivers and valleys emerge between my toes.
Now I can speak, now I can dance because
I see that this land *can* cradle. Heal.
I will not stay, but here, I can rest, here
I am
a seed blown away from the Mother,
reborn by the rot underneath and the steady limbs treading overtop.
I am starting to understand—
Before you can grow, you must dig.

Emma Ward

Fish Crow

Odium;

The protection of her innocence falters

Opening a sore that reality has taught

The elements of books fold upon each other

Manifesting a red-backed crow

Who speaks in parables

Identified as a body of regression

The roof of her mouth

bares no teeth

no dentures

Her ineffable tongue

reminding the indentured

of life's un-seen reverberations

The human relative who belongs to

Crow's teachings

ingests utopian creeds and

in moral rage

she asphyxiates the red-backed crow

Who's only fault was

swallowing the eyeless snakes

who surfaced after rain

Depluming the red-backed crow with her
shovel shaped teeth
Her voice becomes weaker
and weaker
A mystery that grows in her mind
Like algae in a pond of polluted reflections

Fish crow,
Corvus ossifragus
Flying over desecrated wetlands
The power of fish goes unrecognized
Thousands continue to flop
upon fish-eyed pavement
The visual distortions
Draining self-knowledge
Polluting self-worth
Developing self-hatred

Looking up at the blue sky with
a heart full of pleas
a black crow swoops by and
a seed of epiphany
blooms in within a
defeathered
dishonoured
woman

Emile Weber

Gardening

Sometimes I feel rather hollow
As if I'm barren inside
I see people who're so at home with themselves
They've grown such wonderful gardens within themselves

I envy them
I feel so lacking like I need to hurry and catch up

You know
It's hard to grow a garden when disaster strikes daily
Screams and shoots like thunder
Stomps and pounding like earthquakes

But, I am not my father's anger
Nor my mother's guilt

I won't be defined by rage nor remorse
Only that of resilience
I will grow a garden that can withstand hurricanes
By offering shelter and not meeting its hostility

I want a garden that can tell me stories
That can make up for the lost memories
I wish it to be beautiful and lush,
and strong, and broad, and...

And it must start with me digging a hole and planting a few seeds

Then the hardest part,
Patience

You will

As you grow
You will come to know that
Sinners and saints are all the same
For your parents will have faults you'll come to forgive
For villains will have qualities you'll admire

As you mature
You will come to learn
That love is a double-edged sword
For the strength it offers as support
For the weak spots it creates as vulnerability

As you come into your own
You will know
That failure is bittersweet
For the frustration and exhaustion of trying
For the cathartic release it offers

As you age
You will understand
That grudges are the most intimate gifts
For they will keep you warm and safe in the face of novelty
For they will tell others what horrors you hide within you

And when you die
All this knowledge will be lost

Dawn Wehbe

Flashbacks

I was only doing the dishes
Til' my body took over my mind.
I could not find—peace
Even through my wishes,
Looking for some kisses,
To mend me blind, but I could not find
Because there was nothing left for me.

My stomach rumbled—turning in circles,
It wasn't butterflies, no—I was crumbling,
Feelings of nausea—ready to hurl,
Dizziness—making me curl—I'm on the turnaround, marry-go-round
I cannot stop, only to swirl
As my insides turn, I feel myself burn
My throat is tight, I want to fight
They say it's fight or flight, but I just freeze—torpefied unable to act right.

My body curls up, I collapse to the floor
Not because I bore
My mind is screaming, thoughts that sore
Losing control, I lie—lie flat on my back

Flashbacks.

Because I—will never ever be able to be loved from behind
The same
All has changed,
Even if you act kind, I feel so much shame
You've claimed, a piece of my self control
I fold.

This is not how I wanted to start my day,
But you can always restart the day,
And so I tried, could not cry
But found
It was the ice cold water
That brings my back—home
To where I belong.

I know—they know—

No slack.

Know you did me wrong, I hope this cycle won't last long
Because I was trembling, stumbling, talking over my feet
But they could not hear.

No excuses about the beer

Nor the pills that gave you chills 'cause

You're a cheat, you got me beat

Friends *aren't* supposed to bend—they are to mend

So I went to defend, myself, taking me off the shelf

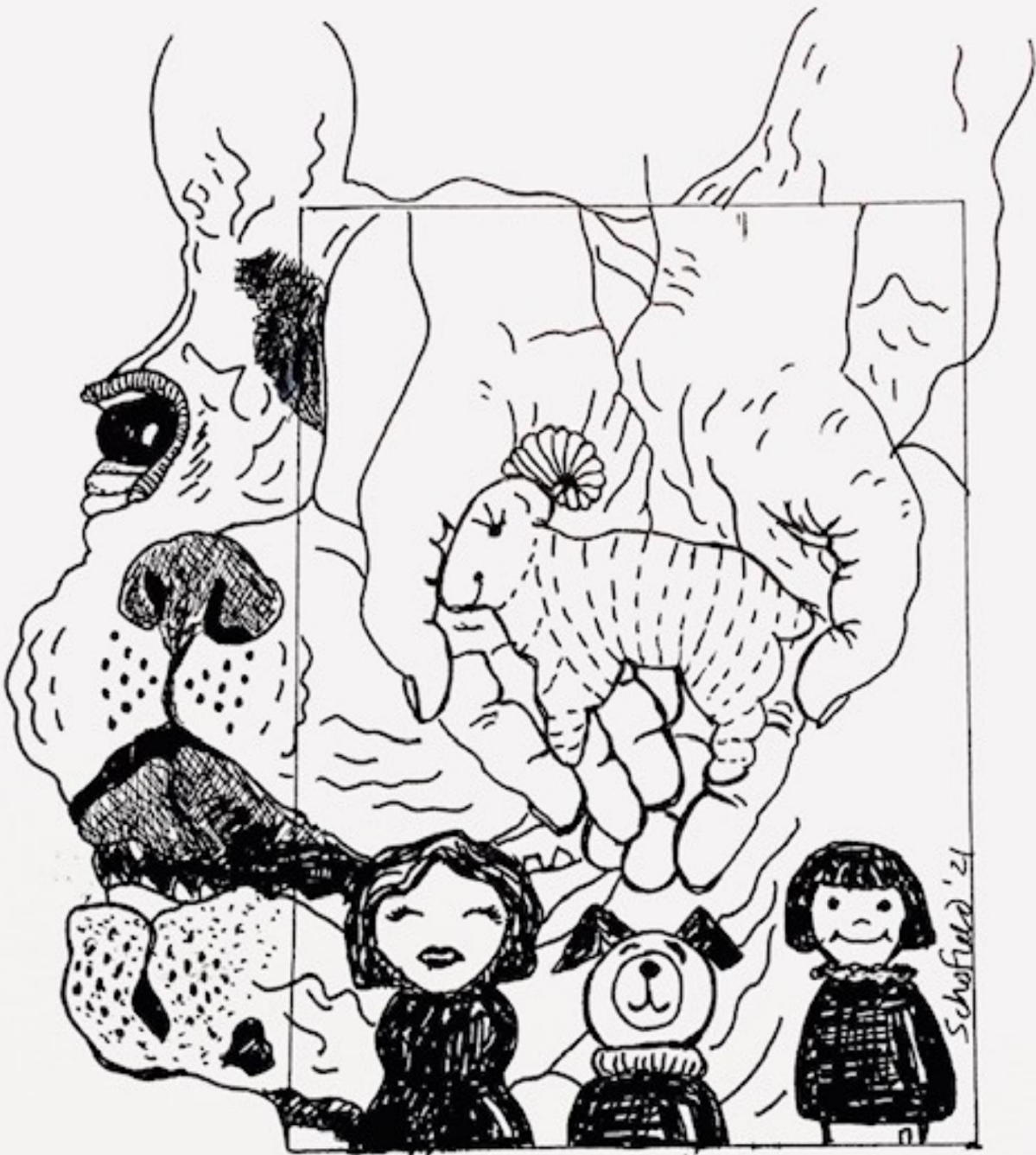
Stood tall, till I could no longer fall.

But I—yes—I—am so grateful

To be alive—I learnt to revive

I am who I am, shalt become someone who I am not

Healed—YES I AM.



FICTION

The Height of Monarchy

No one understands what it's like to be a short king. It's dehumanizing. All my subjects look down at me when I'm addressing them. I know they mock me in whispers behind my back, knights and nobles and servants alike. I've heard the name "Dwarven King" murmured behind closed doors, or the "King of Halflings," or something uncreative like that. I bet Nithi son of Northri, the king of the Northern Dwarves, and Hilgo son of Hugo, the governor of the Halfling Commonwealth, would be as annoyed as I if they knew my people go around calling me these names. I am Deminutus, son of Pavulus, king of Tampa, and warden of the West. My shadow stretches across the surrounding countryside for miles, reaching beyond the Foul Forest and the Monstrous Mountains, past the Raging River, and ending on the Snowy Summits. I deserve respect.

I've tried a number of things to increase my height, but all of them have failed. For about a fortnight I wore hidden high heels, despite being barely able to walk in them without bending my feet, despite the discomfort and pain. Alas, I still only reached the chin of my shortest servant. Unable to physically change my height, I ordered every artist who came into my castle to paint a portrait of me to make me look taller, but that didn't fool anyone. The disparity between the paintings and the actual person only made them laugh even harder. After I sentenced some of them to be executed, the laughter was confined to private chambers beyond my hearing. Still, one day as I strolled through warm and bright corridors toward my main hall, I heard a knight jesting that these beheadings were my attempt to make my subjects as tall as me. He was the next one on the block.

Once I ran out of options, I turned to my court wizard—a hunchbacked hermit twice my size called Senex. I'm not overly fond of magic, of how it creates things out of thin air. I don't trust it. But, it seemed like the only way.

"To grow in height," he said while brewing some potions, "to the Foul Forest you must go after twilight. Bring no servant, no knight. There, you shall meet a witch in the dead of night. She's a sore sight, but she'll relieve your current plight."

And so I journeyed into the Foul Forest. As soon as I stepped through the arched birch trees lining the path leading into the dark woods, I understood why the forest had been given its name. It reeked of decay. At first, the smell was unbearable, and I had to cover my nose with my cloak, but after shuffling blindly along the lightless path for a little while, I grew used to it. I was wondering how I would find the witch, unable as I was to see my own hands when I heard a chilly voice.

"If tall you want to be," the voice echoed in the deep darkness, "You need but ask me."

I hesitated. My first instinct was to draw my sword, but before it was fully free of its leather scabbard, my fists closed on thin air. Rubilac, the legendary sword that had been in my family for generations, passed from father to son since it was first found by my ancestor in a dead man's hand by a shimmering lake, disappeared in an instant. As the wind brushed the leaves above my head and caressed my bare skin with its cold touch, I suddenly realized I was naked. Completely naked. I felt exposed, defenseless, and terrified—all of which were new feelings for me. Embarrassment is one thing, but vulnerability is something else entirely. I was standing in silence, shaking and sweating when the spooky voice said once more:

"If tall you want to be, you need but ask me."

I took a deep breath, stretched my back, and said in a booming tone, "You live in *my* land, witch, and at *my* mercy. I don't *ask* but *command* you to turn me into the tallest being to have ever trodden this flat Earth."

The voice laughed. "As you wish, Your Majesty."

As the blackness surrounding me resounded with the wicked laugh of the witch, I slowly sank into unconsciousness. When I opened my eyes again, I could see the sun was high in the clear sky. Its glistening glow, despite burning my eyes, was most welcome. As I sat up, I noticed I was in the middle of a vast grass field. There were no trees in sight, only small bushes. I was surprised to see how incredibly short the grass was, considering the length of the field, and wondered how long it had taken my subjects to cut it all with their scythes, and why they had bothered. Did I order it?

Faint memories of the Foul Forest flashed through my mind then. I remembered the witch and her words and was immediately excited and frightened at the same time. Unable to tell whether the spell or incantation or whatever they call it had worked, I ran aimlessly across the plains in search of someone with whom to compare my height. I wandered for miles and miles without success. Apart from birds, who were flying strangely close to my head and seemed rather small, there was no living soul in sight. Half the sun was hidden behind the Snowy Summits and my legs were sore and shaky by the time I spotted Improcerus, my throne city, atop its hill in the horizon. It seemed small and far, but after a few steps, I reached the farmhouses surrounding its stone walls. They looked shorter than I remembered. Much shorter.

For a second I thought I had stumbled upon an elaborate dollhouse replica of my city, though I was unsure why someone would have left it on a mound in the middle of the field. But then I saw the tiny people on the battlements and felt sharp needles pricking my legs. I was so confused. Maybe I would've guessed what had happened if my attention wasn't focused on the tiny arrows piercing my bare legs. They weren't painful, but not pleasant either. I tap-danced to avoid them, accidentally stomping the miniature houses around my feet. People were screaming and shouting, bells were ringing, arrows were flying, and I was panicking. I couldn't believe it. In

my bewilderment, I tripped on a clothesline tied between two poplar trees and tumbled on top of a potato crop.

I was lying flat on my back when I heard chains rattling as my drawbridge was lowered and my portcullis raised, followed by hundreds of hurried hoofbeats slowly approaching. Raising my head, I saw a legion of toy-sized knights riding toward my outstretched foot, and as they came closer, I noticed one of them was flying my banner—a yellow giraffe on a red field. They galloped around my right side in a wide semicircle before charging straight toward my head. I raised my hand just in time to block the spears hurled at my face.

They were preparing for another charge when I stood up and ordered them to stop. The knights covered their ears and their horses reared in terror. Some of my men fell on the ground while their horses fled, and others were carried away by their frightened mounts. Only a dozen or so remained. They charged again, but this time with raised swords. I didn't want to kill my knights, but I wasn't looking forward to being stabbed either, regardless of how minuscule their blades were. That was when I had the idea of going to the castle so someone who knew me well could see my face—ideally Senex the wizard.

I turned my back to the charging knights and strode towards my city. The archers on my battlements kept firing annoying arrows at me as I carefully stepped over the wall, trying my best not to stomp on my men or buildings. Behind the gates, some of my infantrymen were waiting in a shield wall, and they were surrounded by houses. I didn't know where to step. As I searched for a spot to fit my raised right foot, I felt several sharp stings on the side of my left one, which was still outside the walls. The knights had returned. I jumped at the sudden pain, stepped on a group of my men-at-arms with raised spears, then fell face-first on top of the tiny houses in the middle of my city. That one was painful—very painful. As I struggled to stand up again, I noticed the wreckage beneath my body—broken pieces of wood, stone, and flesh, all crushed by my weight. I could hear hundreds of screeching screams and feel dozens of splinters stuck in my skin. The front of my body was completely bruised and bloodied, but I didn't know how much of that blood was my own.

Once I was back on my feet, I continued walking toward my castle. This time, as I tip-toed on the cobblestone until I reached the courtyard in front of the main hall, I was able to avoid stepping on my subjects and buildings. Once again I was harassed by my little archers, but by that point, I could barely feel the arrows anymore. I ignored them and peered into the window above the front door. Most of my best knights were inside the hall, accompanied by a few armed servants and, to my relief, my court wizard.

"Senex, it's me!" I shouted, and the stained-glass window shattered.

One of the knights then stepped forward and threw a spear at my face, piercing my right eye. I staggered back and tripped on the inner wall, falling backward and crushing another part of

my city while hitting my head against a stone bell tower. As I stared dizzily at the setting sun and the darkening sky, small people surrounded my outstretched body and started stabbing and slashing my skin. It wasn't long before I lost consciousness.

I awoke in the middle of the path inside the Foul Forest, clothed and armed again. Although it still felt as though my body was covered in needles, I didn't have a single cut or bruise. This time I could see myself and the surrounding trees because of the sunlight piercing through the leaves overhead. A bit further along the path I saw a house—old, rotten, and covered in ivy. On the front porch sat an old lady with a chilling smile.

I turned around and left the forest as quickly as I could and returned to the city, which was intact and once again loomed over me. As I walked, I was glad to hear mocking whispers and hushed laughs among the people again, as opposed to angry shouts and terrified screams. Since then, I haven't fretted about my height ever again.

Mya Chidiac

'Til Death

I was 18 years old when I first met the Grim Reaper.

My miserable form lay crumpled on the ground, tears flowing freely from my eyes, hands moving up and down in a sorry attempt at CPR as I wracked my brain for memories of the first aid class I'd taken three years ago. Abandoned on the ground, my phone relayed the gentle voice of a 9-1-1 dispatcher reassuring me of all the things I wanted so badly to hear: an ambulance was only minutes away, I was doing a wonderful job, and my father would be so proud. The way she said it felt so final, as if he was already gone, as if the possibility of his survival was nothing more than the delusional musings of a girl already in mourning. I counted out my compressions as I tuned out her hollow words, indulging in my depravity a little while longer. One, two, three, four, and pray that you know what you're doing. Nine, ten, eleven, twelve, and tune out your grief, denying what you know to be true. Reach fifteen, and breathe life into your dying father, desperation written in the shallowness of every breath.

Sudden cardiac arrest; I wouldn't get a name for it until hours later until the doctors explained it in convoluted medical terms as I turned to ash in the waiting room. Newly orphaned and completely alone, I asked to see him, and a kind nurse rubbed my back as I collapsed at his bedside. And then he appeared: ethereal, beautiful, wielding a scythe of considerable size, furrowing his brows in response to the recognition in my eyes. I watched my father's ghost rise from his cold body, and, upon exchanging some secret words, the two left the room as I stood there, frozen in time. In the days that followed, I would write it off as a hallucination, as a mere trick of the light, but the Grim Reaper's face would haunt my dreams for years to come.

Five years later, in the middle of the night, the slurred cries of my roommate roused me from my sleep, alerting me to the inevitable. I found her on the bathroom floor, shaking uncontrollably, eyes widened as if seeing a ghost. Her skin was like fire, her pupils dilated beyond belief, and as I dialed 9-1-1 for the second time in my life, her broken body went still. Pulseless.

In.

Out.

How long had she been sitting there, waiting for somebody to come save her?

In.

Out.

What did she take? Why hadn't I seen the warning signs earlier?

In.

Out.

How many people would have to die before I could do anything to help it?

Like a broken record, the voice of the 9-1-1 dispatcher told me to turn her on her side, unlock the front door, and stay on the line. I couldn't bring myself to say that it wouldn't be necessary anymore; I couldn't say anything at all. My breaths came in quick and shallow intervals, and just then, as I hyperventilated on the linoleum floor, he appeared to me again.

I would never stop being transfixed by his beauty. Golden curls, freckles, sunkissed skin; a beacon of light in the darkest room. His warm eyes met my own, pools of the sweetest honey, and his forehead creased in an unreadable expression. "Valerie," he said, "nod if you can see me."

So I did.

He reached out to wipe away a fallen tear, his skin warm against my own. "What a mystery," he mumbled, more to himself than anything. "I'm sorry for this."

And before I could ask what he meant, a swing of his scythe revealed all I needed to know. Just like my father, my roommate's soul rose from her body, but unlike before, the Reaper disappeared with her before they'd exchanged a single word.

It was as if he'd put me in a trance. In his absence, reality came flooding back, my body crumbling under the stress of the night's events. The paramedics said I was in shock. Only I knew the truth.

I reached mid-adulthood. I earned my medical degree, I began to practice as a surgeon, I found a way to make a difference in the world. But on the occasion that there was nothing more I could do, the telltale sound of a flatline would summon him. Some days I would watch him move in and out of hospital rooms, carrying wayward souls in his eternal light, and he would smile at me, and I would hold onto each moment as if it were my last.

Later, I would linger after the death of a patient, and we'd talk before the reaping. He would praise me for my work, and I'd ask him eager questions about the afterlife, to which he could give no answer. "If you were to know what happens," he said, "it would affect how you'd

live the rest of your life." I could see the truth in his words, but it didn't stop me from trying. The only thing stronger than my curiosity was his resolution.

In the end, I met the same fate as my father. Sudden cardiac arrest; it comforted me to know that this was something we'd share. With my dying breath, he reached out his hand and asked, "are you ready to see what's next?" And of course, the answer was yes, I'd been wondering about it for years, after all, but when I tried to say the words, I faltered.

I had made a life for myself. I had saved the lives of a million others. Was I really ready to go?

But then I looked into those honey eyes, and something like eternity washed over me—an endless calm, a deeper understanding. Reduced to my bare essentials, I took his hand and said, "show me."

So he did.

Angus Edward Cochran

Anxiety

I feel the scales under my skin prickling my soft outer tissue. I feel reptilian eyes where human ones should be when I blink. I hear the panic in my voice before I speak: I need to get to the Ballfield down the road. I see my living room tilting at a 45° angle. This panic attack isn't my first one.

I don my black wool armour to protect against the wind's gnashing teeth. I also don matching black gauntlets; however, I leave my face bare. The wind kissing my skin keeps the scales subdermal. I find that a bit of exposure to the night's cool air works wonders for grounding me.

I love that my parents have learned that I need my space, that I'll return, that I am overwhelmed; that I need to ground myself.

I slam the door behind me, and my inner dragon reveals itself in my visible breath. It doesn't want to be lulled; it wants to fly. I leave faint tracks in the fresh snow while I walk across the driveway, the treads of my boots clawing at the pavement. My dragon wishes that its large leathery wings could carry my carapace from Suburbia. I don't want the cold; I don't want anxiety. I want calm. Calm like falling into a deep sleep.

I stop at the four-way before descending the hill to the Ballfield.

Why am I made this way? I ask myself. God, why did you need to give me such an internal treasure trove to attract dragons?

While my dark surroundings feature a fresh sprinkling of snow, it feels like I'm walking through waist-deep snow drifts, skulking slowly into the silent night. I get to the Ballfield. I feel the scales pressing down on my shoulders the Ballfield wasn't what I needed. Usually, the comfort of summer memories calms me, but the snow obscures their joy. I can't find the comfort I need. The snow starts flying and soon I can't see my nose. The wind's howling deafens me. My ears throb. My heart is in my throat, trying to climb onto my tongue to bid this world goodnight.

Where can I go if this place won't calm me?

HONK!

I turn my head to see a car's headlights swerving away from me. I didn't realise that I stumbled into the street. My dragonhide won't protect me from collisions if it can protect me from anything.

I steel my resolve and walk deeper into Suburbia. I start walking towards the School. The blizzard begins to dissipate, slowly. While my gauntleted hands feel exposed without a sword and shield to protect me, I do the next best thing. I begin humming Sondheim. The draconic vapours from my mouth lessen.

The heartfelt lyrics lull my dragon and propel my legs in the cold night. While the falling snow still quiets the streets, my voice is loud enough for myself. My walk blurs till I touch the School's lifeless brick exterior. I turn around. I feel the purpling of my claws within their gauntlets. They yearn to be warm at home.

The snow has slowed back to a dusting where the flakes flutter, falling from Heaven. I now see the streetlights hanging overhead, guiding my entire walk. I retrace my claw marks back to the Ballfield and I see where my clear tracks grew from anxious chaos. Home is on the other side of that chaos. My new claw marks begin to jumble together with the old: the wind quietly picks up again.

I need to get home, I think.

The wind starts screaming. The cold sets in, burning my face. My dragon begins to rumble warmly in my chest again. I need to return to my cave and lay motionless on my piled treasure between stacks of books and dirty laundry.

My bed will comfort me, I think while this new blizzard rages.

I feel my inner wings trying to burst through my armour. I scramble back up the hill. The snow is so blindingly white that I fumble forward in the haze. The wind is whipping by so fast that the snow constructs a solid wall around me. I can't move forward. I flail about in my white cocoon. I beat failingly against the snow wall and slowly crumple to the ground.

I begin to hum softly. The melody fills my cheeks and my ears, and the top of my cocoon cracks to reveal the streetlight before Home. The wind slows and I can now push through the wall. My furry caprice cracks through my cocoon and I walk quietly back to the front door. Before turning the doorknob, I take three deep breaths through my nose—hold—and then release them through my mouth. My ever-prickling scales remained subdermal. I remained grounded. This

clarity provided by the breathing can only come after the trials of taming my restless internal dragon.

I turn around to look one last time at the night. The dusting obscured my first set of tracks and only my latest across the lawn remains. I may get some grief from Father about messing up his snow-blanketed lawn, but I don't care. At this moment, I am at peace. I will need to walk again, probably tomorrow night, and that is OK because at this moment the world is still. I am still. The wind is still. The snow muffles the murmur of the white halogen on the corner so that only its light remains. Everything is as it should be.

I re-enter my Home to find my parents watching TV and sipping hot chocolate. My father asks if I'll watch wrestling with him at 9 and I refuse. He seemed saddened by my curt refusal.

I need to work on that, I think.

I retire to my room to watch YouTube. I journal and then go to bed. My dreams are quiet, a just reward for helping my draconic roommate go to sleep. My troubles can wait until tomorrow morning when he will re-awaken. I'll have to do the slumbering dance again.

But that is life, and every day I get a little better at dancing my part.

Jessica Hannaford

Full of I-Love-Yous

Sal and Kayla sat on the hardwood floor of their apartment. The people living below them were playing an EDM song of some sort even though it was only 10:30 in the morning. The muffled bass thumped through the ceiling; making the whole house feel like it had a heartbeat.

The walls were bare, painted the rented apartment beige that never looked clean, even when it was freshly painted. There were a few marks where tape had pulled off bits of paint and where furniture had scratched the drywall when they had first moved in four years ago. The walls had been full of pictures of the two of them together: at Niagara Falls, at a party, on a hike. The walls had been full of posters of concerts they went to and movies they were constantly rewatching. Now the walls were empty. Sal wondered if they would be repainted or left all scuffed up.

The living room was bare, even the colourful curtains had been taken down from the bay window behind where the couple was sitting. The morning light made the room almost too hot and showed dust particles floating in the air, seemingly forgotten by gravity. On their right, there was an archway leading to the tiny kitchen, with the yellow wood cabinets and the laminate countertops. If Sal concentrated hard enough, she could still almost smell the time Kayla forgot she was making pancakes, leaving the pan on the stove for almost an hour and causing the whole house to fill with smoke. Sal smiled softly at the memory, even though it hadn't been funny at the time. It had resulted in one of their biggest fights, and Sal had called Kayla thoughtless, an insult that still hung between them to this day.

Kayla laid back on the hardwood, staring up at the ceiling. Sal looked over at her.

"The end of an era," Kayla said, basically to herself. She had been speaking like this for the past week, saying things out loud, but never to Sal. It was annoying, but Sal didn't want to fight anymore, so she just let it go. She laid back beside her girlfriend, well, her ex-girlfriend now she supposed.

Thump, thump, thump, went the house's heartbeat.

The ceiling was that terrible popcorn ceiling from the seventies. Sal remembered how they had almost not even rented this place because Kayla hated the ceilings. Sal's next place had popcorn ceilings as well. She wondered if Kayla's did.

"The end of an era," Sal repeated, letting the words float around the room with the dust particles, trying to fight against the gravity of them. The truth of them. She looked over at Kayla, studying the profile of her face. Her smooth, freckly, olive skin and her nose with a bump in the middle from when she had broken it by getting hit by a volleyball in middle school. Sal looked at her dark eyelashes and her curly hair and remembered how it felt around her hands.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

She felt a lump rising in her throat. "Will we ever talk again?" She whispered. She felt foolish asking that question, but she needed to ask it. Sal needed to know if she would ever be able to tell Kayla about when she had her weird recurring dream about losing all her teeth, or complain about her colleague Rick at work who never completed his reports on time, or laugh about the

newest episode of the Bachelor, which they had both started watching ironically but now watched very much unironically.

Kayla looked over at her, and Sal could see her eyes were wet.

"I don't know," she replied, her voice raspy from holding back tears.

"I love you," Sal told her, probably for the last time. She thought of all the I-love-yous said in this apartment, how each room might be full of the phrase, how it could burst out through the windows. And this was the last one. Kayla smiled sadly.

"I loved you too, Sal," she said, before sitting up and wiping her eyes.

And the people below them turned off the music.

Sal almost felt her heart join in the silence.

Audrey Marie Hill

Gravel Roads

I remember the day my daddy went away.

I was only eight years old, living in a town that no one ever seemed to visit, or ever seemed to leave. The roads were paved before my brother was born, and were celebrated despite numerous potholes. My mom said that it made it easier for people to drive to the mill every day. My dad was amongst them. Sometimes he'd come home long after dinner, even after bedtime. He was always quiet as if he was trying to sneak back in without anyone noticing. He always looked tired. He was frustrated, too, though it was hard to see at the time.

Being from a small town, you get used to hearing your business floating around. My mom used to say that tiny towns breed the nosey, and our town must've been the tiniest town in the world. I was guilty of it, too. My bedroom was attached to the living room, where my parents argued the most. It was always when my mom thought we were asleep. When they'd fight, I'd scurry to the closet and press my ear against the wall, trying to listen in. Sometimes I'd fall asleep like that, and wake up in the morning with my comforter bundled around me. Ghosts, I'd assumed, were eavesdropping too.

One night, my dad found me. My parents were whispering, which scared me more than the yelling. I thought it might've been about the mill, but it was hard to tell. The fight was brief. My mom got the last word in, as she often did, and shortly after, my father's familiar footsteps began to approach. To my alarm, the door to my room was slowly pushed open. My dad poked his head in. I was worried that he'd be angry - I wasn't supposed to be awake, and my mom had scolded me for eavesdropping before. Instead, though, my dad walked in and paused at the doorway of the closet, peering at the glow-in-the-dark stars I'd asked him to put on the closet ceiling years before. He looked down at me with a tired smile.

"Is this your castle?" He asked, reaching down to ruffle my hair. I smoothed it back down.

"I'm hiding." I lowered my voice. "Monsters."

He nodded. "Well, Maggie, they won't find you in here."

People liked to say that my dad was angry. I think he was just sad.

I remember the day they took my daddy away. I was sitting in the living room with my brother, watching TV after dinner. While the roads in our town were paved, our driveway was still made of gravel. Every night I welcomed the crackling sound of stone beneath tires, but it had come early that night. As the car door slammed shut, the phone began to ring, and my

mom picked up. My brother and I raced to the door. When my dad stepped inside, my mom slammed the phone down and raced to stand between us. She looked frightened.

"What did you do?" she whispered. My dad looked at all of us, hiding his hands behind his back. I knew what he'd done, though no one ever told me.

"It was an accident," my dad breathed. "I-I don't even know why..."

"Sam," my mom said shakily to my brother, waving towards my room. After my dad nodded to us, my brother took my hand and pulled me away, shutting the door behind us. Wordlessly, he followed me to the closet and sat in the doorway as I leaned against the wall. The sirens came soon after, followed by heavy footsteps entering our home. I didn't hear a struggle. I didn't even hear my dad speak. All I knew was that he was gone.

I used the closet less and less afterward; monsters began to lurk far beyond those thin walls. Tiny towns breed the nosey, but they also breed hate.

In the eight years since I've left town, the roads have scarcely changed. My brother just sold the house; with mom gone, there wasn't any use in keeping it. I almost didn't go to see it. I just came back for the funeral. My brother and I pretend that the house didn't mean much to us, but I guess that it's hard to lie about those things.

The house had been emptied shortly after my mom passed away. I hadn't truly grasped what it would look like without us. It was a husk, haunted by faded laughter. Walking inside, I found myself stepping around the furniture that no longer remained. The only evidence of our existence were dark patches on the carpet where our things had once been. I visited my bedroom last after an hour of careful empty room inspection.

I went to the window first, which groaned when I lifted the heavy frame open to allow the late fall breeze in. As I stepped back, I found myself wondering if I would've felt like I belonged if my old things remained. They all sit in a storage unit now, tucked away in a dark corner I'll probably never see again.

My fingers grazed the wall where posters once sat. The room still felt familiar, like strangers on the subway. Then, there was the closet. It was empty now, just as it had been when I was younger, with the door hanging ajar. I walked over slowly, and after lingering in the doorway, I slid down to the floor and pressed my back against the wall. I could see the grey sky so clearly through the window now. My fingers dug into the carpet. As the minutes passed, snowflakes began to fill the view. My breath fogged in front of me. I looked up to the ceiling and I couldn't help but smile; one glow-in-the-dark star still remained. It shone as brightly as I remembered.

Will I hear him again? I close my eyes and press my ear against the wall.

Silence.

Abeer Qureshi

You

9th May 2019

You beg me to let you read my diary. You do it so often that I have memorized the way you do it. You start by asking what I am writing. Even though you know what. Then you say "Oh please let me read some. Let me read a page, okay a line. Let me read a line." When I say no, you pout, and then we both laugh. I bet you don't realize that my heart flutters knowing *you* want to read something I wrote. But I can't let you read it. Not even a line. How can I? They are all about you.

You. Where can I begin about you? Maybe the first time we met, or the first second I saw you. I remember. All of it. I remember it like it is happening right now. I can see the flickering light behind you, the rain crashing on the window, the muddy shoes I was wearing, and your face. I remember your face, so perfectly. You turned to me, and I felt my heart do a 'thump thump'. It was so loud. Surely, the girl next to me heard it too. You were wearing your navy hoodie and black jeans. I tried smiling but every part of me was suddenly stiff. The entire room paused. Nothing moved, nothing made a sound. Not even the rain. It was just you and I enhanced in a moment. Of course, this was just my point of view.

Now tell me, how can I let you read this? That's right, I can't.

25th May 2019

I think of you before I sleep. I like to make fantasies about us in my head. I know that's all they will ever be. You made it very clear that I am your "friend". I have tried convincing myself to let my feelings go. But you are so close to my heart, that to do that, I need to let *you* go. And I can't let you go. I keep thinking "what if...?", while being completely aware that you don't and won't ever see me that way. I am sure this is what being in denial is like. You don't make it easier for me either. You are kind and gentle. You make me laugh and you said- you said that I have a "beautiful soul."

20th June 2019

Do you believe in love at first sight? I partially believe it and that is only because I was captivated completely the very moment I laid my eyes on you. If I hadn't met you, I would still believe that it only happens in books. I think the heart and the mind both need to fall in love. The heart falls in love way faster than the mind. The mind, it takes its time. Sometimes, the heart falls in love the very second it sees the other person. But the mind catches up slowly. And that is how you can partially fall in love at first sight. Is that how you felt when you first saw her? Did you also have a pause in time when your eyes met for the first time? How could you not? She is beautiful and me- I am just regular.

1st July 2019

I have accepted that we are only travelers in each other's story. I know that one day I will remember you as the one who got away, and you won't remember me at all. You would be happy living in a house with your children and her. I don't hate her, even when I want to. She is lucky to have a gem like you. You are a gem. But you aren't my gem. You are my friend. And I can't become a villain in your story by having these feelings for you. So now, every time you cross my mind, I will think of you only as my friend. Maybe if I pretend long enough, I will believe it.

26th August 2019

How can you stay night after night on the phone with me and talk about her? I am sorry, I am selfish. But how can you love her after the misery she has caused you? I know I am not as beautiful as her but was there really no point when you considered me? Even when I wiped every tear from your face that she caused? Even when I bled with you when she put thorns in your soft petal skin? Even when I helped you clean all the mess she made? Did you not stop for a second and think that way for me when I was the only friend left in your life? I didn't do all of this just because I am in love with you. I did it because I also love you like the way you love me.

I truly envy her. One, because you love her. Two, because she could unlove you. And she didn't even try. I couldn't get either of those things, even when I tried.

18th April 2020

The first time I told you about him, I wanted you to get jealous. As I said that he makes me happy, I wanted you to crumble up. I wanted you to think of all the moments we had and miss them. I wanted us playing cards, walking in the parks, our hands entwined together while watching a horror movie, water fights – all of those and more memories to play in your head. I felt guilty immediately. But I am sure you didn't feel hurt any of the times I talked about him. And you know what is really surprising? I am not hurt that you didn't get jealous. You are my best friend. I cherish you and I always will. But now I have him.

Him. He is something else. He has the most beautiful blue eyes I have ever seen. He puts his controller down to listen to me, the way you used to. He always pays for my food, the way you used to. He calls me to make sure I am okay, the way you used to.

16th May 2020

Today you asked me how I was, and I lied. I lied and told you that I was happy. You replied "You deserve it. You deserve the world. I am so happy that you are happy." I know you would have rushed over if you heard my voice crack. I know you will get your knuckles bloody punching him if you see the bruises he gives me. And I probably should be honest, but I am scared. You don't know what he can do.

17th May 2020

You knew something was wrong. You always know. You kept asking me. You wouldn't stop. "Tell me." "Tell me some." "Tell me why you are sad?" "Tell me what's wrong?" "Tell me so I can help." "Tell me, is it him?"

"Did he hurt you?" You asked and I cried.

20th October 2020

"Let me take you someplace sweet, someplace beautiful. Just us two. It will be a place where no one can see you. I have always been so jealous of the boys you talked to. So, this will be our place. Only ours. We will dance. We can dance the entire night if that is what you want. I want to see the moonlight glisten on your face. I know you will look beautiful. You always do. You always have." – You repeat your words to me as you read my diary.

NON-FICTION



Alex and I

I see him in the past, imagining worlds. Back then we were inseparable: we played together wherever and whenever we could find some privacy, be it at a family get-together or at home. We were happy. We didn't know much about the world yet, but we learned together. We both learned about the hardships of life, but Alex learned mostly from his parents, about how to be someone in the world, while I learned mostly from my brothers, about how to be sane in the world. However, as our lessons grew apart, so did we.

I see him now, sipping his french vanilla and typing away at his keyboard. Alex has big dreams. He wants to change the world with his writing, and he works hard for that dream—maybe too hard, though he'll never think it's hard enough. He worries too much. He cares too much. Why can't he sit beside me in the Chill Room and... well, chill? I ask the question, but I know the answer. Alex will never relax, not until he has fulfilled his dream, not until he can hold a book with his name printed on the front and a picture of him, with an eyebrow raised, on the back.

I still see him, struggling to write, struggling to come up with ideas, struggling to live up to the expectations set on him. I wish I could talk to him—tell him that everything's okay, that he doesn't have to worry so much. But even if I did, he wouldn't listen to me. He doesn't listen to me anymore. And why would he? What have I achieved? Alex has won an honourable mention in a short story competition, published essays, short stories, poems, and more in journals and magazines, a high GPA, and some academic awards and scholarships. Not great

deeds, but more than me. *Way* more than me. And, unfortunately, achievements are all he sees—all he cares about. He wants to be someone in the world, which is why he lives in a shameful culture, even if those around him don't. What others think of him matters more than what he thinks of himself, and certainly more than what I think of him. But I can't say much—I live in a guilt culture. I try to be sane, but once my guilt grows unbearable, I call Alex. He's my saviour, but also my doom.

I see him in the future, years from now. I can see a small room with a large bookshelf filled with coloured stripes of various sizes, an L-shaped desk adjacent to it, a window to its right—letting a ray of sunshine settle on the open notebook laying beside the keyboard—and, to its left, Alex's university diploma. He'll spend most of his time in that room, working towards his dream, working to build his image as a writer. But when will he make time for me? Will there be a Chill Room in that house? Maybe his Chill Room will be the one I just described, though the word "chill" will have a different connotation then. And I wonder if there will be a place in that room for me.

OUTATIME

The other day I saw an omen. As I trudged up Citadel Hill to clock in for the day's shift and approached the main gate of the fort, tromping up the sidewalk that circled the glacis from the direction of the artillery park, I saw two beautiful, full-antlered bucks trotting side by side in perfect unison toward me. For a moment I thought they were trained; they were so lovely and synchronous. I was sure the trainer would appear behind them, grinning at the awed spectators as the animals passed by, but this was not the case. All I could see were a couple of ladies, who had evidently startled them, by the front gate of the fort and who had moved out of the way to allow the deer to escape. In my shock, I nearly neglected to cross over to the opposite side of the road to let the creatures continue safely on their trajectory down toward the grassy hill behind me.

Even in the bright, clear morning, I wasn't sure of what I'd seen. It seemed unbelievable. When I told my coworkers about this experience, I received two responses: "Wow, you saw the spirit of the citadel!" and "What were they doing here? They don't belong here. This is a city!" The former statement refers to the fact that the stag is a prominent symbol of the citadel. Its image is plastered all over the fort: on the walls, on the trophies, on gift shop trinkets. The latter statement, rooted more in physical practicality, refers to the fact that downtown Halifax, though perhaps once the feeding and breeding grounds for local wildlife, has since become a hostile environment for these creatures. The image, then, was steeped in contradiction.

Sitting in the kiosk, I thought about the meaning behind my experience. It was too bizarre, too surreal not to mean something. I sailed through a stream of ideas and landed beside H.G. Wells and his famous time machine, staring out over our empty world, lying under an engorged, red sun. The image is inherently unnatural, and out of place. The first time I read this book, I felt an existential unease that formed a dense metal ball in my stomach and sent light dizziness to my head.

I like reading science fiction. It allows me a chance to relax into escapism. I take comfort in the presence of humans in the future universe, conquering time and space, going forth and multiplying, colonizing dead planets, and bringing them to life. This is not Wells's approach to the genre. In his most famous works, he is far more pessimistic, even nihilistic in his views on the future of humanity in the face of crisis. His humans are helpless, succumbing to whatever apocalypse descends on them; they are never saved by their own hands.

This past summer at the citadel I sometimes found myself debating with a few of my coworkers about the right strategy for dealing with the housing crisis facing Halifax, having often passed the little tent village that had sprung up in one of the nearby parks. Local government doesn't seem like the answer to me, as this body seems unwilling or unable to protect citizens who have been forcibly ejected from their homes again and again in an environment that has become increasingly hostile towards them. What other avenues are there, though, for fixing this problem which seems insurmountable? I don't know whether grassroots movements are enough, or whether this population, at one time settled, will become nomadic to survive. Only time will tell.

I love watching deer. They are beautiful and elegant and walk on long stalk-like legs, lowering their pretty heads to the grass and the flowers, chewing quickly while their ears swivel this way and that, alert to any danger, disappearing from the scene at the first sign of peril. In many ways, they have perfected the art of escape. They, too, must live nomadic lives as, returning to old homestead pastures, they are met with industrial monstrosities that have replaced their ancestral stomping grounds. I wonder what it's like to be labeled a pest and ejected from what was once your home. I hope my citadel spirits had a chance to rest on the glacis and take in a meal before they had to press on in search of untouched sanctuary.

Working at the citadel leads to learning a lot of terminology for military structures. The Cavalier building, for example, doesn't refer to horses (as most of our customers believe), but rather to a defensive fortification on a raised platform within a larger fortification (in our case, the roof of the building that, historically, was covered in cannons) to be able to fire over the walls of that larger fortification. Glacis, a term I have already used twice, refers to a slope inclined upwards to the wall of the fort. Attackers would need to scale this hill while avoiding a hail of bullets and bursting projectiles, trying to find the enemy through a thick maritime mist—a near-impossible task. The etymology of the word is French and describes a slope that has been made slippery from ice. The term is related to “glacier,” which is a mass of ice that slowly moves across the planet, formed by accumulated, compact snow. Only ten percent of the Earth is still covered in glacial ice. It is storing sixty-nine percent of the world's fresh water. It's possible it could be gone within my lifetime.

I remember a conversation I once had with a girl from Austria. I mentioned that I've always wanted to visit and that I imagine they often have white Christmases. “We used to,”

she replied, “but not since I was a kid.” I am always amazed at someone who can still shrug off climate change when anecdotes like this continue to build out the public consciousness about the issue; I find it chilling when a denier finally admits they might have been wrong. Who wouldn’t want to escape into the narratives of cyclicalality, to run from responsibility, when facing certain possibilities seems so daunting? What does it mean when those comforting thoughts evaporate into an intangible mist?

The citadel, with all its museums and artifacts, is like so many little time capsules within a larger fossilized capsule. There is a certain optimism in events that are meticulously recorded for future generations to appreciate and enjoy. Each iteration of the fort has been preserved in miniature in the Shaping of the Hill exhibit. One might think they had stepped into the past as interpreters representing 19th-century soldiers describe their daily life as a 78th Highlander; this is part of the living history program at the fort. The clocktower out front has been reproduced time and again in paintings and sketches and photographs. Our brave dead of numerous wars are immortalized in memorials and on plaques. At night, visitors are offered ghost tours through the facility; they are led through dark, empty corridors as the reddish-yellow glow of swinging lanterns guides the way.

Wells sets his famous time-travel story in the year 802,701 AD. His end of the world event is centuries after that. If contemporary science is anything to go by, this estimate is wildly optimistic. Each new article I read on the subject brings to mind the same image of the flaming, whirling license plate, ejected from Doc Brown’s DeLorean, which reads in big blue letters:

OUTATIME

As I continued up the glaxis, I had to look back at the fleeing deer to confirm: *Yes, it's happening. Yes, it happened.*

