

BESIDE The Point

DREAMS

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Issue #8 2020

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EDITORIAL

Manifest

In creating this year's edition of *Beside the Point*, we challenged writers and photographers to respond to the theme of "dreams." First off, this may seem a simple task: a dream takes place when you sleep, and your subconscious mind conjures a series of images. But upon reading the selected pieces, you might notice that, for many, dreams push boundaries and take us out of our comfort zone. For others, dreams are the goals that they strive to achieve.

From the cover image with its cloudscape to the closing poem "Like the Sun," this issue reaches from earth to sky and across dimensions. Within this journal, you will find fantasy stories that question what dreams are and if we can make them come true, and realistic pieces that take on the idea that human struggle lies at the heart of a person's dream. Whether tackling omnipotence or addressing mortality, each piece explores a different facet of the gem made of dreams.

The works in this collection will remind you what fierceness feels like in the bones, and why life is worth fighting for every hard step of the way. Our authors touch on hope, despair, change, nostalgia, realism, and the supernatural. Our photographers complement these themes with a rich visual language of light, shadow, texture, and shape. Putting together a body of work that encompasses the theme of dreams was an exciting challenge.

When we look up at the sky at night, no one really looks at a single star. Stars shine together in constellations. This is what *Beside the Point* is about. It was a privilege to work on this year's journal, as we all have differing ideas and opinions, but as a team, we allowed our voices, along with our artists' visions, to craft the issue. We also worked with a new graphic designer to create a visually pleasing book, one that we aim to have you reaching for in the years to come. We hope you enjoy the pieces as much as we do and have a wonderful time getting lost in the dreamscape.

—Rachel Harvey, with contributions from the editorial team

POETRY

Uprising

By James Clarke

I wonder who I would be without you,
A life separate from your tyrant reign.
No inner turmoil, devoid of that pain.
Someone who could see their ambitions through.

All smiles as I conquer goals, old and new.
No longer pitied or seen in disdain,
Nor burdened by this foul façade I feign.
I bask in fantasies I wish were true.

I won't deny you the role you have played.
I have long suffered under your regime.
But you made me brave, wise, and defiant.

A pain fraught existence that I wouldn't trade.
I don't need that fantasy, that pipe dream.
Your reign ends now, I won't be compliant.

PHOTOGRAPHY

Major Arcana #1

By Rebecca Wheeler



SCIENCE FICTION

Somnium

By James Clarke

One dot. Two dots. Three dots. No dots. One dot. Two dots. Three dots. No dots. Repeat. It's been like this for over a half hour, grey dots flashing over a vast white nothingness. Typical Somnium bullshit. I guess I'm not getting a dream at all tonight, at least last night I got half of one.

"Somnium, I'd like to speak with a representative," I say as I scan my blank periphery. I don't know what I expect to see in the void.

"Your request can't be processed at this time, please try again later," a cheery woman's voice replies.

"Well shit, I'll just wake up then."

"Request denied. Seven hours and seventeen minutes until peak beneficial wake up time," the same sickeningly saccharine voice pipes back.

"Oh lovely. You know what Somnium, you can get fuc-"

"A Somnium representative will be with you shortly."

"About damn time, but you can still get fuc-"

"Somnium would like to thank you for your continued patronage."

I crafted a dream of my own once, that was before my parents added me to the family plan. I was four or five at the time, back when Somnium was only tinkering with headsets and not our actual heads.

I dreamed I was a starship pilot racing in some sort of celestial Indy 500, doing laps around the Solar System. My navy-blue racer had a pockmarked patina to it, much worse for wear compared to the other machines.

“G’day mate.” Banjo, my old Blue Heeler, was my co-pilot, and he spoke English with an Australian accent, fittingly. Even though we were at the helm of this beaten-up lemon, we were still bossing it. Weaving and bullying our way through the pack as we circled the Galilean moons on our approach to Jupiter. The planet’s Great Red Spot looked like the all-knowing eye of a malevolent giant. One of those pine tree air fresheners dangled from the rear-view mirror, only instead of pine it gave off an aroma of buttered popcorn. I remember that dream in great detail. I must have had other dreams when I was young, I don’t know why I latched on to that one in particular. I like to think my developing imagination thought this little adventure was its masterpiece and backed up a hard copy.



“Somnium, how long until wake-up time?” I stare at the flashing grey dots.

“Six hours and eleven minutes.”

“This is ridiculous.”

My surroundings quiver a little before turning into a violent rumble. A casual office begins to construct itself out of pieces of the void. Colour begins bleeding out and consumes the freshly rendered furniture and decor. I’m caught off guard as I feel my body sink back into a hot pink beanbag chair. A portal in the room’s ceiling opens up; a desk and another beanbag chair fall out of it. Seconds later, a blurry mass lands headfirst in the chair. It collapses into a blob before taking the form of a bespectacled butler. A Somnium avatar. The portal makes a whooshing noise as it closes.

“Good night Mr. Reynolds, how can I be of assistance?” the avatar asks in the plummiest English accent I’ve ever heard.

“I haven’t had a decent dream in weeks, and I wanted to file a complaint actually.”

“I see, what constitutes a decent dream to you?”

“You could start by actually giving me a dream and I could tell you if I thought it was decent or not.”

“I don’t understand,” the avatar says.

“Of course you don’t. Look, I haven’t had a full night’s dream in like two weeks, is it my problem or is it on your end?”

“Did you administer the supplement properly?”

“*Orally, first at seven, and then again at eleven, yeah I did. Jinx.*” I talk over the avatar as we both recite the Somnium jingle.

The avatar furrows its brow at me.

“Most perplexing. Somnium would like access to your medical records, do I have your permission?”

“Aw, so sweet of you to ask. Yes, you may, what does it matter? You would have accessed them anyway, right?”

“Mr. Reynolds, this is just conjecture, of course, but looking at your records I believe you’ve built up an immunity to our current supplement. The quality and quantity of your dreaming experiences are going to be adversely affected because of this. Fortunately for you, a more potent supplement is currently in the research and development stage. We’re predicting a release for the fourth quarter of next year.”

“Are you kidding? It’s March of this year!”

“Somnium would like to thank you for your continued patronage.” The avatar’s form flickers and fades.

*I crafted a dream of my own once,
that was before my parents added
me to the family plan.*

“I’d like to cancel my account. Now please!” I demand before the avatar can disengage. The avatar ceases flickering and glares right at me, right into my soul. I’ve been craving a nightmare experience like this for months.

“Mr. Reynolds, I see you’ve been a customer with us for nearly twenty years. Perhaps you would be interested in a five per-cent discount on the island vacation package.”

“No, I’m not interested. You said it yourself the experience would be adversely affected. So please just cancel my account.”

“Mr. Reynolds, I assure you, you don’t want to miss the upcoming Famous Dictators of History series.”

“I’ll pass on that one, thanks.”

“Would you be interested in a free month trial of the basic modifier pack? Lucky rabbit’s foot, unlimited funds, charisma toggle.”

“No, just cancel my account!”

“Breast augments,” the avatar says in an amorous, breathy voice as it quickly transforms into a buxom, red-haired woman.

“Redheads don’t really do it for me, love. I have a type, and it’s stuffy English butlers.”

“Very well,” The buxom avatar says in the butler’s voice before reverting back into the butler again.

“Oh mama, yeah, that’s the one,” I say, fanning my wrist in front of my face.

“Would you like this avatar to feature in your dreams? That can be arranged.”

“As a matter of fact, I would. Just in a dream of my own creation. So just cancel my damn account.”

“Mr. Reynolds, only five percent of our former customers ever experience auditory dreams without Somnium supplements and fewer than one percent have visual dreams, are you sure you want to cancel your subscription?”

“Yes, absolutely.”



Two months have passed since I cancelled my Somnium subscription. I fall asleep at night and the next second it’s already morning, each and every time. I have no recollection of the lapsed time, just an instantaneous recharge. It’s unnerving, I almost miss those monotonous grey dots. I don’t actually, though—I never want to wait for something manufactured from someone else’s mind again.

I slip under the covers and reach for my end table. I grasp for the bottle of Somnium supplements I had discarded weeks ago. The routine was hard-wired into me. I fear I’m too far gone as my fluttering eyes usher me out of consciousness into a dark void.

“G’day mate, think we’ll win today?” A voice from the void asks me. I hadn’t imagined this voice in almost twenty years.

POETRY

Evolution

By Arianna Coll

As a child, they meant anything and anyone
What would you want to be as a grownup?
A daring Astronaut and a brave Firefighter
Or, if you were me, it was to be Avril Lavigne

At night, they meant magic
Glittering castles and superpowers
A mythical land where everything was possible
And nothing was ever sad

As a teenager, they meant aspirations
Exploration of foreign lands and everlasting love
Money was theoretical
And time was forever

As an adult, dreams mean anxiety
A distressing feeling gnawing at my mind
As the question of what my life will hold
Stops my heart every time

Torn between desire and reality
Will I dare to be happy?
Or will I settle for the reliable
And look upon the wasted potential of a life that could've been?

FANTASY

One Thought Away

By Cameron Simo

Work has an unspeakable laze to it today. The only things breaking the monotony are the clacking of keyboards and the occasional chats by the water cooler. I take short breaks between each of my tasks and twirl a pen to repel boredom. I wonder if something will ever happen to break me free from this rut of traffic, work, traffic, eat, sleep, repeat. I figured by now that my ballet career would have taken off, though it's only wishful thinking, with my name, Abigail Hilcourt, in neon lights, yet I'm still in this flimsy office chair, waiting for life to get off its ass and put me on top of the world.

How cruelly fate works. I wonder if anyone down there, in the bustling New York City streets, feels the same way. Or maybe they have fulfilling lives, who knows? Hard to tell from up here.

I wonder if they'd want to hear some accountant's opinion of the world. Even if I struck a conversation with them, I wouldn't be able to hear their replies with my manager leaning on the corner of my cubicle, rattling off about the luxurious vacation he's going on this winter, and how he wishes for me to join him instead of his "excuse of a wife." Gross as he is, I can't argue his opinion. His wife is as beautiful as she is vapid. He smiles widely as he bellows out laughter, as if he read my mind. When his gaze crawls up and down my body, I take refuge in the bathroom. Can you guess what I'm thinking now, Mr. "I-Swear-I-Could-Fit-Into-These-Pants-From-College-Yesterday"? There's only one way I'd ever want to see you exposed.

My forgotten cell phone waits for me at my desk upon my return. Mom left a voicemail. A knot forms in my gut as she explains, through stifled tears, that someone held up the family diner. No one

was killed, but they need to close indefinitely to repair the holes that warning shots left in the walls and ceiling. The display cases need to be replaced as well. The garbage can by my feet quickly fills with tissues stained with running makeup as I realize I've used up my vacation days this year nursing hangovers. I also won't have their help paying rent this month.

Information on the news regarding the robbery is hard to swallow. The pixelated image of the suspect invades my living room as Sasha Blanette, an old roommate of mine, reports the story. Since she became the 6 PM anchor, I tune in to admire her perfectly wavy hair. I've thought about calling her after she moved out, but I never found the courage.

If only some brave regulars of the shop stopped that mugger. I'm not sure if I would've, but karma will catch up to him. I can almost see him getting jumped right about now....

Before bed, I check the Powerball numbers. Since living on my own, I've played the lottery in hopes of winning something big, something that'll get me out of this dingy apartment. Sweat coats my hands as I think about holding an oversized cheque over my head in triumph.

8... 19... 34... 57... 12.

Not even close.

I crunch the ticket into a ball and throw it across the room. I collapse face first onto my pillow, clutching my danburite crystal.

Tomorrow will be better... please let it be better.

“... made one arrest at the scene.”

I jolt awake when the radio turns on in the morning. I roll onto my back and, unable to find the motivation to turn it off, stare at the collage of my dancing photos taped to the ceiling as I brush the thin hair out of my face.

“Witnesses say that the assault victim was the suspect involved in the robbery at *Faith's On 8th Diner* in Pittsburgh yesterday afternoon, which officials later confirmed this morning in a press release.”

My head snaps to face the radio.

What did she say?

“Dan Kurel, a regular at *Faith's On 8th*, said that he couldn't do much during the robbery, but he, and other customers at the time of the incident, took justice into their own hands for the Hilcourt family.”

I take a deep, stupefied breath.

“In other news, outrage broke out online last night as hopeful Powerball winners were denied their winnings due to what's been called a communication error. The MUSL states that the wrong numbers were announced last night, and that the intended numbers were 39, 65, 7, 13, and 22.”

Those numbers... they can't be...

I propel myself off the mattress and unravel the crumpled ticket. Between my narrow fingers is a sixteen-million-dollar jackpot with my name on it.

“Holy fuck,” I whisper.

I grab my phone and call my manager to quit. He doesn't answer.
Odd.

He usually replies to my texts and calls almost instantly. I check Facebook, out of habit, and cup my mouth as hot tears of disbelief well up. His wife posted on his behalf, calling the sudden accusations against him “sickening” and “false.” In the comments, multiple women, and some men, shared their unfortunate encounters and disgust towards him.

They came true. They came true... holy fuck, they actually happened... Oh my god! Oh my god!



I shiver despite how many layers I put on, and struggle to understand what had happened in the last seven and a half hours. In that time, everything from the day before came true. My heart pounds against my chest whenever my mind wanders, because every thought is now not only precious, but fate changing. Could I make world peace? Maybe, but what if I can't control this power? Could I cause a butterfly effect that destroys the world? Everybody I come into contact with is now in danger if my imagination strays. My understanding of the situation is nearly as empty as the can of chips in my hand. You'd think three large cans of Pringles would solve everything, but I still need more comfort food. If I'm going to get groceries, I should at least pick up my garbage.

Wait a minute...

You know what would be cool? If I could lay on my bed and get this can into the garbage without getting up. But how should I do it?

I think about levitating it. After a few minutes, nothing happens.

Huh. I guess there are some limits.

I then imagine myself lying down and tossing it with my eyes closed, where the garbage lands perfectly in the trash can. I wait a

I tremble from withdrawal at the mere notion of not using my power.

couple of minutes, just in case, then I go through with my envisioned plan. A surprising “clunk” makes me open my eyes and investigate. It worked. I can win any bet with this. I can go viral.

This is insane! What else can I do?

I pepper little experiments throughout my day. I daydream about how excited Mom must be after hearing the news, and she calls moments later. I imagine that the stray cat in the alleyway gets picked up by a family, and a little boy brings it to his parents in the afternoon. I gotta share this with someone, but who?

Sasha!

It'd be so nice to see Sasha and catch up. But... I can't do much with a few packages of ramen and some molding peppers. I don't want to go shopping, not in this condition! I've been through too much today to be thinking about doing errands. Sasha wouldn't mind bringing eggs, spaghetti, soy sauce, ground beef, some *Oh Henry!* bars, and a bottle of wine with her, right? Maybe she would if I put the idea into her head? After her broadcast, of course!

Sasha shows up at my door at 8 PM exactly with grocery bags in tow. We make dinner together and catch up on each other's lives since she left. Turns out she's dating her cameraman.

“Scrawny as he is, he's a sweetheart,” Sasha says. “You two would get along.”

I smile and nod. Thanks for the backhanded compliment.

Sasha talks about her trip to Italy last summer, and how beautiful her cousin's wedding in Venice was. The food, the views, the atmosphere, and the people are all described in such enviable detail that I can taste how cheap the wine I'm drinking is in comparison. She recently moved into a condo with her boyfriend. I can almost feel her disdain for this place. She probably thought I'd be doing better and, to be honest, I did too. I splash some wine into the pasta sauce, then nervously pour my third glass of the night.

"What about you, Abby? Anything fun and exciting?" Sasha asks.

I slap my now empty glass down on the counter and reel my head to look at Sasha. Her and her perfect makeup and hair and figure....

"For the last couple of - hic - couple of years, I've done sweet fuck all since we talked," I slur. "Same boring job, same sh-h-hitty apartment, and same lack of everything you've got...."

I slump onto the counter, alcohol and self-pity lingering on my breath. Is a little bit of fun too much to ask for? I close my eyes and smile as I think about dancing at a club, feeling younger and more alive. The music would be blaring so loud, I wouldn't hear my own thoughts for a couple of hours.

"Aw, hey now, it's okay," Sasha coos. "How about we do a girls' night out like we used to after dinner? I think we'd get into *OAK* pretty easily."

I furiously nod.

The rest of the night becomes a drunken blur.



I wake up naked the next morning with an incessant pounding in my head. Opening my eyes is a struggle. God, what happened last night? Whatever it was, it couldn't have been worth this hangover.

Couldn't I just...?

I think about how great I'd feel without a hangover. My head would be clear, my muscles wouldn't be sore... holy shit, the aches are going away! Wow, if only it were always this easy!

I suddenly feel something on the other side of the bed. A man... is sleeping next to me? His jawline, his hair, the shoulders; he's exactly my type! Oh God, did we...? I peek under the covers, and the final box on my list is checked off. I want to kiss him, but I don't want to wake him up. He's perfect like this. I put on some pajamas to get the handsome angel in my bed some water.

The rest of my apartment is a disaster, and reeks of sweat and liquor. How wonderful would it be for the strangers passed out in my living room to clean up their mess? I can only imagine, and suddenly, they're all awake. They promptly follow the instructions laid out in my imagination. I watch it happen, and gawk at the precision. They leave when the place is spotless without saying a word. Damn, I'm getting better at this. I wonder if I used my power last night. If only I could remember. And that hunk in my bed, what a time that must've been. Well, I mean, if I can control what some drunks do before they leave my house... what's the harm in using it for a little fun? I tremble with excitement.



At parties, the question of what you'd do with unlimited power often comes up after a group has drunk a few beers. My answer? I'd construct my ideal life. After realizing the extent of my power, I did just that in one year. I cashed my winning Powerball ticket, continued dating the angel from the club, bought a house, got hired by the prestigious dance academy of my choosing, and came up with choreography that my class mirrored flawlessly.

I don't need to pay for gas or dinner, deal with traffic, or wait for my students to slowly learn their routine. All of the fame, fortune, and convenience I could ever want is just one thought away. Life is effortless, perfect even. But, even then, a familiar feeling has slowly crept back into my mind, one that I thought would no longer be an issue with everything I could ever want....

Life has a predictable laze to it today. The only things breaking the monotony are the clacking of tap shoes and the frequent repetition of the same songs. I take short breaks from my tasks, twirling a pencil to repel fatigue. I feel myself slipping in and out of consciousness, but even if I got caught sleeping, I could get away with it. By now, my class has gone home, yet I'm still in a flimsy office chair, waiting for something unexpected to happen.

How dull fate has become. The excitement I feel when I look at my display case of trophies is gone. Only I know how those were truly won. I think of the dance ribbons lining Mom and Dad's mantle....

I want to go home.

I message Thomas, my boyfriend, and I tell him I'm going to visit my family in Pennsylvania. Rather than wait for whatever his reply would be, I think about how understanding he would be that I'm taking the weekend for myself. Such a text came through within a couple of minutes. I wonder if he'd do that if I didn't think of it.

I don't bother packing. I need some spontaneity in my life again before I go insane. I tremble from withdrawal at the mere notion of not using my power. God, has it gotten that bad? No, I can quit anytime. I grip the steering wheel with all my might and vow to not use my power this weekend.

I pull out of the parkade, grinning like a teenager first learning to drive. This feeling... it's freedom! I roll down the windows. The air is fresher. Red lights are brand new; I almost forget what to do. The radio is playing random songs, and I'm tapping the steering wheel to

the beat. I'm singing and dancing. People probably think I'm crazy.
Is that traffic?

"Yes!" I holler in glee. If people didn't think I was crazy before,
they must now.

My heart suddenly drops when I notice why the traffic is thick.

A car went onto the sidewalk and crashed through the front
window of a diner. Police and ambulance vehicles swarm the area.
Police tape blocks off both pedestrians and cyclists making it even
slower for vehicles to move forward.

I could think about the police letting cars through until I pass,
but I won't. Are those people alright? Is anyone hurt? I can't imagine
what it'd be like if I got into a crash. This one doesn't look too bad,
but what if I swerved on the highway and collided with someone -
God, the daydream is so vivid, I feel queasy.

I shiver.

It's okay, I'll get there soon enough.

Easy does it, Abigail.

POETRY

Lung Capacity

By **Rachelle Bramly**

I hold today like an offering:
there is so much about this world
I do not know. The sky
is a vibration of billions
of beings: all life communicates –
where does voice originate? The depths
of the oceans: less explored
than outer space. Great abysses
I dreamed of as a child –
helmet intact until it cracked
and I suffocated. What
are we trying to find out there?
The universe will expand forever,
I'm told. The ocean, in theory, has a floor –
will we ever be satiated? We eat
until we're sick. I dream
of what it feels like to be filled
with outer space... I can
finally breathe.

LITERARY FICTION

Escape

By Emily Welch

Barry opens his left eye first, then his right, and scans his bedroom while listening for the familiar sounds in the apartment and around the neighbourhood close by. Bus brakes squealing, cars horns pressed by impatient palms, all of the sounds that were annoying, yet comfortable. He listens as his mother goes about her usual Saturday routine, and he feels the snakes squirming in his stomach: they excite and terrify him.

Barry's mother leaves for work promptly at 9 AM. With her coffee in hand, she leans into her son's bedroom doorway. She stands there for a few seconds, watching his chest rise and fall under his striped flannel pajamas, then quickly heads out the front door of their three-floor walk-up. As soon as Barry hears her shoes clicking on the stairs, he climbs carefully out of his lower bunk, and swings his legs over the edge of the bed gently, afraid of being heard – even though the apartment is empty.

With soft steps, Barry pads down the hallway to the bathroom he and his mother share. He always waits to hear the ticking of the old iron radiator, and when he hears the first ping, he begins. These rituals keep his mind from moving too fast.

Barry stares curiously into the mirror, while brushing his teeth, at the freckles sprinkled across his cheeks. The wide blue eyes looking back at him feel like they belong, but he frowns at the widening shoulders. Barry believes when he looks at the mirror that someone in charge has made a mistake. They must have. But no matter how much he questions and despairs, nothing ever changes. He stays zipped up in a stranger's body.

The old pine door of her bedroom closet opens soundlessly. His mother's garments are arranged in complete symmetry; diaphanous dresses worn long ago before life became reality. Barry reaches his hand up and brushes his fingers over the dresses that are hung with great care, each two inches apart. He is aware of how his mother takes pleasure in keeping them neat and carefully pressed. Barry runs one of the filmy evening dresses through his hands. He has never known anything else to feel like this. The ivory fabric slides over his skin, and he imagines this is what air would feel like. Ever so carefully he thumbs through the gowns, and he ducks his head down, so he can slide right under them. With the door closed behind him, everything is dark; everything feels safe. As he sits on the floor, he can just slightly hear the traffic outside. A siren wails somewhere close by, but there are no voices to be heard. He reaches up and tugs on several of the dresses, closing his eyes as they slide off their hangers and fall over his head and around him. As they fall, they flutter, like windblown leaves off autumn trees. He feels the softness of the cloth, the richness of satin, and he can't see which garment

*But no matter how much he questions
and despairs, nothing ever changes.
He stays zipped up in a stranger's body.*

is running across his face. All he can smell is a powder scent; all he can breathe is the silky fabric, over his nose, his ears, his chin. Time pauses. In this space, he doesn't have to pretend, he can just be. He breathes and lets his mind stop.

A year ago, when he had just turned nine, he had been thumbing through the Sears catalogue. There had been a beautiful teenage girl that he kept coming back to. She was blond, like him, and was wearing a satin graduation gown. Barry could not stop running his hand over that picture. The dress was mauve, and not frilly or busy like some of the clothes of his female classmates. It was that same, satiny, slippery fabric as his mother's dresses; with simple folds that rippled and flowed around the young girl's legs. Everything about it was right. He tore the page out of the book and hid it in his dresser drawer. It was just him and the dress. He would take it out before school started and study the way the cloth flowed around the girl, how you could see the outline of her leg underneath it.

Back in his mother's closet, time has stopped. When Barry finally stands up, he takes a moment to lift the drifts of sliding garments off the floor where they had fluttered around him. Gently running the silky folds through his fingers, he holds the dresses to his face, and then to his chest one last time. He believes that they can feel his heart beating. When he finally stands up, and stretches, he sighs. He has been able to dream without interruption. Barry makes sure that he sets each dress back on its hanger, and divides them evenly, two inches apart. He gives a quick glance back, and closes the door.

PHOTOGRAPHY

The Hidden Self

By Rebecca Wheeler



HORROR

Dreams Aren't Real

By Tori Schroeder

The room was pitch dark. Before my eyes all was still. Bathed in moonlight, the curtains radiated a faint glow by the window. Not a single incriminating creak could be heard from the floor of our aged home, and the door to the hall, slightly ajar, hung unmoving. For a moment I wondered if I had seen anything at all. My drumming heartbeat began to slow. I dared to close my eyes for a just second, and a shadow whipped by in my periphery.

I shrieked.

A moment later, lights flooded the room, and my parents rushed in. I was enveloped by coos of concern and warm embraces, and my fear melted away with each streaking tear.

“What was it?” I cried. “I know I saw something!”

“It was only Juno, Sierra. Nothing to be afraid of.” My father gestured to the dresser in the far corner of the room. Our cat was perched there, visible only by the small speckles of white around his paws, and by his unblinking yellow eyes. We’d only had the cat a few months and although he seemed harmless, he still gave me the creeps.

“It’s alright, sweetie, you’re safe,” my mother said. She took my hands and smiled reassuringly. “Dreams aren’t real.”

That was far from the last time she told me that. For two years, I was tormented by frequent and recurring nightmares that left me scatter-brained at school and paranoid anytime after sunset. My parents consulted countless specialists in a desperate attempt to restore order to their lives and mine, until finally, we met Dr. Kelley.

A soft-spoken woman with salt-and-pepper hair, she was able

to alleviate my subconscious-dwelling maladies. After a series of consultations and a prescription of the experimental new medication Gespenstine, I made a full recovery. The only side-effect? I was unable to dream from that point forward.

Due to the largely untested nature of the medication, Dr. Kelley doubted I'd ever be able to dream again. To my parents that sounded like extra insurance, and with my traumatic experiences, I never *wanted* to dream again.

But then I did, unexpectedly, twenty years later.



With my bagel in hand and mouth gaping, I watched the neighbour, a scrawny man in his sixties wearing a blue polo shirt, amble towards his trash can. It was one of those old metal ones like you always hear about raccoons getting into, but though city regulations on waste management had changed, he had not. He opened the can and unceremoniously discarded his filthy deposit. Then he hesitated.

The old man examined the lid, glinting in the morning light, and scratched his bare chin three times. He flipped it around once, twice, then replaced it firmly and returned to his home.

As the back door clattered closed behind him, I inhaled sharply. Everything crystallized, and my head rung as if I was standing in a chiming bell tower. I had seen him perform exactly that sequence of actions once before. Except, in the dream I had last night, his shirt was orange.

I let my half-eaten breakfast fall by the wayside and scrambled to dial up my fiancé.

“Drew, you won’t believe this.”

“What’s wrong? Are you okay?” He responded airily, obviously out of breath. I was definitely interrupting his workout, but this couldn’t wait.

“I’m fine, but I just watched the neighbour take out the trash *exactly* like he did in my dream, scratching his chin and everything. It was like déjà vu. The only difference was, he wore a *blue* shirt.”

There was a pause, and I could hear the energetic beat of some pop song playing in the gym distantly. “Oh, and in the dream...?”

“It was orange.” “Well that’s neat,” he chuckled, “maybe you’re becoming prophetic.”

“I—I don’t know. This is just so... *strange*. Is this what dreams are usually like?”

“Not at all. In my last one my teeth were falling out. But it’s interesting that it’s coming back to you like this.”

It was my turn to fall silent. Words escaped me and my mind flew. Was it possible? Like riding a bike, could my subconscious just pick it back up again?

“Sierra, you still there? Listen, I’m happy for you, but I really gotta get back to work. See you at home, alright?”

“—Okay, sorry. Talk to you then.”

He hung up. I was still lost in thought.

I had been completely content after Dr. Kelley’s treatment ended my nightmares. It felt like a veil had been lifted, and I could see things clearly again without the filter of constant fear. I did get the inkling a few times, though, that maybe I was missing out. Now my juvenile wishful thinking could be fulfilled.

On my way out to work, I hesitated in the doorway. There was another side to this coin. What if my resurfacing ability to dream brought on the nightmares again?

I tried to bolster myself with the facts: I was an adult, living a secure and generally satisfying life. I wouldn't be swayed by silly night terrors of decades past. But gooseflesh sprang up across my arms. A sudden wave of fear momentarily brought me right back to what I once was—a small, helpless child alone in the dark.

I swallowed the feeling down. On my commute, I practiced the deep breathing that Dr. Kelley taught me all those years ago to ensure that the memory stayed in the past, where it belonged.



For a few days no other dreams found me. I assumed it had been a fluke, and although I was disappointed, a deeper part of me was relieved. A week later, however, it happened again.

It was very disorienting, at first. I couldn't place where I was, or what was going on. Some part of me was familiar with the experience, of course, but after having my nights pass uneventfully for so long, to have something capturing my attention was unexpected.

Eventually, I became vaguely aware of my surroundings. I intrinsically identified the rows of cubicles and drab tan walls as my workplace--though the place was so nondescript that it could have been any number of different office buildings. The rhythmic taps of typing keyboards echoed from every direction, slightly too tinny.

Out of nowhere, a figure appeared beside me. Although most of his features were blurred, I could tell by the groomed mustache that it was one of my managers, Phil. He began to speak, but the sound was delayed and distorted as it reached my ears. "...wanted to thank you for all your help training the new interns and working those added shifts. To show our appreciation, the management team has decided to add a sizeable bonus to your next paycheck."

A delighted smile tugged at my cheeks. This was incredible.

Phil clapped a hand on my shoulder. “You’re a real asset, Sierra.”

By the time I awoke, I was still grinning. Any lingering concerns I had about dreaming again were gone. This was exactly the news I wanted to hear. For a few weeks I’d been taking on extra workloads and volunteering to help out in hopes of moving up the corporate ladder. Now if only I could find that same, sweet recognition in the waking world.

“Okay, you know I was kidding, right? About you being able to tell the future?” Drew sat across the dining table from me, shovelling cereal into his mouth. I had regaled him with my latest dream and hypothesis, and his brows were skewed skeptically. “I mean, anyone can dream about a neighbour, and lots of people want to succeed in their careers—a wishful dream doesn’t make it so. I just don’t think you should get your hopes up over nothing, is all.”

“But what if it’s not nothing?” Logic and order governed life; I had never doubted that before. It was always present, from the clockwork of my morning routine, to the meticulous way I filed paperwork at the tax company every day. It was the way of the world, but I also couldn’t deny the possibility, however small, of this convenient anomaly. For once, I was excited by the prospect of logic being proven wrong.

“Then I’ll be real surprised.”

I shot back a sour look. Why didn’t he ever take me seriously anymore?

Drew shrugged, and swallowed another spoonful “All right, if you’re so sure, go buy a lottery ticket or something. But don’t be disappointed if your dream doesn’t come true.”

When I got to the office that day, I sauntered past the series of cubicles feeling like I had an ace up my sleeve. My smile was smug as a child's on Christmas Eve, knowing exactly what presents they'd tear open come morning. In fact, this morning may as well have been the adult, mildly supernatural equivalent.

I sat down at my desk, logged into the computer, and joined in the keyboard-clicking chorus for a short while until someone sidled up. Naturally, Phil, right on schedule.

I turned around with a cheerful greeting on my lips, but before I could speak, I noticed his sour expression and drooping mustache.

"I need to talk to you."

"What's going on?" This was not good.

Phil scratched the back of his neck. "The management team has been discussing your recent... efforts. We appreciated you being more flexible with your schedule and helping to train the new hires, but Sierra, you *are* using the new operating system, right?"

I glanced at my computer screen and back. Was this a trick question? "Of course. I mean, I still run across functions I don't understand occasionally, but I always come to you or one of the other managers for clarification."

"See, I thought so, but then why did you train all the interns on the old system? We're supposed to be working our way out of that one, and the fact is, now somebody'll need to re-teach them. *And*, they'll be making the same mistakes as all the rest of us. Do you see how this is," he did a reverse circular motion with his fingers, "counter-intuitive?"

"I'm sorry Phil, I didn't mean—I'd be more than glad to teach them how to use the new system, if you'd give me the chance." I could feel heat rising to my ears and my palms growing clammy. How could I have not realized?

“No, that’s all right, we’ll have someone else handle it.”

My heart sank. This is not how it was supposed to go.

His gaze bounced from the floor to the walls as he continued, never lingering for long. “I really hate to be the one to tell you this, but management’s going to be keeping a closer eye on you for the next while to make sure you’re dancing to the right tune.” Phil must have understood my devastated expression because he quickly tacked on, “Don’t worry too much, but be aware of that, all right?”

Somehow, I found the wherewithal to nod.

“You’re an asset to this team, Sierra. Let’s keep it that way.” He patted my shoulder sympathetically and left.

Once he had gone, I turned back to my computer screen and held the edges of the particleboard desk until my world stopped spinning.



There was no question, I was dejected, and ashamed. By the end of the workday, however, a surmounting fear had risen and swallowed both feelings whole. There was something definitely not right with these new dreams. I couldn’t be certain, but what else could explain the similarity between what I saw in my sleep and what really happened. Coincidence? *Twice?* When I dreamt of orange, I saw blue, its opposite. Recognition at work became reprimanding... oh god, what would be next?

I couldn’t help it. I hung my coat up that evening and jumped at my own shadow.

I took a deep breath and focused on the facts. These “dreams” hadn’t scared me at all, that was a good sign. They couldn’t be considered nightmares by any standards, so it was irrational to worry that I would fall back into my old condition. I was cured. This was

probably just a weird, late-blooming side-effect of the medication. How could I have gotten my hopes up so much for that bonus at work?—I cringed remembering that whole situation. But those were my own honest mistakes, and I just need to make up for them. I hadn't been fired; I should count my blessings.

Despite myself, before bed that night, I gingerly opened my old medical report. Though Dr. Kelley had passed away a few years ago, I scribbled down the phone number of my old paediatric office on a sticky note. While Drew brushed his teeth, I tucked the page in the drawer of my nightstand. *I won't need it*, I told myself. Besides, if Drew saw how much this had shaken me, it would turn into just another disagreement—and neither of us needed that. But as I drifted into a dreamless slumber, my mother's old adage rang through my head with a new and ominous undertone. *Dreams aren't real.*



Bells rang, only three nights later. In my dream they tolled a proud proclamation for all to hear. I held my breath, and dreaded what visions were to come.

“Sierra, what’s wrong? You look positively radiant, and everyone’s here—you’re not having second thoughts, are you?” It was my mother’s voice, calm but concerned. “You know, even I had jitters on my big day.”

I began to see now: I stood in front of a tall mirror, my mother beside me. Her graying hair was curled, and mine pinned up in an intricate bun. A myriad of ivory sashes and delicate embroidery was draped around me, and a string of pearls lay at my neck. I felt constrained. The necklace suffocated me; the dress was an elegant straight jacket. “No.”

“Okay dear, I just worry about you,” she said.

I held her gaze for a moment, wanting so badly to believe that this could be real. But by seeing it, I couldn't help feeling that it was already compromised. "I'm worried too, mom."

"Don't be. We're all here for you, and it's going to be a perfect day."

"It won't be perfect," I replied, a bitter taste lingering in my mouth. "But maybe I can still salvage it."

I pushed past my mother but stopped outside of the building for an instant to drink in the scene. The procession was arranged with a tactful symmetry, all lavender decorations with scrolling silver accents. Familiar faces from Drew's family and mine intermingled between the greenery, and an awning was pitched by a picturesque pond. It was beautiful.

The truth was, Drew and I had been in a rough patch for a few months. Not long after he proposed and we started to make plans and send invitations, a rift began to widen between us. Disagreements cropped up like weeds, we spent less time together, and things hadn't felt quite right since. The wedding was supposed to fix all that, and smooth out the kinks of too much focus on work or the finances of organizing such a big event, or whatever it was. But now....

I scratched at the tight sleeves of my dress and glanced around. If what I saw in my dreams was the opposite of reality, then there was only one thing to do. The first sleeve ripped awkwardly, and I took a pair of garden shears to the other to save time. I marched towards the convergence of guests and snatched a champagne glass from one. Reaching the pond, I shattered it against a tree. All conversation stopped. All eyes were on me.

Dreams aren't real, so maybe I could save my wedding day by destroying it here. It was radical, but what choice did I have? I couldn't stand by and let this day be ruined by some curse or a cruel twist of fate.

With hot tears pricking my eyes, I yelled into the crowd. “The wedding’s cancelled! Everyone, go home! There’s nothing for you here now!”

Confusion rippled across the faces of everyone I loved and respected. I tore my necklace off and sent pearls tumbling through the garden. “Leave! It’s over!”

I watched a crashing wave of expressions—from shock to disappointment to anger to heartbreak—and screamed until my voice was hoarse and my body wracked with shuttering sobs. Tears flowed for what felt like days. I wept for all I feared losing, and for what I had done to ensure that I wouldn’t lose it.

Everyone else must have gone, because by the time I rose to my feet once more, only one person stood in the garden opposite me. Drew.

His hazel eyes glowed with betrayal. “You ruined everything.”

“I had to,” I rasped. I reached out to him, but he batted my hands away.

“I thought you loved me.” Drew turned his back on me and faded. The colours of his silver suit and sweeping sandy hair bled into the vibrant hues of the greenery, until the whole scene became a distorted mockery of previous splendour. It was an oil painting, the colours not yet dry, ravaged by a rainstorm.



I gasped for air. My first waking moments were spent clutching the blankets around me and stifling a sob. It was over. *But what had I done?*

After catching my breath, I ran to the kitchen. It was illuminated in the early morning light, and Drew was pouring a coffee with his back to me, just as he had been when...

“Drew.”

He turned around immediately.

“I need you.”

He left the coffee half-filled and embraced me.

I spent the next few minutes scrambling to explain what I'd just experienced, desperate for comfort, or at least validation that I wasn't as horrible a person as I felt.

“You dreamed about our wedding?”

I nodded and rubbed my temples. “Yes, but I had to do something. In all my other dreams the opposite kept happening, so I had to, I had to make sure....”

“You sabotaged it? In this dream?” I watched his brows furrow, and his jaw set.

“You have to understand, Drew, I would never do anything like that, really. I want our wedding to be—”

“Sierra,” he interrupted, “how am I supposed to understand that, from what you just said?”

“Don't you remember my other dreams? I needed to....” My voice broke.

His gaze hardened. “To ruin it.”

I barely spoke above a whisper. “I want the best for us.”

“How could you do that?” Drew began to pace the kitchen, running a hand through his hair. “They're just dreams, Sierra, but that was your *choice*. Did I encourage this too much? Are you under that much stress right now? Like, what the hell?”

I couldn't breathe. I was doing it all again. The wedding was supposed to fix everything.

“Maybe you need help or something, but this is... I can't be around you right now. I need to go.” Drew's hand reached for the door.

“Drew, I love you.”

“I thought you did.” And he was gone.



My logic lapsed. Completely eclipsed by raw emotion, it wasn't until evening that I had gathered myself enough to make decisions. The first was to call my old paediatrician's office. Even without Dr. Kelley, maybe something from my old files could point to a cause, or better yet, a cure. If Gespenstine was still available, another prescription of it could solve my problems. I explained all this to the office's answering machine, since they had already closed down for the night. I hoped they were timely with responses.

At a loss for anything else, I called the nearest local psychiatrist. Thankfully, the secretary hadn't left yet. Though I struggled to speak clearly, I was booked for an emergency appointment in two days.

It was a relief. Though my world had become a tumultuous sea, this was an anchor I could hold on to. So I held tight.



The last thing I remember was sitting at the dining table, nursing a cup of coffee in the wee hours of the morning. If I didn't sleep, I wouldn't dream, and if I didn't dream... too late.

A fog must have washed over me, from which a shape began to appear. As it coalesced into a vaguely humanoid silhouette, a groggy realization began to bubble within me. I had to wake up. But before I could shake the grip of unconsciousness, I recognized the figure in the mist. I saw a face, my face, replete with lines that defined my brows, and jowls. My dark hair was greying, almost reminiscent of Dr. Kelley's salt-and-pepper.

I managed to shake myself awake and clambered from my seat at the table. The room was too bright, and my bleary eyes watered, squinting in the light. It was morning. I wobbled to the door, sore and shaky from exhaustion. I steadied myself against the wall and breathed deeply. I could do this.

My eyes shut for what I thought was only a moment, and a vision of my older self appeared again. She was walking along the sidewalk, maybe somewhere just outside of town. Despite a fatigue behind her eyes, she smiled contently.

No. I stood back up, clutching at the doorknob. I just had to get to my appointment, and then everything would be all right. It took two tries to slip on my shoes, but by that point a new thought floated up through the muddle of my mind: in the dream, I was walking as an older woman. They don't come true, Sierra. I strained to think critically. If I walked to the appointment, I might not live long enough to go grey. Besides, it would take longer on foot, and that meant more opportunities for things to go wrong. It'd be much better to drive there—faster, and therefore safer. My fingers wrapped around the car keys.

The Toyota's engine revved. While the noise made my head pulse, I could use it to keep myself focused. This would be fine. I pulled out of the driveway, gripping the steering wheel tightly.

I managed to make it most of the way there without stopping. Each passing street brought me closer to finding some answers, to reaching help. No more fear, no more games from my own malicious dreams. Then maybe I could start piecing my life back together.

At the second to last intersection, I was caught at a red light. *Stay awake!* I started tapping my feet and stretching out my arms. As long as my eyes stayed wide open, I'd get there.

Except, I had to blink. When I did, I tried instinctively to shake myself out of it, but my eyelids felt heavy and my limbs immovable. It was the honking from behind me that jolted me awake, but an image lingered before I could block it out. I saw the colour green.

The light was green; maybe I was just seeing the colour ahead of me. I sped forward, regardless. I rounded the corner and the squat building came into view. The only thing keeping me from my salvation was the final approaching streetlight, this one yellow. I took a deep breath and curled my fingers around the wheel. As it turned red, I didn't stop.

Horns blared as I barrelled through the intersection, but I wasn't listening. A single thing distracted me from my destination ahead, though. The last thing I remember seeing was the bright green pickup truck that sent me careening out of control.

POETRY

Romancing the Lonely River

By Lucy Auchinachie

Tucked in, cradled and rocking in rhythm
Canopy bed on the river
Moseying at a slow pace without rush
I sail through a forest of silvery hush.

I drift, arms of the water escort me
Most honoured guest of the river
Sleepily reading the palm of the land,
Enticed by the water, I dip in my hand.

She's shy, didn't expect my forthrightness
Holding the hand of the river
Sensing her diffident flow, I retreat
Withdrawing my hand, drying off on the sheet.

I think, bar her surprise, she was charmed
Due to the rift in the river
That opened before me and capsized the bed—
She wasn't put off, but enchanted instead.

FANTASY

Gmonster

By Judah lam

“At nine G’s, you can’t move a muscle. It pins your hands and arms down, and your head weighs 100-plus pounds.” – Major Matt Modleski

This is a story, not a song, yet I hope to hear singing at the end. This is a story about real life; it is a story about being full of dreams, and it is a story about finding which way is up by falling down.

I think that I have been having problems with my blood sugar since May, but I don’t know why. When I realize I am dreaming of being underwater, I wake up and find that I am still in my truck, hauling a double supertanker load of gasoline, bound for Chemainus. I have had four cups of coffee, and I rolled my window down halfway at the last red light, but it has not helped me stay alert. Startled by the fact that while I was asleep, for a moment, my rig has wandered into the oncoming lane, I brake too hard and fish-tail. Time stops thin. The horizon twists. The fuel-tanker trailers I’m towing skid, and I hear tires exploding. The rear trailer seems to float up beside me on my left, and it overtakes my truck before coming to rest in front of me as we finally stop. The groaning sounds of stretching metal roar and shudder through me as the truck settles and falls silent. The tanker trailer and I, in the middle of the day, in the middle of Main Street, are helpless—my fear of sleeping led me here. The trailer, bound for Chemainus Esso, is pinned against my driver’s side. This is my dream: more sleep, brighter days, shorter routes, and longer holidays. The trailer, bedeviled, hasn’t flipped over. The truck has come to rest in full jackknife. *Thank God, the hitch seems intact.*

Christ. I let go of one handle of the tanker ladder to trace my gloved finger along the top of the jagged rip in the aluminum fuel tanker. My chest feels tight. All these trips, up and down Vancouver Island, blend together in my mind. Fuel is lapping out the hole, it is running down the outside of the tank, and it is in the act of hypnotizing me. I stand on the fifth rung, with my hand on the seventh, looking up two steps to the sky. Although I know these fumes are getting to me, I step up the ladder. I see below me in ones and zeroes. I shouldn't breathe in the vapour, yet I'm not exactly being careful, am I?

My eyes burn. Vapour billows around my head. A shrill, high-frequency soundwave catches my guard and penetrates my skull. If the frequency was mapped with sand and magnets and iron shavings, you would see the sound's sigil; the noise runs through my head and exits my right ear. My hand holding one ladder rung from the top, I spin around to the right. The ladder is wet. My ear is hot. Like a branding iron, the searing heat flips a switch in my head and tips the invisible scale of consciousness; the world becomes jagged. I see sigils cast upon tussled blue skies. *The sky is blue with cumulus drifts that are falling too.*

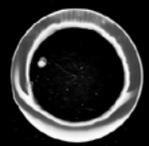
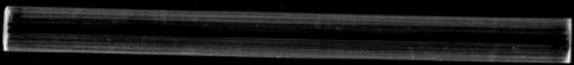
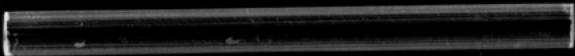
I peer into the gash watching the sloshing waves. I shake my head when the buzzing in my ear takes my balance from me.

“Twang. Buzz. Zap.” I try to look but I am blinded, I am dreaming, but for a few seconds I am also awake. I see a white ceiling, green walls, and bright lights. *What the hell?* I’m lying on my back, my eyes don’t burn, and I don’t smell gasoline. I don’t hear anything but the whirring of electrons. I hear surges from an unknown power source. A helmeted stranger approaches. I hear the tempest of electrical pulses. The chocolate-brown helmet with the black visor nods and steps back. I try to get a look, but the visor is too dark to see through. I can’t see anything but my own reflection.

Where am I? I drift back into the dream and Kali is underneath me. She reaches up and smiles, her four perfect, blue arms, reaching out from the bottom, center green. She is made of wax. So is Alister Crowley, and the rest of them too. *Where am I?* It’s been ages since I knew I was falling off a ladder. Something touches my ear. Something presses on my neck, and my feet. I swim in terror. My heart is the first horse out of the gates.

“Pop.” An electric field consumes the room with blue and rips me out of the dream, but for a moment. A thud and my back arches. My body goes rigid. I feel cold. I smell thunder and all is blue. Electrocuted into place, I’m frozen between death and life with my eyes open, before I’m shuddering. My chest is steaming. The cold is blue, and then hot, white. My body relaxes and I’m falling backwards; the ceiling opens up, and the sky shrinks. Again, a ladder passes as I fall, as my consciousness trades places with my subconscious, snapping back and forth like a plucked elastic band between thumb and finger.

A human tuning fork, my legs are resonating. My right ear burns and my left hand hums. When you’ve driven down the side of a mountain, sometimes you feel as if you need to open your mouth. The room spins clockwise. I am saying something. I can’t feel my face. My tongue is fat.



PHOTOGRAPHY

Major Arcana #2 By Rebecca Wheeler

“Blood pooling in your legs. Contract the muscles in your body, or you will die,” says a voice. It sounds robotic and radiolike. It isn’t coming from the helmet.

My head swoons and buzzes. The rumble of roving, rolling water, a man in a barrel about to go over Niagara Falls, and all the elephants in the world are stomping on the jungle floor. The thundering turns the marrow in my bones. Invisible fathoms press upon me, pressing, pressing. Turbines churn the sea near Departure Bay and the thing the gull dropped hits the water and descends into a vortex of bubbles and saltwater, sinking into black water depths.

Hold him down.

This is the world before the sun, this, before the rhythm of light. The tunnel widens. Something opens at one end. I hear angry machinery whir and click. *How can I have fallen down, yet still be at the top?* A light shines in from above. Jonah and I are vomited into the sea. The cold black sea swallows us. *Let there be light.* I reach for it.

I am dreaming. The falling has stopped. Awake, I sit up. An image of a gargantuan regal moth is burned into my mind. I blink at the pattern of its wings. My vision is blurry and soft. The light is smeared across my face as if I’m sitting in a mirage. The air crackles with cold blue stripes and the devil bobs its head on a sickening, green jelly podium. The devil nods to me. Jellyfish form somnolescent runes in the black water. I can’t form ideas. The murk turns to a blinding light. I’m on my knees and reach up, grabbing at the light. The vision burns like hot sunshine in my hands.

My eyes focus. What I thought was a space helmet is no space helmet. It is a damned devilish caterpillar face, a face with giant, careful, shiny-black eyes. The arcs of electricity are legs coming out of a blasphemous gelatinous belly. There is something strangely familiar about this. I vomit. The caterpillar’s mandibles are shearing at me with a sickening scissor-like sound; the devil keeps nodding. I can’t

*This is my dream: more sleep,
brighter days, shorter routes,
and longer holidays.*

feel my chin. Stripes of white lightning arc out of me when I move and the devil jumps back, away from me. The oily black arms without fingers are feet without toes. Of a dozen, no, of sixteen legs, the two that were touching my neck and the two that were touching my feet now gesture furiously as the chocolate head bobs. It isn't a helmet at all. I see where I am. Don't you know it; I'm in my bedroom. I'm still in bed. *Aren't I?* Slightly turned to my right, I see what today is on the digital clock that displays the time and the day in shimmering red LED block letters. Three, three, three, T, H, U, R. I feel like a submerged target that has surfaced and is bobbing in the cold ocean a thousand miles from shore. *This can't be real.* I can't tell where the dream ends—I keep waking up and finding that I'm still a-dream. I remember reading that dreams, as the aborigines of Australia believe, are the true reality, while reality is the true dream. As above, so below.

My voice is a ripple in the water and my room is a lake of darkness. God, my head hurts. My eyes are drunks staggering about under the stars and my mind is circling like the moons of Jupiter. I feel half-dead.

"I don't understand," I manage to say. Protons are dancing the air into a frenzy. The room growls and hisses. I hear the chime of handbells and the bellowing of lambs.

"Where am I?" the devil says, seeming to have copied my voice. It speaks in zaps and crackles, talking in volts, whispers of amps of current,

mimicking my thoughts. The air clears, and as an immense pressure leaves, I feel my body expand. The caterpillar, the size of a good lion, stands about three feet away from me. This a human being in a devilish caterpillar suit. The devil is acting exactly how I imagine a human would act if humans were caterpillars. It must be human. I think it is.

The devil's fluorescent-green body is riddled with spectacular protrusions. Giant black spines stick out of its head and out of the middle of the devil's green back like stegosaurus plates. The head of the human pretending to be a caterpillar is chocolate brown.

There has to be a person in there. I'm looking for a zipper on the belly. Like the spines, the eyes are greasy black. The arms are black too, oily, like the large eyes. I have a sudden cascade of thoughts that all jumble up onto one another in a pile on the floor. *What happened?*

I realize that the devil has one leg on my foot and one leg on my throat. The other feet are waving. That's too many black, wiggly feet with no toes. I count in pairs to sixteen. I feel like throwing up.

I climbed a ladder when I shouldn't have. I ran my gloved hand along the jagged tear in the tanker hull, inspecting the long narrow hole torn in the aluminum fuel tank, when I shouldn't have. I smelled nothing but petrol fuel when I shouldn't have. I shouldn't have been staring at the waves of gasoline rolling back and forth in the tank, and they shouldn't have been splashing out of the hole onto the ground and hypnotizing me. There's no way that the washy sight of gas fumes should have been all around me. There was no way that the road should have been a pool of gasoline. There was the distant and detached worry of ignition. *Where is the sun?*

That is how the devil comes. Like hearing a song emitting from a cold stone in the dead of night, in the desert, the devil comes—a holy generator of god-coloured sparks that stipple across space, forming devilish electrical arcs in the turnstiles of night. All colours swimming in one imperceptible mass of blackness, purple, therein blue, white,

therein amber tongues that reach inside me and pull on my sin needles. The sheen of the devil's mandibles and the oily black eyes are the two ponds of eternity. They ripple as the feet sign at me and the ponds see me as the helmet nods. I taste the sadness of tears and sweat. I smell water and salt. The devil nods. I believe this thing is human. I'm certain this human thing is asking for my help. The human thing is lost. A Yazidi priest stands between us, swaying back and forth, wailing, and praying to the peacock angel in his language. Tears roll down my cheeks and I sob. The air smells of strawberries and sulfur.

"Whap!" The devil vanishes. I feel like I am gagging. I try to sit up. The green walls remind me that I was just dreaming of when I was twelve, when little Pete and I found the devil walking on Meyersville Road in the swampy marsh of Morris County. My growth spurt had come early. I have a boy's moustache, and new, wide, strong shoulders, and I am afraid to look down at the new curly hair. My sweat smells terrible. When I look in the mirror, I see an ugly boy with dark upper lip fuzz who is riddled with zits and piercing blue eyes. Pete likes to call me pizza-face.

For a few seconds, I am afraid to get out. Through the windshield, yellow arches reach towards the sun. Cars filing through the drive-through seem like robots marching. To my right, neat little houses with tiny square yards line the street. A young boy chases a scraggly, gray dog. I see tailored green grass with red and yellow rose bushes in bloom.

Where the traffic light once was, a yellow house with white trim is brimming with people. I smell barbeque pork ribs. June has been awfully warm. The men, backs to me, in shorts and sunglasses, smile and hold beer cans. Sundress-clad women shade their eyes and nod to each other, saying yes, yes. They are pointing at me.

I feel like a robot. I walk around the tank surveying. My boots make sloshy sounds in the flammable liquid. I feel zombielike; dead-eyed, I walk up to the side ladder and stare at the waterfall of

fuel cascading at my feet. *It's okay. Everything will be okay.* I see the gnarled pole with smashed green, amber, and red lenses lying in the middle of the street. There is a mess of torn wires protruding from the roadside where the pole snapped; the wires make arcing sounds. "Snap. Crack. Sizzle."

A white car is stopped. Four people stand around it. They are holding phones to their heads; one is taking pictures. I don't remember having climbed the trailer ladder. Now I'm standing fair footed, up the ladder. Staring down the hole where the fuel sloshes. The waves are mesmerizing. My comprehension is slipping. The scales are tipping, tipping. I'm losing. My head spins. *Number nine. Number nine. Number nine.*

"Get away from there!" shouts a tall, thin man wearing a gray hat. "You'll go up like a Roman candle!"

I see his mouth moving. *This can't be happening.* Looking down from the trailer ladder, the entire scene looks like a long underground tunnel. I'm not certain that I'm here. My overalls are soaked. Blinking through the sunlight as it burns my vision orange tinted. I face upwind and draw a deep breath. I peer into the gash, watching the sloshing waves. I shake my head when the buzzing in my ear takes my balance from me. My lungs burn when I start to lose my footing. *Don't lose grip of the handle.* There is a growing puddle of fuel at the bottom. I can no longer hold my breath. I can no longer hold on.

"Ishat!" I don't know why, but I'm calling the name of a Phoenician goddess of fire, yelling, falling. I grab at the air and reach nothing. Falling backwards, the sky is getting smaller. Gravity tickles my core. Still falling. No impact, only falling. It's as if I have fallen right through the wet concrete and into an invisible pit. I exhale so violently that I feel myself fly out of my mouth. *Where am I?* "Can you hear me Jake?" says a nurse. I nod. I remember a tall man in a gray hat, yelling for me to get away, and saying something about

candles. Two doctors and several nurses crowd into the small green room with a white door, numbered 9. I nod.

“I’m Dr. Collins. Do you know where you are?”

I shake my head. “The hospital?” I answer.

“Nanaimo General. We thought we’d lost you there. We had to drill a hole in your skull to release the pressure on your brain.” They are shining tiny flashlights in my eyes, left, then right.

I vomit on the arm of the nurse who is removing the breathing tube from my chest. Again, I try to sit up. The nurse pushes a small plunger of liquid into the IV bag, and everything swims and goes blurry. Again, I dream of the past. The doctor is talking to my brother, and Pete is nodding and his cheeks are drizzly. Pete is talking, but I don’t understand. I hear rushing water.

I am almost twelve. Walking home from school with little Pete, taking the shortcut through the swamp. We stick to Meyersville Road until we come to the boardwalk that leads to the trail home. We hear the birds before anything. They are excited, cawing nasally.

“Caw-caw.”

Then I see what they were after. On the side of the road is a huge green, black, and red caterpillar with a chocolate-coloured head. Fish crows have been watching it creep, stalking and cawing from a tall tree in the hardwood forest. The big crawler follows the road. There is little traffic on Meyersville; you hear a car coming for half-a-mile before you see it. Pete looks amazed as I pick it up. The thing goes crazy. It swings its head back and forth trying to get away, trying to bite my fingers, and arching back and forth. I nearly drop the devil, and I come near squashing the thing in trying to keep a hold of it. The red horns are spines, prickly and ticklish in my palms. It is awfully strong for a caterpillar. Rolling up the bottom of my shirt, I make a little hammock and roll the top closed. The giant green thing

eventually stops fighting and rests in the hammock. When it calms, I show little Pete how to make a hammock, and give the devil to him to carry in his shirt. You should have seen his face. As we walked home, Pete walked taller than ever before, face proud as a young lion. I was glad.

“This is a hickory-horned devil caterpillar,” says my teacher, Miss Svaboda. I think she’s really pretty. She encourages us to bring specimens for identification to show-and-tell. My head feels like a toilet bowl that she flushes with a smile.

“Where did you find it?” she asks.

“Middle of Meyersville, near the Great Swamp.”

“That’s pretty awesome, Jake. Thank you for showing the class. I will be setting it free this afternoon. I’ll take it up to the wildlife observation center,” Miss Svaboda says. I like it when she looks happy.

“I’d estimate it to be about a month old. It will be looking for a spot of soft, moist soil near a tree to dig down into and hide so it can pupate. When it emerges in four to six days, it will no longer be a devil, but a giant regal moth. After it flies off, the moth may continue flying for several days just to find a mate, and after it mates, it will lay eggs. It will die only a few days later. Magnificent,” she says. *Miss Svaboda is magnificent.* All the students in the class buzz with questions. The devil has stopped struggling. It is crawling up my arm, cocking back its helmet-like head and waving its sixteen finger-like arms. The devil is speaking caterpillar sign-language to my classmates.

“My brother and I rescued the devil from fish crows near the swamp. They were chasing it, dive-bombing and cawing at it.”

“Is the devil mean? Does the devil bite?”

“It was mad at first, bit once, but it didn’t really hurt that much,” I say.

“What does the devil eat? Grass?”

“Leaves. See, it likes me now,” I say. *Today is the greatest day.*

POETRY

Shrouded

By Angela Chou

When you look to the edges of
The dreams you've cast aside,
Lain in a barren, desolate wasteland
Once worked towards doggedly,
Now abandoned in their graves,
They make you feel like you lied.

When you look down below,
The dreams you've laid to rest,
Have been undisturbed for so long
Abandoned at whims of fancy and
Obscured under layers of dust,
And at your very own behest.

When you look inside,
The dreams you hold so dear,
Are buried deep within.
Will you be working towards them?
But what do you think will happen,
When your dreams become what you fear?

When you look closer at your fears,
They cover all you used to love—
Shrouded in fear's heavy cloak.
You hope they're as hidden as they seem for you,
Silence your own for the dreams of others.
Will fear be all your dreams are made of?

HORROR

Red Delicious

By Micah James

The impressions of light danced over his closed eyelids. Shapes bounced and swayed as the warm breeze brushed his cheek with a downy touch. Even with unopened eyes, he could visualize the orchard in which he lay. It had been so long since his peaceful days in the countryside. He had almost forgotten what it felt like just to lounge under the open sky without incessant demands and deadlines knocking on his skull like broken shutters in a gale. It was clearer to him now, more than ever, that he just wasn't cut out for the high-strung habitat of the big city business world. He belonged just where he was, outside amidst the endless rows of glistening apple trees.

The soft grass cuddled up against his sides, and his head was elevated on a mossy mound. As comfortable as he was, an electric impulse triggered his muscles into motion. The brightness burst through his vision as he blinked into focus. He could tell by the position of the sun that it was high noon, the sky as clear as could be. Leaves of gold and green swayed above him, interspersed with the most brilliantly ripe, red apples. His mouth filled with saliva at the thought of the delicious fruits. Stomach grumbling as if to validate his notions, he got to his feet and decided on a particularly luminous looking specimen.

He reached, and he reached, and stretched to the lofty branch but to no avail. Cursing his treasure for eluding his grasp, he took hold of the wide tree trunk and hoisted himself up with a strained grunt. Inch by inch, he carefully edged up the length of the trunk until he was face-to-face with the luminous apple. Extending as far as his free arm could manage, his fingers gingerly grasped the twinkling fruit and cautiously twisted it until the stem gave way.

Inch by inch, he carefully edged up the length of the trunk until he was face-to-face with the luminous apple.

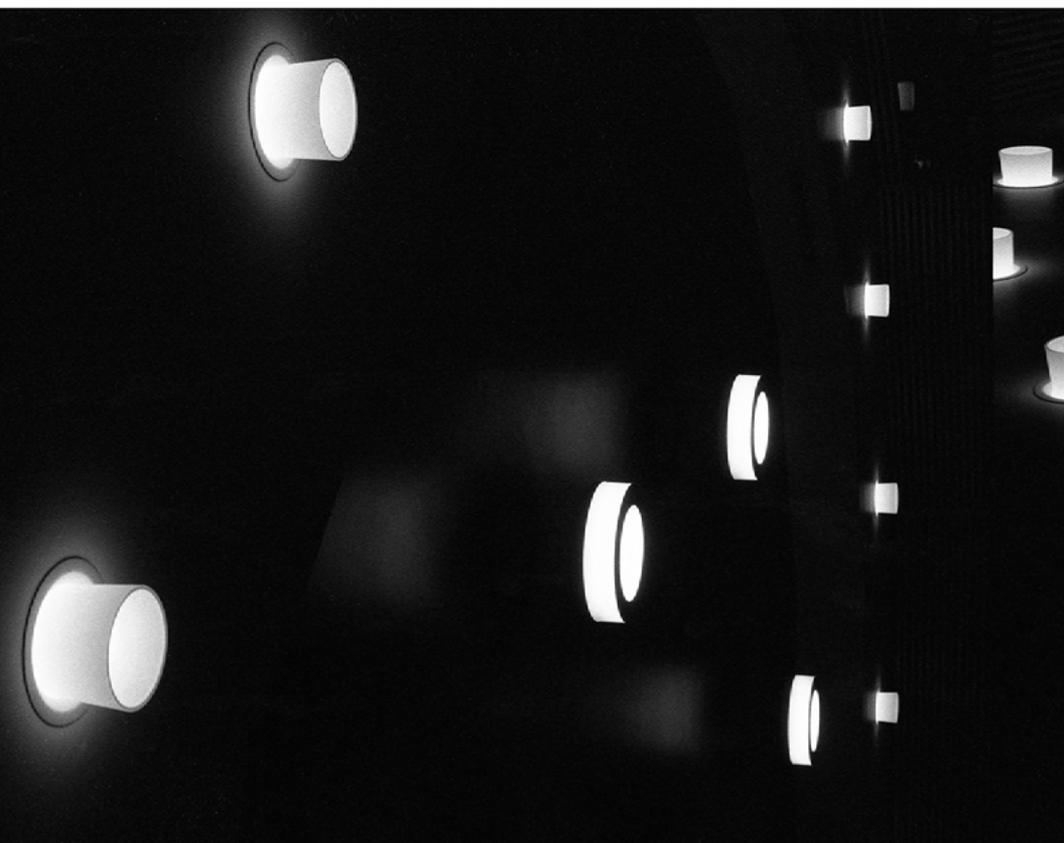
Prize in hand, he squirmed back down to the ground and rested against the sturdy base among the moss-blanketed roots. He inspected the smooth, cool surface of the crimson sphere and carried it to his lips. The crisp skin fractured with a satisfying crackle as his teeth closed down with ravenous energy, sending warm juices flowing down his chin and dripping onto his chest. With the unhinged glee of an infant, he savored his delectable bite.

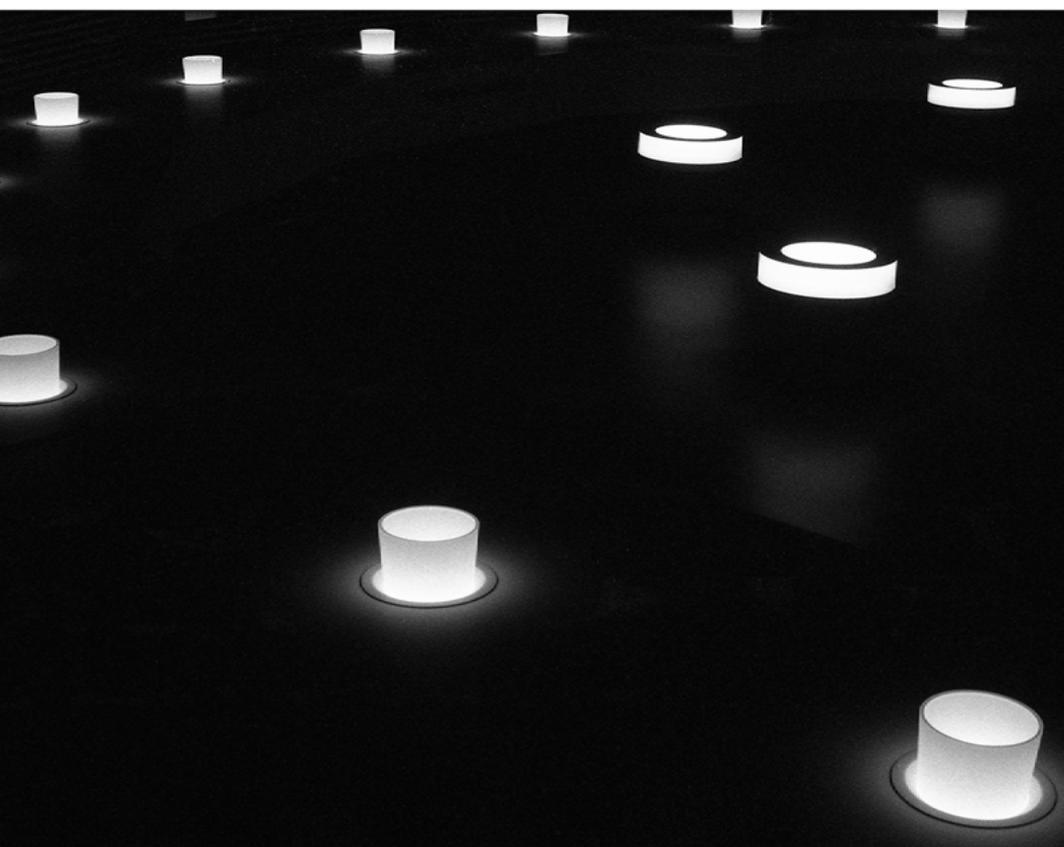
His attention was wholly fixated on his feast until a piercing shriek erupted from the open. Startled beyond comprehension, his eyes burst open to the sight of his wife's pale face, mouth and eyes wide with contorted horror. Blinking, his eyes adjusted to the sight of his cluttered apartment, dimly lit by the flickering of a neon sign out the alley window. Gazing down, he took in the view of his blood-soaked nightshirt. A gasp escaped his lips, sending more drops plummeting down onto himself where they landed in a scattering of scarlet blooms. His limbs were entangled in a heap of linens and the bedpost pressed against his spine. Utterly dazed, he turned his eyes to his hand in which he so delicately held a lightbulb, shattered and oozing with red.

PHOTOGRAPHY

Lights in the Dark

By Andrew Fryer





FANTASY

Butterfly

By Shuang Gong

Rain.

When she got up and drew the curtains, the sky was a flat dark grey. A chilly, moist wind blew into the room through the open window, sprinkling tiny raindrops over her chin and neck. Under the gloomy sky, the falling rainwater appeared to be the same dark grey.

She yawned and glanced at the clock.

6:40 a.m.

Wash, makeup, breakfast, she finished her morning routine and left home at 7:20.

Outside the apartment, she reached out a hand and watched the rain fall on her open palm.

The rainwater was cold and colorless.

The wind blew stronger and howled through buildings.

She preferred going to work in this kind of weather. On bright sunny days, she always found it a waste to spend the rest of her day sitting indoors and watching others walk outside in the sunshine.

She reached the bank at 7:45 and seated herself into her chair behind the counter before 8:00, the time the bank opened.

A glass door, her only exit, was far from where she sat. She couldn't see the rain, if it was still heavy or if it had stopped; all she could see was a narrow piece of grey sky outside the glass door.

She put on a smile when the first customer came in.



She roamed along the familiar street; a sweet fragrance of flowers wafted in the warm air.

It was a balmy day. The sky was blue with feathery, white clouds.

She smoothed her hair waving in the breeze, her steps light and joyful.

After the street corner, she reached her old childhood home. It was the same as she remembered, the light-yellow walls, red stairs, and green wreath on the door.

The pear tree stood a few steps outside the door, its leaves rustling like whispers. It was the tree she watched sprout, flower and fruit every year; it was her silent company and friend.

She picked a leaf and brought it to her nose; it was the scent of home, long-lost home.

The door opened; in a silvery laugh, the younger her came out with two other girls. Together, they went to the community garden and started playing among the plants.

She smiled watching their petite figures bathed in the golden sunshine.

In the wind floated a piano melody; warm and clean, it flowed like a smooth silk and blended into this peaceful moment.

A block away, someone in black was playing piano on the roof of an apartment. Its flowy cloak swung and streamed with wind; a flock of pure black butterflies flew around it and danced to the rhythm.

She couldn't see its face, yet just by looking at its figure, she was attracted.

Sunshine, breeze, and the soft melody, she wished time could stop at this moment.



The rain lasted for three days.

In the morning, she got to work at the usual time and met with one of the managers who seemed to be waiting for her.

“This is not personal,” the manager said.

She collected her stuff and left the bank.

She didn't feel sad; during the four years she worked there, she had seen a few coworkers get laid off, and today was her turn.

She went home and started searching for jobs online. She checked the websites of some other banks; none of them were hiring.

She leaned back in the chair and looked out of the window.

Overcast.

Why wasn't the sky as blue as the one in her dream? She thought back to when she was younger, happier, in her hometown and didn't have many burdens on her shoulders.

She shifted her gaze to the laptop screen.

It was all gone. The old house was sold and renovated; the pear tree was cut down to make way for the new road; her childhood friends had become wives and mothers, or moved to other cities like her.

Maybe losing the job was a chance for her to start something new.

She went to the website of a well-known art school in her city. As a kid, she liked drawing and dreamt of being an artist, but as she grew up, she was taught to be practical and realistic.

The majors, visual arts, illustration, animation, all looked much more interesting than being a bank teller.

She checked the tuition, then the balance in her bank account. She laughed mockingly, closed the school page and resumed job searching.



A quiet room with large windows and white marble statues.

She stood in the middle of it; in front of her was an easel with a finished sketch.

On it was the mysterious figure in black with its butterflies; it sat by the piano with its back facing her.

Under her gaze, it moved and started playing the piano: a clear and mellow melody, like a crystal creek running across spring grassland.

When she stepped back in surprise, the white marble statues in the room dissolved into numerous drifting white petals.

Black butterflies flew out of the sketch and interwove with the petals, forming a swirl of black and white that encased her.

The music from the piano continued.

The scene began to change. She found herself becoming an artist drawing in a studio, a backpacker hiking in deep mountains, a singer performing under colourful spotlights, a photographer recording the world with her camera.

Life was full of possibilities; she could be anyone she wanted to be.

She opened her arms and spun around, danced with the flying butterflies and petals.

Sweet, she could taste the fruity sweetness of the music, in the air and in her soul.



The inbox was empty; no one replied to her resume.

Frustrated, she left the chair and lay on the bed.

She didn't really have to work hard like this. She stared at the ceiling and thought, she could just live on unemployment benefits

and enjoy life for a while. Like in her dream, life had unlimited possibilities and she didn't always have to be a bank teller.

She tossed and turned on the bed.

If life was really that beautiful, she didn't know; she only knew surreal dreams brought her more peace and happiness than reality did.

That black figure, she had seen it twice in a row; with its black butterflies and the music it played, it was too perfect to belong to this earthly world.

She looked at her dim bedroom and the grey sky behind the curtains. On the roads outside, the honks of passing cars never ended.

If she fell asleep now, she thought, would she meet that figure for the third time?

She closed her eyes and pulled the blanket over her head.

A salty and refreshing wind.

A pure velvety piano melody, together with light flutters of wings, slid into her ears, captured all of her attention and soul.

Her heart raced with growing excitement.

She opened her eyes.

She was on a rocky beach with scattered logs. Above the distant horizon, the setting sun tinted the waving sea pale pink.

Black butterflies flying around her landed on her hands and shoulders, their wings reflecting a dark gleam with each flap they made.

As she tried to touch them, they flew back to the one playing the piano.

Like the last two times, it sat there with its back facing her, an aura of mystery filled its vicinity.

The music continued, enchanting with an otherworldly beauty.

She approached the black figure.

And don't call me Liz.
Liz is dead in the grave.

Like snowflakes, butterflies surrounded them when they were close enough.

“Who are you?” she asked.

The music stopped.

She twitched and woke up.

The music, butterflies, and black figure vanished without a trace.

She got up and supported herself by the table; the city noise from outside was killing her nerves.

The beach, she remembered, it was in her city; she went there once long ago.

She took a shivering breath; after a brief hesitation, she changed her clothes and left home.

On the rocky beach, in the cool wind, she wandered and searched.

It was near evening. People were taking their walks in small groups.

She thought she was out of her mind doing this when she spotted the familiar figure sitting by the piano.

The wind rose up; its flowy cloak spread like wings.

Under a rosy sky, among black butterflies, silhouetted against the shimmering, blue ocean, it was beyond the touch of any beings.

She trembled, her brain a total blank.

The music started: an ethereal melody, richer than any she heard before.

As she listened, her heart and soul rose and fell with the rhythm.

High above the clouds, deep in the sea, a warm ray of sunshine, a chilly blast of wind, sweet like a lover's kiss, bitter like a demon's curse, in the resonating melody, she no longer sensed the existence of herself and the world.

Immersed in the music, she closed her eyes.

In the gentle and peaceful melody, she felt as light as a feather.

She opened her eyes when the music faded.

She was flying across the boundless sea and towards the burning sunset on the horizon; wind whooshed past her ears when she flew at full speed.

She wasn't shocked or scared; she grinned and glided over the sea's surface, then lifted herself high into the sky until she came across a plane in the clouds.

She peered into the plane packed with passengers, watched the fiery sunset and shifting clouds, then dove lower in the sky.

She flew to the city. Under her, roads and buildings were like mini toys with moving dots of cars and people.

She'd never felt so carefree; flying freely in the sky, she was no longer one of the people crawling on the ground like a caterpillar.

She returned to the beach.

An ambulance had stopped by the road where she found the black figure. A large crowd gathered around someone lying on the ground.

She landed and ran to it. Seeing the figure lying there, she froze on the spot.

It was her, her body, eyes half-open, skin deathly pale.

She touched it; it was already cold and stiff.

People talked in low voices and glanced at her body; no one seemed to notice her.

Her head spinning in a daze, she reached out a hand towards the few people near her, only to see her hand go through their bodies without any resistance.

Stunned, she stood still until a black butterfly touched her shivering shoulder.

“Had fun flying?”

She swung around and saw the black figure standing behind her. It was tall and lean. Under the black hood, its face was covered by a white mask.

“What is all this?” She pointed to her dead body and then herself.

“Death.”

She felt a blunt blow hit her head.

“You...” She started shaking. “You killed me.”

“You wanted to see me and came looking for me.”

“I didn’t know it would...”

“So I let you know.”

“You can’t do this to me.” She raised her voice.

“You didn’t feel any pain.”

“I... I have a life.... I have a family, friends....”

“You will have a new life,” It approached her, “Your family, your friends, they will grieve for you and move on.”

It held her shoulders and guided her to turn and face the crowd.

“You see them, the living. They have jobs to do, families to take care of, bills to pay, responsibilities they can’t get rid of. They also have goals, dreams, obsessions, things they can’t let go of.”

It wiped the tears on her face, “Busy, aren’t they? Liz, don’t feel sad.... You were one of them, but now you are ahead of them.”

The butterflies brushed her cheeks with their wings as if to ease her sorrow.

“Who are you?” she said. “Show me your face.”

“Accept me, embrace me, then I am yours to explore.”

Its hands left her.

She watched it disappear into a wind.

In the following days, she stayed with her body. From when it was embalmed in the funeral home, to when it lay in the casket at her funeral, and until it was cremated to ashes.

No more tears. She touched her name carved into the gravestone and left the cemetery.

She flew over the whole city.

The busy streets were full of life and activity. Nothing ever changed; the world ran at its own pace.

She didn’t feel hungry, thirsty, or tired any more. During the day, she watched people’s lives; at night, she watched their dreams.

She used to think everyone was different, but after having watched so many people, she found everyone was the same. Though it didn’t sound pleasant, she had ceased feeling happy, sad, or any other strong emotions.

One night, she saw a young single mom crying alone on a bed, missing her hometown and parents thousands of kilometres away.

She waited until she fell asleep and went into her dream.

In the initial nothingness, she touched the space of void and stuck her fingers into it, read the girl's mind and memories and materialized them.

The surroundings rippled and brightened up; streets and houses began to show up. She landed on top of a building and added the girl's home and parents into the scene.

Silently, she watched the girl walk down the street, meet her parents, hug them and burst into tears.

Butterflies flew down the sky.

“What a beautiful dream.” The black figure landed beside her. “Liz, you are an artist, a creator.”

She shook her head. “After waking up, she is still the single mom who works fifty hours a week to provide for her kids.” She sighed lightly. “And don't call me Liz. Liz is dead in the grave.”

The black figure gave a short laugh under its mask. “I'm glad you said it.” It wrapped an arm around her shoulder; its cold fingers stroked her cheek.

A white mask covered her face.

“Don't let them see your face. Don't talk to them. The living, they are in deep sleep.”

POETRY

Snooze

By Ethan Badr

Alone I stand on the high street
the sky a pale grey
the wind a gentle suggestion
the tree branches *rattling*
(Snooze)

An empathetic rain
begins gradually, randomly speckling
the warm dry pavement
A crow, tired of his tree
leaves in a *flurry of fowl language*
(Snooze)

My feet carry me forward
down off the high street
a forest of brilliant yellow
and of the deepest red
consumes me
(Snooze)

Shadows sing across
the padded forest floor
asking and not answering

Squirrels talk politics
over afternoon tea
heard, but not seen

A bear lumbers silently across my path
he glances dreamily into me
then disappears into the—

9:07

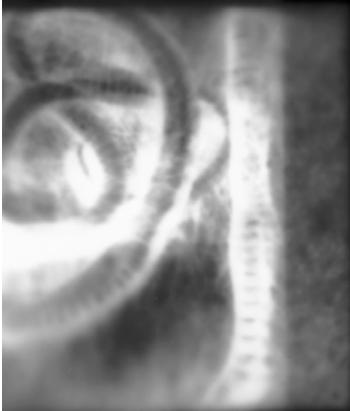
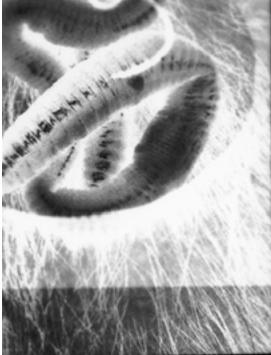
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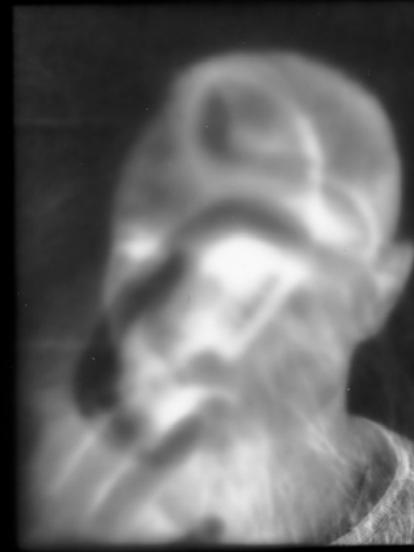
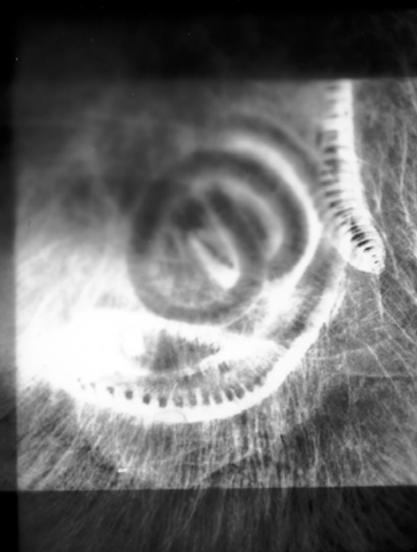
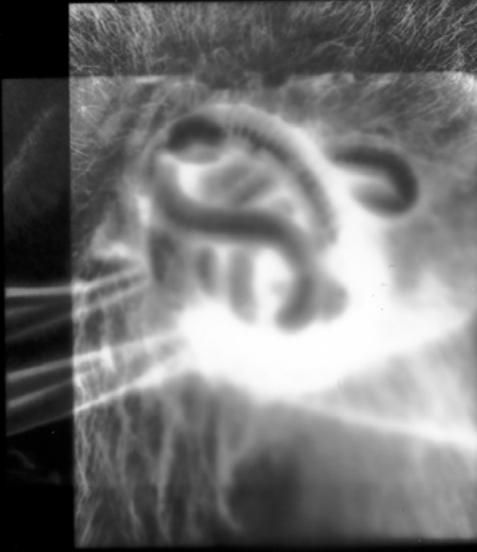
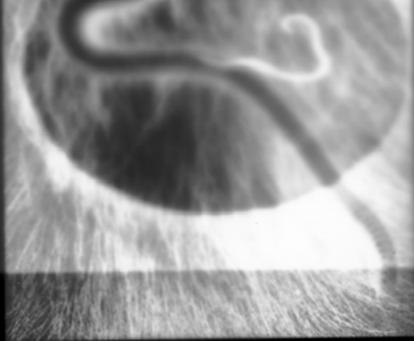
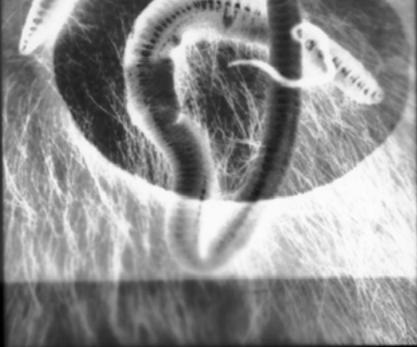
(Snooze)

PHOTOGRAPHY

Major Arcana #3

By Rebecca Wheeler





SCIENCE FICTION

Maya's Blossoms

By H.M. Friendly

When she was nine, my daughter Maya disappeared from her bed, without a trace, late on December 24th. She wasn't the only one. That night, nearly every child in the Western Hemisphere vanished. Christmas arrived to riots and a raw, anguished wailing.

However, that morning, I awoke at daybreak, to silence. This alone was nothing strange: most parents slept in as long as they could. It was our earned right to make the kids wait till eight or nine, when we'd had at least one cup of coffee. But, every year, I would come padding into the living room to find Maya on the couch in her pajamas, usually assuaging her impatience by noisily playing with her dolls, action figures, and toy cars, using the back of the couch as a mountaintop stage upon which they enacted and recontextualized the ongoing drama of her short life.

She would yip in excitement when she saw me. Then she would run and jump into my arms, babbling nonstop. I would squeeze her solid warmth and bury my nose in her tangled, wispy hair, breathing her sweet musty scent for just a moment before she launched herself off me to go diving into the presents.

Yet that morning I knew something was different. When I awoke, it felt as if some invisible force was pulling at me, trying to reconfigure me, rearranging me at a molecular level. It felt like I had awoken in a separate place entirely, although everything around me looked completely familiar.

I walked down the creaking hallway. The coloured lights on the tree bathed the room in variegated, flickering hues. I looked on the couch; Maya was not there. I looked in her room; Maya was not there. I looked outside, upstairs, downstairs, in closets, my panic rising.

Maya was not there.

Soon, the neighborhood echoed with sirens. I was on hold with the police for nearly an hour before being disconnected; I imagine nearly every house in the country was calling. Across the continent, sweet-smelling evergreen trees stood silent and twinkling, their gifts undisturbed.

Hundreds of thousands of children had gone missing, and nobody knew why, or how. There were no signs of break-ins, no struggles, no ransom notes. Nothing but an empty silence, a surreal feeling that we'd all been transported to an alternate dimension within which nothing is right and nothing makes sense. We were a broken people.

That was four years ago. Maya would be thirteen, now. It makes me cry to think about it. But still, life must go on.

I buried myself in my work as a neuropsychologist, studying the strange environment of dreams and dream logic, like how we may say to someone the next morning, "You were there, but you didn't look like you."

Where is the crucial point at which an altered reality is completely accepted without argument?

Somehow, determining this seemed even more relevant after we lost our kids.

I would take to the bar after work, and sit in the murky yellow light, the air thick with cigarette smoke, and watch all the other empty-eyed ex-parents stare through the amber liquid in their glasses, their eyes dark and glassy. Tensions boiled over: people brawled and crawled all over each other, bashing and smashing and yelling their anguish.

They lashed out at the innocent, too. Word quickly got out who *didn't* lose their kids, and those parents were bullied and ostracized.

I remember stumbling through an icy parking lot late at night. I had somebody's arm around my shoulder; he was staggering, blood streaming from his face. He had been attacked without provocation by two assholes in a bar. They shattered a pint glass with his face, telling him he didn't belong there because he still had his kids. I couldn't hope to fight them off, so instead I shouted that it wasn't his fault and that now, more than ever, his kids needed their father. It was a shot in the dark, but it worked. They stopped and stared and looked ashamed, then tidied his collar and tried to buy him a beer. Of course, he just wanted to go home to his children.

People dealt with the tragedy in all sorts of ways, and this included those lucky parents. There were a few hundred kids left, and most perplexing was that there were households who lost one child, but not another. Some parents became neurotic, keeping wakeful watch over their children every night. Others pointed out that the children who remained said they were too excited to sleep, and suggested keeping them awake indefinitely, lest they also disappear. Of course, this was rejected as an abusive solution, but ironically, these parents were right – sleep was indeed the axis around which the vanishing rotated.

Yet, even more tragic were the parents who lost their children, and the grief drove them insane. Absurd nutcases rambling about totally illogical, unscientific theories. I couldn't help but pity them.

Anyhow, this is pretty depressing... I'd much rather think about Maya, who was the sunshine that made rainy roads sparkle.

She had a smile that was like a lantern in a dungeon: no matter how bad things were, seeing Maya smile was like a window opening into an ethereal realm from which I never wanted to leave. Even if it was just to try to cheer me up after a hard day, she was never hesitant to smile. Some evenings I'd be tired and irritable, and she would curl up in my lap, all bundled up in a blanket with her tiny bare feet

poking out, and she would simply talk about whatever thoughtful things came to her mind, or maybe she would invent stories and jokes on the spot. She was always smiling; she cracked my cold, surly, concrete scowl every time.

She had fine, wispy, golden hair that shone in the sunlight and was always in tangles. She had a tiny nose with perfect symmetry, with angles that seemed soft and sharp at the same time. She constantly mumbled and giggled to herself, in her own little world, and when she laughed hard, it was an effervescent, bright sound, like bubbles rolling over each other, and she would have a fit of hiccups every time. Her blue eyes seemed brightly backlit and were often wide with excitement.

She had a sense of wondrous curiosity about the mechanics of the world, how and why things were the way they were.

“Wow, Daddy, look at this awesome leaf!” she said once, running over to show me a leaf I had seen a million times before. Totally unremarkable.

“What’s awesome about it?” I said, and she held it up to the light so that the sun made the chlorophyll glow green, and an amazing network of veins and structural elements would appear.

“Sееее? It’s soooo coooool!” She traced each little line carefully with a tiny fingertip.

“You know, if you peel it apart, you can see all of that glistening beneath the surface, without having to hold it up,” I said. “Here, like this.” And I tried to take the leaf, to show her, but she looked aghast and twisted her body to hold it as far away from me as possible, safe between her palms. Her eyes flickered with alarm, and I couldn’t help but apologize for the affront.

Maya loved dreams.

Every morning, at breakfast, she recounted them in great detail. From knights and castles to weird space monsters, Maya had been there. She told me about her adventures as I herded her around the house, getting her ready for school. While I waited outside her bedroom for her to get dressed, she continued regaling me through the door. When I asserted that she momentarily stop orating to brush her teeth, *properly*, I thought her head would explode. Then, as soon as she spat and rinsed, she was back at it again.

Maya *lived* in her dreams.

“Daddy, I found this awesome world!” she exclaimed one day at lunch. “You should come with me ’n’ see it!”

I was chopping red peppers for a green salad. “Honey, dreams aren’t real. I can’t come into your mind,” I said, but I felt a growing curiosity.

She frowned. “No, you go to it in *your* dream,” she said. Then she beamed at how clear she had made the concept. I pondered a moment.

“So...a dream is like a room with multiple doors?” I said. “You go into it in *your* dream, and I go into it in mine; then we’re both in the same dream? And it’s totally real?”

“Uh-huh!” She bounced up and down and wiggled her hips; we had just shared a moment of intellectual solidarity.

I murmured and lapsed into thought.

“So will ya come?” she prodded me.

“I’ll try, honey,” I said, and I was actually serious.

As I was tucking her into bed, she described the dream she was going to have, and how I should go about having it, too, as if she were giving me directions somewhere. She spoke of a playground, and cherry blossoms. As I fell asleep, I concentrated on this vision. I held it in my mind until it fractured, and I sank into oblivion.

“You didn’t come,” said Maya the next morning, her voice heavy with disappointment. I assured her that I really *did* try, and it didn’t even occur to me to ask how she knew I hadn’t been there. I wouldn’t even think of it until a couple years after she disappeared.

It was around that time I learned about the rogue planet.



“Get this,” said Daniel, one of my fellow researchers, about a year ago. “That Christmas Eve, a massive planet passed close to the earth.”

“Which one?” I said. My understanding of our planetary orbitals did not suggest this was possible.

“They didn’t specify, but it wasn’t from here; it blasted right through our solar system. It was big enough that the sun couldn’t even capture it.”

“That same night,” I said slowly.

He nodded. “The next morning, did you get the feeling that something just *wasn’t right*?”

I couldn’t even respond, but the look on my face must have said a lot, because Daniel winced.

He never had kids.

“Sorry, dude,” he said, flushing a little. “I mean, other than that.”

“I did get that feeling, yes,” I said slowly, staring into myself, trying to see past all the wreckage to that one moment when my life was just on the apex of obliteration.

“A planet that big has gotta have a major gravitational pull of its own, a *huge* electromagnetic signature. I wonder if those two events are causally related,” said Daniel. “Especially since the Vanishing only happened on one side of the planet.”

An MRI machine works by aligning the protons of hydrogen atoms within our body to a specific orientation and polarity, using huge magnets. It manipulates the magnetic resonance of our tissue.

I was thinking about this on the way home that day when I absent-mindedly fumbled the gearshift, nearly throwing it into reverse while advancing. Fortunately, it didn't shift; it just ground horribly.

Our brains are susceptible to magnetic frequencies, and therefore, being inseparable, so are our conscious minds. I read a paper from a theoretical physicist who stated that alternate realities are nothing more than successive bands of electromagnetic resonances in incremental frequencies. If an object can be induced to align to the resonance of another dimension, it will shift over instantaneously, like a smooth gear change. If the resonances are dissonant, it won't happen. It'll grind.



“So tell me something,” Daniel said a few months later as we were working to modify an old MRI machine. “If it's true that the planet produced a massive magnetic resonance shift, why didn't all the adults get flipped, too?”

“Because children *believe* that dreams are real, and this already changes their physiology; they undergo a resonance shift on their own,” I replied. “The planet simply boosted it to the next band.”

Daniel simply shrugged. He stared off into the distance for several minutes before speaking.

“You know, nobody understands what you're doin' here, man,” he said. “I don't even get it. The best I can grasp is that you theorize our children have been transported to an alternate dimension by an ‘electromagnetic resonance shift,’ and you're modding this machine to try to bring 'em back. To reunite all of these bereft parents with their children. That's the whole reason we've been doin'”

this, right?” Daniel’s eyes pleaded with me for some semblance of comprehension and cohesion.

I stood up and walked over to the coffee machine. The coffee was cold, but I poured it anyway.

“No,” I said. “To bring them back, we would need to alter the children’s resonances in those other dimensions, and we don’t have the capacity for that. Going there is our only option. We must *join* them.”

Daniel stared at me for a very long moment. Then slowly, unblinking: “You’re... expecting everybody who lost their children... to just flash themselves into some unknown dimension and *never return?!?*” His jaw hung open, his eyes wide.

“Daniel,” I said, sipping my cold black coffee, “I don’t give a damn what *everybody* does. I’m doing this for me.”

For the first time since I’ve known him, Daniel turned pale. We worked in relative silence for the next few months. I lost a friend that day, but I didn’t care. Of course he wouldn’t understand. He never had kids. He was also expendable. His validation was not required.

I had a goal. Maya and I were going to be together again, or I’d die trying.



Fog obscures the ground, low clouds, like steam rising from a city sewer at night, drifting high and white into the sky. It’s snowing, but the snow is floating upwards, rising into the white void, and they’re actually cherry blossoms, soft and velvety, and I can fly, too. I go up, and up, and up, following the cherry blossom snow. Upside down, in the sky, an orchard approaches. The trees are blooming pink; the ground is covered in it; I alight and sink to my shins in the stuff. I wade through the fragrant snow, and a wind picks it up in a swirling storm that obscures my vision completely, but I keep walking, and it settles down. Far in front of me I see a children’s playground. It’s empty, except for one lone

figure spinning and dancing around the structures. I quicken my pace, and now I'm here, but I stop right at the edge. I can't go any further.

You turn and you see me, and your eyes light up. You run to me; your feet are bare; you're wearing your favourite green dress; your shimmering blonde hair is totally tangled. You look just as I remember you, and you glow like an angel. As I did, you stop right at the border between the orchard and the playground. You're out of breath; your cheeks are cherry red.

"You came!" you shout. "You finally came!"

I can only nod wordlessly, my breath catching in my throat in a suppressed sob. There's a palpable pain in my chest. I take a deep shuddering breath. "But I can't stay. I'm not close enough yet."

"What'ja mean?" you say, crestfallen. You reach up to me, and I automatically hold my arms out for your embrace. But we cannot come together, and when we try, the storm kicks up again, swirls around us, and I know you're about to fade into it, so I step back, and the blossoms fall.

You look so small, standing there, with your arms held out, and when I step away, your soft, gentle features crumple into tears.

"Why'ja wait so long?" you say. "Why can't'ja stay?" My own cheeks are hot and damp, too.

"Baby, I'll be back as soon as I can." I turn and run into the snowy void. I don't dare look back.



"Danny," I gasp, emerging from the depths of the machine. "Dial it up twenty Ohms. We're almost there!" Daniel silently makes the adjustment to the modified MRI machine.

"And what happens then?" he says. "You just gonna flip or something? And *then* what? You'll be stuck in some unimaginable alternate reality forever?"

I look into him and speak carefully.

“Danny, I’ve been stuck in some unimaginable alternate reality for *four years*.”

He stares at me for a long while.

“Look, man, you’ve been messin’ with this every night for a year. Our funding was pulled. They think you’re nuts. I’m gonna get blacklisted if I don’t distance myself from you.”

“This is *it!*” I say, gulping from a bottle of water. “I *know* it!”

Danny gives me the same silent grimace he’s worn for months. After a pause, he walks over to his locker.

“Look, I’ve tried to support you, even to humour you, but I just *can’t* anymore, dude. You’re on your own.” He pulls on his coat and looks askance at me. “You’ve slipped, man. You should get some grief counselling, and, you know, move on with your life.”

“I *am* moving on!” I say. I can hear the strained hoarseness in my voice. I haven’t had proper, unmedicated sleep in so long.

Daniel’s mouth opens long before he produces any sound from it. “You’re insane,” he says flatly, staring at me.

“I am *not*,” I say. “The science clearly supports the theory.”

Daniel just shakes his head slowly. He walks towards the door, but before he leaves, he looks back one last time. “Hey. Be careful, okay? You take too many of those sedatives, you *will* die.” His eyes are dark with worry. Then he’s gone.

I walk over to the console, verify the settings, and fire it up again. I pop two more sublinguals, then I slide back into the huge, clanging machine. I close my eyes and focus on cherry blossoms.

Maya, hold on, baby! Daddy’s coming.

POETRY

Keyboard Warrior

By Grace Ruthven

She dons her sword and shield, not from a sheath,
but from inside a computer crafted of steel.
Entering this fantastical world,
she is no longer an ordinary girl.

Bounding through the brush,
she rushes to rescue her allies when the going gets tough.
Demons and ghouls alike fall at the tip of her blade;
in this dreamlike world, there's no one she cannot save.

Gambling with goblins
and palming pearls from pirates,
she sails from the tip of the Eastern Kingdoms
to the bay that lies beneath it.

She rides on horseback,
anticipating any counterattack.
Quarrels and quests cannot get the best of her,
and a deadly dragon lies in the cave to the west in slumber.

Fire crackling like thunder,
she sunders the scales of the basilisk.
Collecting his prized treasures,
between dreams she basks in the most luxurious pleasures.

The bards tell toiling tales and sing sublime songs,
about the mighty champion who can do no wrong.
The most praised and powerful explorer,
between dreams the ordinary girl becomes a warrior.

CREATIVE NONFICTION

Kung Fu

By Jonas Thoene Gerber

One of the first martial arts movies I ever saw was *The Forbidden Kingdom*: a charming zero-to-hero movie filled with jaw-dropping action scenes and hilarious comedy. Suffice to say it was a feast for the eyes when I saw it at eleven years old, and it set me aflame with passion. I loved the epic fight scenes and badass warriors in the film. However, after begging my dad to let me join a Kung Fu studio, I was disappointed by the classes.

Instead of flying kicks and flashy sword moves, we spent most of our time doing push-ups and learning stances. Perhaps I should have seen this coming. There is a scene in the movie where Jason asks Lu Yang to teach him Kung Fu. Lu Yang hits him with a stick and says, “that’s called strike, tomorrow I teach you block.” Despite my dissatisfaction, my burning desire to become a Kung Fu master would not be quenched, and I kept training.

Throughout my instruction, I maintained my fascination with ‘completing’ my journey by receiving my black belt. For a white belt, this dream seemed impossibly far away. I longed to be able to smash through wooden tables or pluck a fly from the air with chopsticks at a whim. The belt progression was displayed along one wall as a constant reminder, a colourful rainbow of badassery. The studio was decorated with all kinds of exotic weapons begging to be used: swords, halberds, bo staffs, rope spears, and nun chucks. Much to my dismay, however, the studio was very strict about who was allowed to train with weapons, and all the cool pointy ones were reserved for black belts. My obsession was further encouraged by the showboating

of older students; one of the younger black belts loved to show off his wallflip to newer students. Each nugget of awesomeness kept me coming back for more.

I spent six years training. Kung Fu was a rock to me through all the changes and confusion of middle and high school. Tears, laughter, and everything in between were shared at the studio. Despite the challenges of the training, the instructors always kept the student's enjoyment as a priority. The monotonous repetition of techniques was broken up by games of dodgeball or water balloon fights. Whenever I felt stressed or overwhelmed with other parts of my life, I could find solace in my training.

As might be expected, my Kung Fu training was far different from what I had seen in *The Forbidden Kingdom*. The brutal, fast-paced realities of self-defense differ vastly from the flashy, extensive fight scenes seen in action movies. Focus was placed on practical, efficient techniques over ostentatious ones. My disappointment was multiplied by the endless repetition of mundane techniques. The curriculum was quite comprehensive for practical self-defense; we covered striking, takedowns, ground fighting, weapon use, weapon defense, and supplemental movements such as dive rolls, flips, and high jumps. There was an insane amount of content to learn; the curriculum only reset annually, so each month came with its own subject. In retrospect, I'd be hard-pressed to say I achieved any degree of "mastery."

I was deemed ready to take my Black Belt Test after five years when I was sixteen years old. There were two different black belt tests at the studio, each occurring once a year: one for kids and one for adults. I desperately wanted to take the adult test. While a youth black belt carried the same status as an adult black belt, the test was less difficult and required less preparation; to me, this lowering of the bar seemed patronizing and undermined the validity of my hard work. Perhaps this was cleverly designed to push students to work harder; this was certainly the case for me. Thankfully, I was deemed ready to take the adult test with two other students, Dave and Addison. They were a fair bit older, mid-thirties, and I admired them a lot; they were incredibly skilled and worked extremely hard in preparation. I felt inadequate training with them. As a gangly teenager, I had awkward, flailing techniques that were a stark contrast to their smooth, polished ones.

The pressure leading up to the test was a palpable weight on my shoulders. I felt like I'd never be good enough. Every day for almost a year, I would do some form of training to prepare. Occasionally, I would take over instructing lower-level courses at the encouragement of the studio head; he told me one of the best ways to study is to teach others.

The instructors were frustratingly vague with the details of the test, further increasing my anxiety. My instructors told me we had to know the entirety of the curriculum and demonstrate requested techniques. They also mentioned that there would be a written portion and an essay, but to my dismay they said nothing about the topics. The few details that I managed to glean were that the test would begin with a short but intense timed hike up Mt. Finlayson in the morning as a warmup, and then the test itself would take place at the nearby studio.

It's a delicate balance to climb for success without building your own fall.

The morning of the test was by far the hardest part of the day. My head was cloudy and my heart beat heavily in my chest. Everything I had worked for had built up to this. I met with Dave, Addison, and my instructor at the base of Mt. Finlayson at around 8:30 AM. After a brief warmup, we were off. The climb was incredibly easy; I blinked and it was over. A short twenty-six minutes and we had scaled the mountain, four minutes faster than our supposed goal. We made it up and down so fast that we were early for the next part of the test.

While Dave and I shook with nervous energy, Addison was a paragon of composure. It seemed like he was preparing to kick his feet up for a lazy afternoon instead of undertaking a monumental test of perseverance and skill. Addison's calm demeanour helped ease Dave's and my tension. However, our tranquil moment was banished once we stepped into the studio.

We were greeted by a wall of intimidating stares. The thirteen Black Belts overseeing the test were lined up along the wall behind the studio head, Bob. Despite knowing many of them for years, there was no joviality present. I felt as if I were on trial. A dozen judging eyes bore into me. After a brief introduction, our first challenge began. They lit a candle and told us to maintain a horse stance—legs wide, knees bent to 90°—until the candle burnt out. The first few minutes were bearable, but eventually, my already sore legs turned to jelly. However, the mental strain far outclassed the physical one; the endless blank stares brought me to the brink of panic.

Kung Fu was a rock to me.

Unfortunately, Dave and I didn't make it through the challenge unscathed. While the candle only burnt for nine minutes, our legs wouldn't hold and both of us fell multiple times. Only Addison, true to his indomitable character, lasted the full duration. No comments were made from the testers, and we moved on to the next phase.

We were told we would be sparring with each black belt in succession for two-minute rounds. After that, we would then go through the order again and wrestle each black belt for the same duration. The testers formed circles around each of us and would viciously push us back into the centre if we got too close to the edge. Strangely, I found this section to be the most enjoyable. It felt liberating to be able to fight back against my judicators. My relief was short-lived, however. Within minutes, my chest was burning from the intensity. My numb legs struggled to support me, and I felt as if I was moving through molasses. The brutality was further punctuated by faint retching from another corner of the room. I couldn't spare a moment to glance, but afterwards I learned they had buckets ready in case any of us vomited; to my surprise, it was Addison who had to use the bucket. After an hour of being rag-dolled and used as a punching bag, I felt as if I had been put through a washing machine. Thankfully, the next portion was the written exam.

The respite was heavenly, but the written exam came with its own challenges. My exhaustion was so strong that I had to use both hands to hold my pencil. Additionally, my head was so foggy that the convoluted questions in the short answer section made little sense. For example, one question asked for an example of movement within non-movement. The essay question further confused me. It described a scenario where while

standing on a frozen lake one sees both a man and a woman fall through the ice. With no opportunity to go for help, and equal distance from both, who should you save? To this day, I struggle to provide a suitable answer. I answered that I would save the woman because I felt that if the man was larger, he would be more likely to survive in the frozen waters long enough for help to arrive. After my rudimentary answers, I was not feeling confident in my chances.

The final portion of the exam would be a technique demonstration. To my surprise, this was the quickest and simplest part of the exam. After a year of study, Addison, Dave, and I performed the techniques with little difficulty. All consideration for our tiredness vanished upon the conclusion of the exam.

With bated breath, we hung on Bob's every word. He expressed how proud he was to see how far each of us had come, and that each of us deserved recognition. But he had only one black belt to give today and asked each one of us who we thought had earned it. As soon as the words left his mouth my heart sank. I knew it wouldn't be me. Despite all my hard work, Addison and Dave were far more proficient than me and had performed better throughout the exam. Unfortunately, they both seemed to agree. I wasn't anybody's choice for receiving the black belt. I answered that Addison should get it, and Dave and Addison each answered that the other should.

Much to my surprise, however, this was simply another test! With a great smile, Bob confessed that each of us would receive a black belt. Gone was the air of gravity; smiles, laughter, and congratulations filled the room. While the final test may have seemed cruel, it provided me with valuable clarity. Despite working my hardest, I wasn't the best or most deserving of a black belt. I didn't have to be though; I had proven my dedication and perseverance and followed through with my training.

But I wasn't satisfied. The praise and congratulations from friends and family felt hollow to me. Despite fulfilling all that was required,

I hadn't met my own expectations of what a black belt meant to me. I thought that passing my test would mean that I was a master, but all I had done was learn the basics. I felt as if I were cursed by a genie; my dream had come true but not the way I wanted. The more I learned about martial arts, the less I felt I knew.

For a time, the martial arts movies that I had once loved repulsed me. I could see what true greatness looked like and knew that I was nowhere close to achieving it. Despite years of hard work, I was only a few rungs up an endless ladder. It seemed easier to just let go and walk along a beaten path than struggle to appease my vanity. It was hardly a healthy mindset for a young man, but perhaps a realistic one.

My focus shifted. I stopped training to devote time to college, work, and mindless entertainment. For a while, the release from my endless training felt like a weight was lifted from my shoulders. I had so much more time to spend however I desired, but soon a different burden moved to take its place. The disappointment I felt only grew in my passivity. An endless nagging question prodded the back of my mind: Would I feel satisfied if I had kept training?

I was standing on the edge of a knife; the slightest slip could cut me. Life was an endless tightrope of pain with no destination in sight and an abyss looming around me. But it seemed that time was the solution I was looking for. The clarity that hindsight provided let me turn the knife's edge away.

I accepted the reality of my own limitations and took pride in the work that I put in. The value of the training I put in only grows the older I get. Discipline, tenacity, and guidance are privileges that molded the person I am today. I can't do half the things I envisioned I would be able to do, but I'm also capable of so much more. People always say to follow your dreams but never seem to consider what happens if you achieve them. It's a delicate balance to climb for success without building your own fall.

POETRY

Lost

By Angela Chou

Water passes over their splayed fingers.
It barely registers.
Their eyes are half open,
sunlight filtered through illuminated eyelashes.

A cloud passes overhead.
They caress their fingers over
smooth rocks in the river
and roll over on the grass.

Three hours have passed
in two slow, thready breaths.
They scramble to their feet
and run towards the bus stop,

but never make it in time.
It happens more and more,
until the last fragment
of their reality shatters.

Was it real? Or just a dream?
What is real? What is a dream?
What is it worth to be lost in your dreams?
Will we see outside of them again?

FANTASY

Mirror מורוּמ

By Bill Allen

“So, how was school today?” my mother asks as we pull into our driveway.

“Fine,” I reply.

“Anything fun happen?”

“No.”

She parks, gets my wheelchair out of the trunk, and sets it up outside. I open my door and prop my arm against the car seat to push myself out into the chair, only to come down a little too hard and crash into it.

“Whoa now, let me give you a hand!” Mom blurts out.

“No, I’m fine. Don’t worry.” I reposition myself in the chair to straighten myself out. “I can do this by myself.”

Mom lets out a sigh, and we turn to make our way up to the house. She fumbles with her keys a bit but eventually gets the door open, and lets me wheel past into the foyer.

“So, got any plans for the rest of the day?” Mom asks as we undo our shoes.

“The answer is still no, Mom. It’s been no everyday since the accident, and it will stay no until some miracle fixes my nerve damage,” I grumble. She asks this same question every day, as if anything could ever change.

“I just thought that maybe you could go out, maybe hang out at the park out back with your friends,” she says.

I glare at her. “And do what exactly? Sit there and watch them run around?”

Mom shrinks back a bit, and I breathe out a sigh. I don't intend to come off as angry so often, but it's never easy to fight it.

"Can you just hand me my cards please?" I mumble.

"Of course," she mutters. Reaching over to the foyer shelf, she pulls out my deck and hands them to me.

"I'll be in my room," I say, slipping the cards into my pocket and quickly wheeling myself around to head off through our tiny house. I roll through the whole first floor, past the kitchen and living room, and then pivot my chair to the right and stare up the staircase.

"All right. Here goes nothing."

I pull myself over to the handrailing and lift myself out of my chair. I lean on the railing heavily, transferring my weight as I struggle to get my crippled legs to make the step up each stair. I make it about four steps up, only to slip, and send myself crashing back down to the bottom in a roll.

"Carrie! Are you alright!?" Mom yells as she rushes into sight, only to find me lying breathlessly on the floor. She quickly bends over and picks me up, making sure I'm all right, then goes to carry me up the stairs.

I hate this more than anything. I know Mom means well, but I feel patronized. Even simple things like the staircase are too much for me to handle.

We reach the top, and Mom sets me down on the spare wheelchair we keep upstairs. She makes her way back down and turning back to face me, looks up as I gaze down at her.

"Carrie, I know you try, and I love that about you, but please, just please don't lie to yourself."

My anger swells. I want so desperately to say something back. I want to tell her to shut up, or to not talk to me like that. Don't lie to

myself? About what? I spend everyday living with these stupid legs. How could I possibly lie to myself?

I don't need to say anything, though; my gaze must convey itself well enough to her. Without making eye contact, she quietly whispers, "Sorry. I didn't mean it that way..." before I withdraw, pivoting myself and wheeling my way past her bedroom down to mine, swiftly opening it, rolling in, and slamming it shut behind me. I'll talk to her later once I've had the chance to calm down.

I look around, my anger dissipating as fast as deep breathing can make it. Everything is still here. My bed, my desk, my window, my mirror.

"Yep. Nothing changed at all," I mutter, before wheeling over to the window to look outside. I peer out, just barely managing to see while still sitting in the wheelchair. I can see the park. I see John, Penny, and Gina messing around, kicking a soccer ball about and laughing.

I don't even understand why I do this everyday. It's always the same. I look out the window, and I see my friends doing something I can't.

I turn from the window, slipping my cards out of their case as my gaze is drawn naturally to the poster on the backside of my door.

That poster was my escape. I've had it since I was seven; it's a depiction of my favorite stage actor, a woman who went by the name Gambelle. I used to watch her on television, and she always found a way to impress, regardless of the odds stacked against her. She'd do card tricks, magic shows, even stunts. I especially loved the ones involving trampolines. Watching her fly around the stage was always so magical!

I fiddle with my cards, lost in the memories. I fold them and shuffle them; the cards were the only trick of hers I could figure out how to feasibly do on my own. I close my eyes for a second, imagining what it must be like to be her. All the tricks, all the opportunities. I sigh happily. That must be the life.

*I warp my face, stretching it out
and putting on a big, fake smile,
and the reflection does the same.*

And then my eyes open, back to my dreary, forever unchanging room.

“Ah, this lovely little cage of mine,” I mumble before turning from the poster and rolling over to my desk. I place my cards down, and reach over to my journal, pulling it towards me. I flip it open. My last entry had been approximately three months ago, when I had successfully managed to get up the staircase on my own. I haven’t been able to replicate that “stunt” since. I groan, because as I am, I can’t do anything.

“God, I just wish for once that I could go back to how things were.... I wish I didn’t have to deal with these useless legs.” I shake my head. As if that was possible. All I can do is card tricks. I turn myself around and make my way towards my bed. I figure a nap probably wouldn’t be terrible right now. It’s not like there’s anything else going on.

I cross my room, passing by my mirror, but something catches my eye, and I back up to check if I was just seeing things.

I wasn’t. I turn myself, wide eyed in confusion and shock, as I stare up at my mirror. I can see myself, but it’s not a reflection. It has my face, but is dressed in bright red, and is standing tall on both legs.

I look back to my poster. It’s a dead ringer. Whatever this image is, it’s me, dressed up like her. The red jacket, the top hat, the showman attire.

Completely baffled, I raise my arm. The reflection does the same. I warp my face, stretching it out and putting on a big, fake smile, and the reflection does the same. It's me—it has to be. But how?

I look down. My legs are as bruised up as ever; the fall from the stairs definitely did a number on them. I reach down, trying to move one of them, only for pain to shoot through me as I attempt to lift it. I look back up, longing for what the reflection had. I reach out for the mirror, and following suit, the image does the same. This can't be real, can it? How can this possibly be me? Our gazes meet, our actions mirror, but we are so starkly different.

And then our hands meet, pressed firm against the glass of the mirror, and everything goes dark. My mind races. What happened!? My eyes flutter open after a few brief moments, and everything feels...different. There's something underneath me.

Mystified, I look down and stumble backwards as I realize what changed, only to then catch myself with my legs before falling over. I'm standing. On both my legs. I regain composure and try to squat. My knees bend and I lower myself down, then straighten myself back up. I can stay balanced. I wiggle my toes. Each and every one of them leaps to action; I can distinctly feel each of them from the others. I look around. There isn't a single wheelchair in sight.

I take a step forward. My foot lands, admittedly not too gracefully, but it lands nonetheless.

I hear some noises coming from off in the distance. It sounds like... people? Like a lot of people, and the voices are interspersed with laughter. I take a step towards the voices, and then hear the faint humming of music growing alongside them. I step, and then I step again, and soon enough I'm running! I can't believe it. I, with no wheelchair in sight, am running!

And then I burst out through a tent flap and am met with an onslaught of bright, colourful lights and overwhelming amounts of noise from everywhere. My eyes adjust, and as everything becomes clearer, I realize where I am. I'm at a circus! I see food stalls, tents, fireworks in the distance, and most of all, I see people, happily walking around and enjoying the festivities.

I stand there in utter awe. None of this makes any sense, but it's all such a rush! There are no more limitations...no more dusty old room or wheelchair!

Lost in the moment, I bolt through the park grounds, and while admittedly I'm not the most graceful runner, I'm too desperate to take everything in to care. I see games with larger-than-life prizes, and people leaping to and from trapezes and flipping off trampolines! It's like an entire world based off those old shows I watched!

Everything is so foreign, yet somehow familiar. Every corner of this wonderland seems to hide something amazing, something I've never seen anywhere outside of my television, and the most exciting thing is that I'm a part of it—I can live out all my dreams here, not as an outcast, but as a magician, someone free from limitations!

Then, a deep voice erupts over the crowds through a loudspeaker. "Come one, come all, to Wonderland's Rarest! Take a gander at rarities and oddities the likes of which none have ever seen!"

Curious, I can't help but follow the loudspeaker back to a tent from which people are coming and going. I smile. I already love this entire place! I step through the entrance.

And then everything is silent. Confused, I look around. Everyone, the entirety of the crowd I entered the tent with, has disappeared. I am alone.

“What? How could...” I start to say, only to cut myself off as I look further into the tent. Lining the walls are human-sized glass cases with displays inside featuring strange-looking people. I walk up to a display slowly, and gazing up at it, I stumble back and fall over. Inside is John, running in place, just like how he was on the field earlier, but there is one thing distinctly different about him. He has a soccer ball for a head and is running in place, going nowhere but happily refusing to stay still. He doesn’t acknowledge me; his gaze is firmly planted straight ahead. I knock on the glass trying to get his attention, but fail to even make him flinch.

Entirely confounded, I shift my gaze to the other displays. I see Gina and Penny amongst them, both in similar forms to John, running in place with soccer ball heads, but it isn’t just them. I can see my teachers, my mom’s friends, and then, even stranger, Gambelle herself. But she isn’t in some strange form like the others; in fact, she isn’t even moving. She just stands there, her body a life-sized porcelain doll, perfectly posed and dressed to look exactly like my poster, but without the expression or character.

And then a voice rings out, piercing the silence occupying the tent, chanting my name sombrely. “Carrie... Carrie... Carrie...” Concerned, yet desperate to find someone, anyone at all, I follow the voice, and after winding down hallway after hallway of displays, I finally burst out into an open room with only one display. My jaw drops, partly out of confusion, but mostly out of shock.

I see my mother, trapped in a glass case, but she isn’t herself. She is also a puppet, suspended entirely by strings. She is relatively small, but possesses four arms, each hand holding a different object. Most of them hold common household items, but I zero in on only one: the one holding a wheelchair.

I look around, but see nothing else in the room besides her. Then, I look back to her, only to jump in shock. She is staring right at me, her gaze locked with mine.

“Hello Carrie. How was your day?” she asks, not a single emotion occupying her voice.

“Uh...” I sputter out.

“How was your day?” she asks again.

I stare at her in confusion, not knowing what to say. What the hell is this thing?

“Do you need a hand?” she asks, emphasizing the hand with the wheelchair in it.

“N-no... No, I think I’m fine...” I respond, struggling to meet its unflinching and unblinking gaze. “I was just, uh... wondering if you maybe knew where all the people went? There were crowds outside...”

“They went home.”

“Home? But they were all just here. How could they have gone home?”

“They went home,” she repeats, not registering my question.

“Uh... yeah... of course.” I peer around, hoping to see if there’s another doorway to go through. I spot an exit on the other side of the room, and without a word, slowly begin making my way towards it, not taking my gaze off the puppet as it rotates to maintain eye contact.

“Carrie.”

“Yes?” I respond, working my way towards the exit slowly.

“Don’t lie to yourself.”

My eyes go wide. If I wasn't so confused, I'd be angry; I can feel boiling in my chest. I take a deep breath as I stare into her soulless eyes. This thing doesn't even seem to register how I'm reacting. It just keeps staring.

"Don't lie to yourself," she repeats. I keep moving towards the exit.

Just as I get to it and break eye contact to leave, I hear the puppet behind me.

"Don't lie to your..." she begins saying before I dash off and exit the room, trying to get away as quickly as possible. I can hear her close behind, repeating the statement over and over in that same, cold voice. *Don't lie to yourself. Don't lie to yourself. Don't lie to yourself.*

Eventually, as I keep running, her voice trails off until I can't hear it, and I finally stop, nearly falling as I bend over, clutching my knees. I take a couple long, raspy breaths.

After a bit, having finally calmed down, I stand up and look around. It's somewhat dark, and I still haven't seen anyone. I let out a sigh as my adrenaline finally settles, but then I notice what's around me.

Mirrors. Lining the walls, everywhere.

"A hall of mirrors? Huh, I wonder..." I mutter aloud, walking over to gaze into the nearest one, only for my suspicions to be confirmed. I see myself, but not as I am. This version of me is in a lovely dress, checking her hair as she stands in what seems to be party, with people all around her in formal wear. She looks happy.

Leaving that image behind, I walk around from mirror to mirror, wanting to see what they show me. Moving on to the next one, I see myself in a wedding dress, the smile plastered across my face only further accentuated by what look like tears of joy causing my makeup to run. Then, as if to counter that image, the next one shows me in a hospital bed, the expression on my face utterly emotionless.

Don't lie to yourself.

I move slowly, taking it all in. I wonder who they see me as? Do they see the stage attire? Or do they see something completely different? Or is all of this just an illusion? Question after question runs through my mind as I glide from mirror to mirror, my desire to find an answer growing more and more desperate.

And then, all those thoughts are silenced. I go up to the last mirror in the room, and, looking down, I see me. I see a sixteen-year-old girl, complete with paralyzed legs, stuck in a wheelchair, staring up at me in utter amazement. This one isn't an illusion. This one is me.

Completely taken aback, I stare down at myself in shock. I've been so caught up in what is happening that I nearly forgot how I got here.

Then, the silence between me and the mirror is broken; I can hear the voices of the crowds rising again outside, just like when I first got here. My gaze wanders, wanting to find somebody, anybody else to talk to, but upon looking back to the mirror, I can't seem to pull myself away from it.

Enamored, I raise my arm. The reflection does the same. I warp my face, stretching out and putting on a big, fake smile. And the reflection does the same. It is me as I once was.

I look down to my now-functioning legs. I bend my knees a little, and bounce myself on them. They're everything I longed for, everything I used to have, and yet...

I look back to the reflection. I know exactly what she saw in me. She saw everything she ever wanted, but couldn't be. It was...sad. All these dreams kept from her by a pair of paralyzed legs. But then again... do the legs really keep her from that much?

The thought hits me out of nowhere, but somehow makes sense. Everything I do in this world, sans walking and running, is something I could have done with or without legs. I could explore and adventure, meet wonderful people, and do wonderful things, regardless of my ability to stand. Sure, I can't bounce on trampolines and do stunts, but I'm still happy here even though I don't do those things. Actually, maybe that's the difference.

Maybe the difference isn't the legs. Maybe it's just that I'm happy.

I crack a little smile, and meet my reflection's gaze, and she smiles too. We both reach out, press our hands firmly against the glass, and as we meet each other, everything goes white.

Holding my eyes shut, I take a deep breath. I no longer feel my legs beneath me; I only feel a wheelchair. I open my eyes slowly, and am met with the view of my bedroom mirror, showing me as I normally am: a sixteen-year-old girl in a wheelchair. I sigh. Not having the ability to walk is going to sting, but there are probably better things to focus on right now.

I wheel myself over to my window and peer out. I still see my friends running about, and I smile.

"Yep. Nothing's changed at all," I happily say to myself. I pivot my wheelchair, gaze up at my poster briefly, smile, then open the door, leaving my room. Maybe I'll go out and have some fun at the park.

I roll down the hall, and turn, only to face the stairs looming beneath me. I pause, and Mom's words ring back into my mind. *Don't lie to yourself.* After a few moments, a gentle smile creeps onto my face.

"Hey Mom! Could you come help me down the stairs?" I yell down.

"Carrie? Of course, just give me one minute!" she calls back.

I laugh. I can't wait to get outside. I'm gonna have so much fun.

My mind wanders back to Gambelle. She always found a way to impress, regardless of the odds stacked against her. I let my smile grow.

Because now, as I am, so can I.



FANTASY

Night Poppy

By P. J. Davies

This isn't a story about time travel—I haven't moved an inch. I sleep two blocks down from the apartment block I grew up in. I've never been on an airplane, never stepped foot in another province, let alone another country. Why would I need to? What could I see that I haven't already? What could there possibly be for me, out there, that isn't already here for me? I have ruled empires, known the adoration of thousands, and led a flight of great and terrible flying beasts into battle. I have lived at every age for every conceivable amount of time. I have lived over and over a golden boyhood summer spent catching fish and sleeping in trees. I have been an acrobat and a sage. I will be 32 years old in March, and I have lived so long and so deeply that there are cracks forming on my soul. Death used to frighten me, so I sought immortality. When I found it, my body became a prison.



I met Anthony at the Flatlander Bar and Grille. He was a friend of my roommate's cousin, something like that. We were celebrating someone's promotion. I don't remember those friends very well. I was in my first year of college and very far away from where I am now. Anthony was a bit older than us and the definition of a strapping young man. Yet each time he turned his head to catch a comment, his habitus was that of a very old man. He moved slowly, a waxy figure in the candlelight flicking his blonde forelock away from

his eyes, a nervous tic. I've lived entire lifetimes since then, and I've learned to read people better. What comes off as alluring is the reek of danger. Dangerous people often don't know they're dangerous; most don't think of themselves that way. They can't help it any more than the barn owl can help the field mouse. When Anthony turned his lamps upon me, it was the danger that pulled me in.

Down the bench towards the strange man I went, shifting my beer into my left hand. "I'm Brad," I said, pumping his hand "Have we met?" He turned to look at me through a lock of his hair. His gaze was neither warm nor cold, but it was thunderous. He spotted the rubber band around my wrist.

"You tryin' to quit smokin'?" Anthony sounded like he had done some smoking himself. People get to the end of their lives and their voices falter, the musculature that bolsters even the deepest bass withers and they emote with a warble. He had such a voice, not one to match his meaty presence.

"No, no I don't smoke. Asthma!" I thumped my chest, the site of my defect. "This is for dreaming."

His eyes flashed and he ran a hand through his cowlick. It was the first time that evening he'd looked even remotely interested.

I clarified: "You know, for like, taking control of your dreams? So that you can like, fly?" I grinned at him to show him I was only partly serious.

Anthony remained stony-faced. He drained his beer and put the glass down on the table, frowning at the suds. "You trying to wake up in your dreams, then?" He made a universe out of each word.

"Yeah! No luck yet though. Still totally weird shit out of my control. No flying. Just like, I have to save all the guinea pigs from my elementary school's classroom before it turns into a giant apple. That sort of thing."

As he listened to me, Anthony reached for his pocket. He fumbled around in there and after a moment he pulled out a small leather pouch.

“Here,” he pulled out a shrivelled little blue flower from the pouch and waved it at me. It smelled of freshly cut grass and jasmine tea. “Drink this in some tea before bed. It helps.”

“Wow, really? Thank you! What is this, morning glory or something?”

Anthony’s gaze skittered away from mine. “Night poppy. It doesn’t grow around here.” He stood up abruptly and sidled around the other end of the bench, placing the table between us. “Hope it helps. I have to go to bed now.”

“Wait! This won’t like, get me high, right? I mean it’s just that I have work tomorrow.” I hoped I didn’t sound desperately uncool.

He grimaced. “No, it doesn’t mimic our poppy in that way. You’ll be fine.” He pulled out a ten-dollar bill and stuck it beneath his empty glass. “A word to the wise, should you wish to be so. Don’t stay too long.” He donned a long coat and strode out the door into a bitter November day. I wish I could say it was the last I saw of him.

When I got home that night, I brewed a cup of tea with the strange flower. The night poppy seemed to sparkle and play tricks on my eyes. One moment it was blue and broad petalled, the next it was almost purple and the petals looked like tentacles. I took my mug to bed with me and drank it while I played games on my phone. I soon became drowsy and turned off the lights.

I felt myself sinking into my sheets. I allowed myself to relax, letting sleep overtake me. I leaned back until I felt the sheets give way, and suddenly I was on my back with my feet dangling over me. Awake now, I sat up and rubbed where I had fallen.

I was in a low-ceilinged room with a dirt floor, dimly illuminated by a window cut into the thatch above. I glanced at my wrist. The rubber band was gone. I felt pleased with my technique for only a moment before I remembered the flower. I felt my side and the bulge of the leather pouch with the rest of the crushed flowers still within it. Reassured, I rose to my feet and left the little room; turning round I could see that I had been inside of a cottage that grew and shrunk like the pulsing of a heart.

I was in the belly of a vast green valley, stretching into mountains on either side. A mountain stream meandered through, crinkling and crashing over stones in the streambed. It was as though I'd been walking around my entire life with every sense turned way down, and now they'd been cranked all the way up. The woodsmoke from the cottage mingled with the sweet grass and wet rocks of the valley. I felt each blade of grass against my feet, and the wind slithered around me. The colours were alive and pulsing. The presence of red brought the sensation of blood and the smell of iron; green things bubbled with life and the blues ached with cold. I walked the valley for hours, and I returned the next night. And the next. And the night after that.

Most people, when they begin to lucid dream, understand they have more freedom with natural laws. Many take to the highest heights or plummet to the depths of the ocean. This is enjoyable, and as someone who has spent thousands of hours in the air, I won't say I don't see the appeal. But it's shallow. We live by so many laws that it can be difficult to see the bars on our own cages.

Like time.

If there is some force greater than us, some unknowable impetus that imagines the world into being, it is time. Our existence on Earth, what era we are born into, even when I lose consciousness and enter my personal kingdom, it is all ruled by time.

Things changed for me when I learned how to sleep in my dreams. At first I could stay only days, but like a muscle my dreamtime grew stronger until I could stay weeks and months. Soon I spent years, and woke up in a younger body some mornings aching from the incongruity. People moved into my valley, and I taught them how to use the night poppy and wake up in their dreams. They returned with tales of alien landscapes and fantastic beings. I imagined their dreams into existence: glass waterfalls, winged lizards with mouths on their stomachs, buildings made of sweet clouds and rain.

I spent centuries in my dreamtime before I met another dreamer. I had assumed that the space was entirely mine, with no overlap into the dreams of others. Those who populated my dreams were not under my control. Their identity blended with mine and they often took on the appearance of people I knew in the waking world. They were not entirely my creation, more a kind of consciousness that formed itself around mine like lakeweed wraps around a swimmer's limb. But when I first saw a fellow dreamer, I knew.

A woman with a hawkish face and short, buzzed hair entered the valley leading a cavalry of about one hundred people. She was wrapped in a maroon shawl fastened with a large emerald brooch that glinted in the sun as she strode across the grass towards me. We locked eyes and realized what the other was. She acknowledged our mutual trespass in the dreamtime with a shrug. She had walked with these people for miles, through fire swamps teeming with terrible beetles and obsidian valleys with rivers of tar. They believed she was their saviour, she told me. They wanted to live where the night poppy grew. She could make one of those things true at least, she said. She and her people led a bloody assault on the valley, and we returned in full force. Beasts from under the ground and from the sky battered the woman's army until they retreated, leaving a scorched land. I thought I saw the woman once more after this, awake, plucking wilted grapes out of her shopping basket at the farmers' market, but

I could not be sure. I think it's likely that she found victory in some other place and time. After her attack, the poppies could not be salvaged, the ground was mud and stone. The people left the valley, some of them in pieces, a pair of boots with a hand stuffed in each all that remained of some little families, hopping towards the distant hills. I left as well.

I wandered for many dreamtimes. I walked for months and years, awoke to eat and white-knuckle my way through a waking day, then slept and walked again. I played with my age; I lived as my twelve-year-old self many times along a sunny riverbank, building a better treehouse each time. I let myself grow old as I walked, and then young again. Eventually, I came to an interpretation of Paris, with a floating city above populated by warrior monks and physical artists. I dedicated myself to the acrobatic arts, stretched the limits of my dreamly body. Once I grew tired of this, I allowed myself to grow older and older. My beard grew down to my knees; I could not die. I moved into the mountains above the monastery of the fighting monks and allowed my body heat to melt the snow where I sat. People began to make the treacherous journey up my mountain to see me and ask questions about existence. When I did not answer, they sat with me instead, and went away looking accomplished. I continued to sit. My beard grew into the roots around me.

I have not awoken in years. I cannot bring myself to build another existence, and I cannot bear to be stuck in that young and powerless waking body for even a moment. Recently, a young man came to see me. I could tell right away that he was a dreamer, but he seemed surprised to see the same in me.

“How long have you been dreaming?” His blonde hair was cowlicked, and he flicked it out of his eyes impatiently.

“A very long time. What about you?” I returned his steady gaze.

“Oh, this is the longest I ever stayed dreaming,” said the boy, waving his hand dismissively. “A few weeks. I get better and better but then I have to start where I left off. It’s hard. You seem really good at it though!”

“I appreciate the compliment,” I said, taking out my small leather pouch. “You’re doing very well. I have seen many dreamers now, but almost none of them know what they’re capable of.” I paused and examined the boy, then continued as I knew I would: “If I helped you dream longer, would you do a little favour for me?” A final stitch in our story, a snapping shut and a popping open for both of us.

I retrieved a fragment of night poppy from the little pouch and placed it in his cupped hand, where it glinted purple.

“All you need to do is hold onto it when you wake up. Before you go to sleep again, put some in a little bit of hot water and drink it. But keep half for later.”

“Will I need to do it each time?”

“No. You only need to do it once. But you’re going to hold on to it, because many, many years from now, you’re going to meet a man in a bar. And you’re going to give him the rest of the flower.” I pressed the pouch into his other hand and closed his fingers over it.

“How will I know the right man to give it to? What if I give it to the wrong man?” He was staring at the little bud now, the cerulean shade reflected in his eyes.

“You’ll know. He’ll tell you.” How I wish I could stop this cycle before it begins again.

“Well, okay. Thanks mister, I guess.” He turned to go.

“Wait!” I needed to help him, give him a heads-up somehow. “Come here, come closer.” The boy approached me warily. I clasped his shoulders, pulled him to me. “Just don’t... don’t stay too long.”

The boy flinched and shook free of my hands. He took a step back. "Okay."

I watched him descend the mountain. He took long, confident strides, looking around him as he went. He was still enamoured with the dreamtime.

I watched him until he was a speck on the horizon. I remained seated as a wind picked up, and then a slurry.

I am the still warm center of the earth. I am the taker and the giver. I am the dreamer and the dreamed.

POETRY

The Contract of Dreams

By Owen Kojima

In dreams, we are infinite.
Space and time stretch and contract.
Energy created, and matter destroyed.
In dreams, there are no laws.

In dreams, we are heightened.
Fear drives us faster, and we hold love tight.
Heroes and villains fight forever in the night.
In dreams, there are only absolutes.

In dreams, we sign a contract.
We can outrun cars and read minds.
Delve deep ocean depths and fly into the sky.
But in the fine print of dreams, we agree to an ending.



LITERARY FICTION

Recollection

By **Nessa Pullman**

I still feel like we're together in the first few moments I'm awake. The bridge between worlds so short-fused, I tremble to catch onto something—anything to keep me here with you.

I forgot how good you felt against my soft curves. I forgot the taste of your lips when I'm breathing you in. Routines I was so conformed to now feel like shots of heroin. Fast, intense, euphoric—purging through my body like a tidal wave. And it's never enough. I bite down harder for more, but no blood draws. I panic when you don't react to this inflicted pain. You used to wince when I played rough, but now there's nothing. And then I remember it's because you're not real—this is not real. I open my eyes to stare at you, hoping to catch something alive, but your eyes are dark—like the deep waters of the sea where things go to get lost. It's empty in there—an echo chamber of a million moments vanished into the underground. You notice my concern and tilt your face to the right, and I remember the way you look at me when you are trying to figure me out. Your lips twist slightly, revealing that familiar smile I ache for. I sigh sweetly—I've found the sign I've been tirelessly searching for. It didn't take long for you to come back, it never does. I move my hands up your body, grazing each electrified molecule with the edges of my fingertips. The energy seeping from you is amplified as I take my time to explore the charted territory—a seismic wave rolling through your body and flooding into mine. I close my eyes again and let the rush take over my body—collapsing into your delicious sensation once again.

PHOTOGRAPHY

Major Arcana #5

By **Rebecca Wheeler**

I know this isn't real life, it feels different. But I don't care. I'll keep going as long as I'm allowed to. If this is the only realm that exists with you, then I'll stay forever. The steady flow of energy shared between you and me will keep us treading as we sail back to the stars from which we all came.

I'm completely lost in the rebellion as moments merge into one. I'm so dull I barely notice the deterioration as you slowly dissipate from my white-knuckled grip. In a panic, I open my eyes to look at you. I attempt to lock you in with my gaze as if this would somehow keep you from disappearing. You are dissolving fast—slipping rapidly through the cracks in my fingers. I scramble for a way to make you stay. I reach for you as you fall apart in front of me—frantically chasing after the pieces as they float away...

Darkness now surrounds me in a blanket of comfort, but I feel nothing. I sort through the emptiness to find any remnants of you that have been left behind. I don't care what it is; I'll take anything. It's only been moments, but it doesn't take long for my body to tire. It begs me to stop—returning me lifeless back down towards the murky earth.



The blankets of darkness are now heavy sheets against my skin, and I know where I have returned to. I keep my eyes shut tight, clinging to the darkness for as long as I can in the hopes that I will slip right back. I'm not ready to give up; I'm not ready to open my eyes in fear of the view that will greet me.

So I stay here, in the darkness that surrounds me, in the very last place that I saw you.

And I'll wait here for you to return, so we can sail back to the stars.

POETRY

Like the Sun

By Lilli Paterson

Your fingers surface
Stained in expired ink
And I find a new way to convince
Burnt honey skin
Waiting to be touched, but not held
“Like the sun,” I offer
For she sings the moon to sleep
Each morning
Only to be coated in darkness
That marks the end
Of her forever

Yet again

Contributors

Bill Allen is an aspiring writer of fiction and an avid fan of both theatre and film. He is currently studying at Camosun College in pursuit of education and experience in these areas and looks forward to eventually immersing himself into the community while continuing to write and refine his style and abilities.

Lucy Auchinachie is eighteen years old, and is in her first year at Camosun College. She has a passion for words, and writes both academically and creatively, inspired by her lived experiences and by the artists of her generation. Through her poetry, she hopes to convey her perspective of the world with nuance and clarity, and to find meaning in the everyday. She was a finalist in the CBC Shakespeare Selfie Student Writing Challenge in 2017.

Ethan Badr is a student of literature and philosophy at Camosun college. He has always had a fascination with reading and writing poetry. He is passionate about learning, sharing his ideas with the world, and talking to interesting people. This is his first publication in *Beside the Point*, and he is currently writing for the *Nexus* newspaper.

Rachelle Bramly (she/her) is a poet, writer, and performer most recently published in *The Raven Review*. A settler on Lekwungen & W̱SÁNEĆ territory, she is deeply influenced by the land, the body, her many moves, and her years as a farmhand. Her poetry often explores power, grief, and relationships. Rachelle is currently completing a BFA in creative writing, with a focus on poetry, at the University of Victoria. She is also writing a novel. This is her fourth year published in *Beside the Point*.

Angela Chou is an artist and writer who enjoys creating things, whether tangible or intangible. Though many different mediums are used, poetry is one that is returned to more often than not.

James Clarke is some guy who has taken every Creative Writing course that Camosun College has to offer. He strongly recommends you take all of them too. The cathartic nature of writing helps him cope with his medical condition, HME (Hereditary Multiple Exostoses). His favourite food is Butter Chicken, he plays an unhealthy amount of Fire Emblem, and he is a die-hard supporter of Tottenham Hotspur. His life dream is to pen a screenplay that rivals Martin McDonagh or Taika Waititi in comedic genius.

Arianna Coll is a fictional realism writer who tries painstakingly to articulate everything she envisions into words. She is also an avid reader and dedicated watcher of film, television and people to better understand the human condition. She has written many short stories and the occasional poem, and is constantly jotting down ideas to improve pieces she's written, read and/or seen, even if they are not her own.

P.J. Davies is a fan of science fiction, the ocean, animals, and book reading. When not immersed in literature, they can be found swimming outdoors in all weather, tracking urban wildlife, and acting as president, treasurer, and secretary of their very own Welsh Language Appreciation Society. They live with their partner and two cats a half-hour walk from the sea in Victoria, British Columbia.

H.M. Friendly was born and raised in Victoria, British Columbia, and spent eight years at UVic studying neuropsychology and other sciences, before becoming horribly disillusioned and dropping out in order to pursue the less lucrative but more inspired career of being a professional author. H.M. Friendly writes dark Sci-Fi, literary fiction, and horror, and has released two short-story collections. Read new stories and reflections at hmfriendly.wordpress.com.

Andrew Fryer engaged in many mediums while attending the array of art courses at Frances Kelsey Secondary on Vancouver Island, which helped to enrich his visual language. Though his favoured medium is graphite pencil, Fryer is compelled to take the teachings of it and apply it to all mediums. Since fall of 2016, he has been enrolled part-time in Camosun College's Visual Art Program. The photograph "Lights in the Dark" was taken during the program's Creative Photography course.

Jonas Thoene Gerber is originally from Germany but grew up on Vancouver Island. He is currently studying an Associate of Arts degree at Camosun. After he finishes, he will either transfer to a university for an English degree or do some travelling and look for opportunities to teach. He loves trying out different styles of martial arts and hopes to continue his training whenever possible. His long-term goals are to work in the editing and publication industry.

Shuang Gong is a writer, artist, and former Camosun College student. Horror, mystery and fantasy are what she is interested in; to her, writing and creating an imaginary world is a way to enrich the plain everyday life. This is her third publication in *Beside the Point*. Currently she is working on her first novel.

Judah Iam is a Camosun College student who lives and writes in Victoria, British Columbia. He likes to create short stories that explore themes around unconsciousness, consciousness, and dreams. Judah holds particular interest in comparative mythology, in superstition and spirituality, and in rituals of the occult. With his work, he aims to bring attention to the intersectionality of waking life and dreamtime while creating endearing characters that foster empathy and compassion for humanity overall.

Micah James is a first-year student at Camosun studying visual arts and business. Born and raised in Victoria, British Columbia, she has been writing as both a hobby and a passion since the second grade and took her first writing course in the fall of 2019. Her favourite authors are L.M. Montgomery and David Arnold. Micah enjoys reading historical novels and fiction, writing poems and short stories, watercolour painting, beautiful British Columbia, and her two tuxedo cats.

Owen Kojima is a Camosun student who has lived on Vancouver Island as long as he can remember. A long-time fan of reading, he is now publishing his work for the first time. He enjoys all kinds of stories, though his favourites are those of a more hopeful nature. He hopes to continue to publish works of fiction well into the future.

Lilli Paterson is a poet and visual artist whose work centres around themes of memory collection and finding home. After graduating high school in Whitehorse, Yukon, Lilli moved to Nova Scotia and spent a year exploring the east coast before venturing to Victoria for study. Through writing, painting, and digital media, she shares her experiences and aims to help others in validating their own.

Nessa Pullman is a freelance writer and book publisher. Her articles and short stories have been published in magazines across Canada and the United States. She recently achieved a writing scholarship to do her Yoga Teacher Training in Costa Rica. Human connection through movement and storytelling is her deepest passion and driving force in life.

Grace Ruthven is a student at Camosun College who is from Victoria, British Columbia. “Keyboard Warrior” is an epic narrative poem that tells the story of an ordinary girl who escapes into a video game world to live out her dreams. This poem was inspired by the author’s love of video games and her online identity that she maintains in the popular massive multiplayer online game “Word of Warcraft.”

Tori Schroeder is a current Camosun college student and an aspiring storyteller. Her days are often filled with a rotating hodgepodge of creative projects as she endeavours to find just the right outlet for her eclectic imagination. She's glad to call Victoria her home and thankful to be published in *Beside the Point* for the second time.

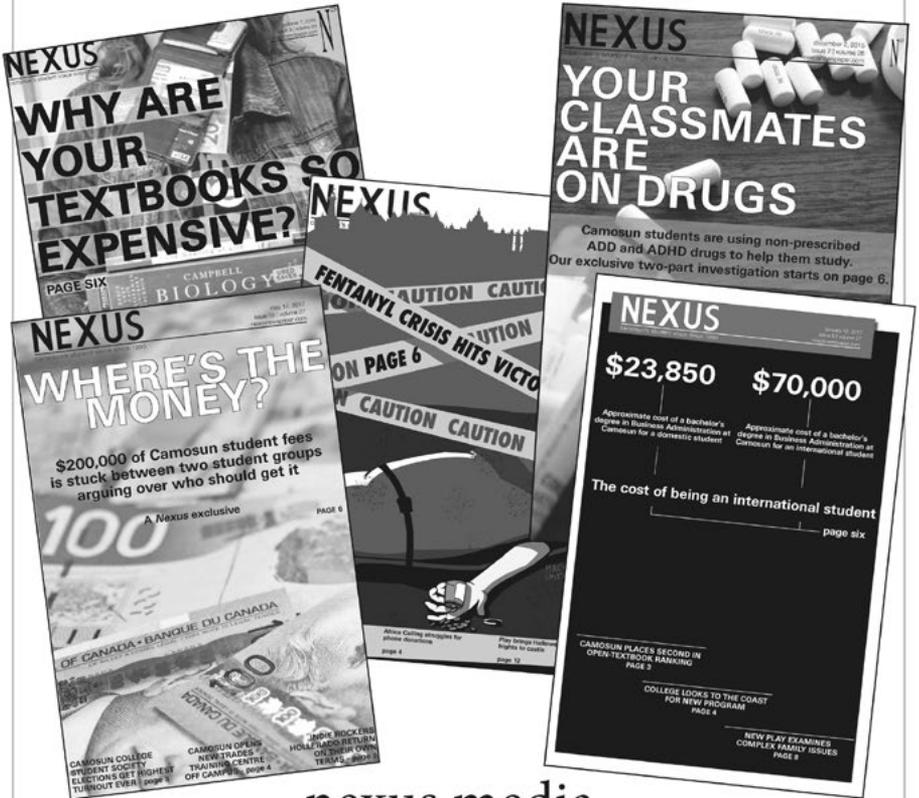
Cameron Simo is a third-year UVic student with a passion for creativity who enjoys writing, aspires to become a teacher, and always looks for inventive (yet needlessly complicated) solutions to simple problems. He has been published in *Beside the Point's* "Community" and "Time" editions, and he is honoured to have his work selected for a third time. He hopes to bring his novel ideas to life one day and that this is only the beginning for a potential writing career.

Emily Anne Sibley Welch arrived as a student at Camosun when she was thirty-five years old. She got her diploma in Mental Health and Addictions and now works as an outreach worker with young adults who have autism. She discovered, while in school, how much she values studying and educating herself. She is now preparing to continue her studies in literature and anthropology at UVic and would like to teach someday. She had a wonderful experience writing "Escape" and has formed a real attachment to Barry and his dreams.

Rebecca Wheeler is an interdisciplinary artist emphasizing video, photography, and performance art in her artistic practice. She is based in Victoria, British Columbia, and is currently a visual arts student at Camosun College. In Fall 2020 she will be relocating to Montreal to study Intermedia Arts at Concordia University. In the "Major Arcana" series, cameraless photographs conjure up tarot card imagery. Modern tarot is commonly known as a divination tool linked to intuition. Control in the dark room is limited, so each image is created by chance. This uncertainty makes each print feel like magic in its own right.

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DREAMS



BESIDE The Point

FEATURING WORK BY

Bill Allen
Lucy Auchinachie
Ethan Badr
Rachelle Bramly
Angela Chou
James Clarke
Arianna Coll
P.J. Davies
H.M. Friendly
Andrew Fryer
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Shuang Gong
Micah James
Owen Kojima
Judah Iam
Lilli Paterson
Nessa Pullman
Grace Ruthven
Tori Schroeder
Cameron Simo
Emily Welch
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