

BESIDE The Point



POWER

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Issue #7 2019

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Editorial

Hello, dear reader, and welcome to the 2019 issue of *Beside the Point*.

You hold in your hands a book of power. In its pages, you'll find a collection of strengths—the disparate talents of authors, editors, photographers, and thinkers bonded together to create a body of work as multi-faceted as the idea of “power” itself.

This year's call for submissions reaped some curious and contrary tales. Forty-seven unique interpretations of the theme of power came to us, explored through the avenues of poetry, prose, and photography. We took our time with the pieces, reading them on our own, gathering into small subcommittees and reading them again, then finally bringing our experiences back together for the consideration of the whole team. In the end, twenty-seven pieces were selected for their language, their imagination, and their daring.

These chosen works take you on a difficult journey, but what else is to be expected from a theme as loaded as “power”? In truth, establishing continuity was one of the editorial team's biggest challenges. We quickly realized the solution was to embrace each piece's individuality, and worked instead to create harmony and balance. From the resolute gaze on the front cover to the final wave of “Tyrico Bay,” we navigate strength and fragility, life and death, good and evil. We explore both humanity and the supernatural. We fly around in a dream world and then dig into the very bones of our own.

The substance of the journal has once again been enriched by visual art, but with a slightly different approach than in previous issues. In the past, illustrations were commissioned as companion pieces to select stories. Now, you'll find autonomous photographs exploring the theme of power in their own way. We were delighted to find that some of these pictures had a serendipitous connection to a few of the written texts, while others drew us into their own nonverbal narratives.

Sequential art forms like these thrive in the print medium. By publishing in print, we are decidedly championing books as a vital source of power. The sensory experience of reading bound pages is undeniable: we breathe them in, feel them with our fingers, hear them rasp and turn, and feast on them with our eyes. With a hand-held object in mind, our return to *Beside the Point's* original smaller format was a conscious move towards portability; this issue will fit easily into a backpack or purse, so you can carry this small source of power with you throughout your day or tuck it neatly on your bookshelf to revisit again and again.

Finally, it's our responsibility to state the reality of this collection: it's not always comfortable. Often, power exists for one person solely because it has been taken from another. We recognize and respect the lasting effect this can have, and felt it was necessary to supply a **content warning** for the pieces that may be triggering. If you see this symbol © beside a title, please note that the piece uses language or themes that may be distressing for some. You can turn to page 115 to see more detail about the topics concerned.

As varied as the pieces are, one theme that did turn up again and again over the last three months was the concept of personal power. It is our hope that as you flip through these pages, you will be inspired to explore what your own personal power looks like, how you can harness it, and how it can function to empower those around you. We now turn this collection over to you, dear reader. The power is in your hands.

—Cate Charron, with contributions from the editorial team

What, Me Worry?

By Christopher Vickers

I grew up in a cooperative housing project, a long spit from a snaking slab of concrete protruding from the coastline called the Breakwater. The tail end of the love movement had left my post-hippy parents looking for somewhere to stay put in Victoria, B.C.; the co-op in James Bay was an affordable place to raise a family around like-minded people. To me, though, it was Fenway Park, the beaches of Normandy, Evil Knievel's show stopping runway—everything. I lived in B-block, an apartment complex flanked by trees and a winding garden path. C-block was across a courtyard and behind it was a long alley leading from a tool shed to a wooden playhouse and a small field. The alley was lined with a fence and fruit trees protecting us from the dastardly plans of the kids from the other co-op.

Summer days saw a gaggle of kids aged five to fifteen hanging out together. We lived in deep imaginations brought to life by the uncanny braveness of youth. There was an inherent hierarchy in the co-op. The oldest wielded power over the younger kids with their sheer size, punctuated by an air of snooty knowingness. The top of the pecking order was a nefariously stalwart boy of thirteen named Malcolm. He looked like an athletic James Dean, roguishly handsome with a glint of danger in his eyes. His right hand was another thirteen-year-old named Dylan. Tall and wiry, Dylan was at his core a peace-maker—a sage, but still game to stir the pot of childhood chaos, while Malcolm was more than likely to set the stove on fire.

The duo had started a top-secret club called the Brat Patrol. The clubhouse was located in Brendan Marshall's Tetris game of a garage largely because it had the luxury of a beat-up couch. The club had recently procured a vehicle by swiping a shopping cart from Thrifty Foods and piloting it back to our corner of James Bay. They kitted

it out with two-by-fours placed crosswise through the bottom compartment, so more kids could cram onto the side of the cart, hooting and hollering. The Brat Mobile was the slow-moving scourge of the neighbourhood. Suffice to say, I would have played chicken with an atomic bomb to be part of the Brat Patrol, but Malcolm just wasn't having it.

"What's the password, Vickers?" Brendan said leering at me with a cracked smile, as he mounted a stool behind a makeshift milk crate entranceway to his garage.

Brendan Marshall was the son of an actor and a witch. He was a year younger than me, but his ability to conjure richly theatrical strangeness made him untouchable. We were inseparable when I had broken my arm the same week he had totalled his collarbone, but lately he was playing capo for the older boys and had been busting my chops over the teeniest missteps.

"I'll give you a hint, it exists in the known universe."

"Come on, Bren, that's impossible. What do I have to do to be part of Brat Patrol?"

"Fly to the moon with those Dumbo ears," Malcolm butted in, "then maybe get us some Cokes."

A wave of red cascaded over my face. I turned away from the thrum of laughter and slunk home to explore my cash flow situation. Not unsurprisingly all I could find was a single dime at the bottom of a pocket, wadded up in some Bazooka Joe comics. I was masterful at raccooning in the pursuit of the consumption of sugar, so I knew I could forage for bottles to return, but that could take all afternoon and Malcolm could down a couple of soda pops in a matter of seconds. Not unlike the buzz it produced, sugar was a fleeting social currency.

It's peculiar how much emotional shapeshifting we do as children to fit in. How far we will bend and break ourselves to not be made fun of—to be accepted. On any given day in the co-op, rank and

stature could come plummeting out from under your feet. I needed something really special to become a member of the Brat Patrol, but what did I have to offer? Gazing past the parade of heroes posing on my Justice League wallpaper, my eyes focused on the big box recently given to me from my Uncle Brian. I had just the thing! I scooped up as much treasure as I could hold in my arms and raced out of my room, taking the flights of stairs in leaps, rocketing out of my front door into the courtyard.

“What’s the password, Vickers?” Brendan asked, popping his head up from a stack of milk crates.

“You can stuff the password, Bren. These *Mad Magazines* should do the trick,” I said, revealing a teetering pile of the fantastic and crass comics.

Malcolm and Dylan appeared out of nowhere, sliding up to Brendan and I, smoothly relieving me of the stack.

“Where did you get these?” Malcolm asked, flipping through a *Mad*, the cover depicting the freckled nitwit, Alfred E. Neuman, poking his head out of a sea of black umbrellas, holding his hand out to check for rain.

“My Uncle Brian gave me his entire collection. They go all the way back to the ’60s. I have tons more.”

“The same Uncle who beat Zelda?” Brendan chimed in, wonder ballooning in his eyes. *The Legend of Zelda* was the most popular game on the newly released Nintendo Entertainment System. A few lucky homes in the co-op had got a Nintendo that Christmas, but now it was summer and no one had come close to finishing *The Legend of Zelda*. No one, that is, other than my Uncle Brian.

“Yeah, he’s awesome,” I said, glowing red again, now with gushing pride from the rays of attention beamed my way.

Dylan had already fanned out the *Mads* on the dinged-up coffee table they had scavenged to spruce up the clubhouse. A week before

it was just Brendan's garage, but entering now was like setting foot in the inner sanctum.

"Take a load off, Sir Vickers," Dylan said with an over-the-top British accent, gesturing to the couch.

"Wait a minute," Malcolm said, surging at me from behind, twisting my neck in a vise-like headlock, "how do we know you're going to be true to the Brat Patrol—are you going to rat on us to parents?"

"No," I said.

"Sell our secrets to the other co-op?"

"I'd never do that!"

"Will you choose the Brat Patrol over your other friends?"

Malcolm was dragging me around as I struggled against his wrenching grip. I was an immensely sensitive kid and my response to any emotional extreme was eventually tears. As I stumbled back and forth in Malcolm's hold, I could feel the hot, wet pressure building in my face.

"Hey, Malc, let him go," Dylan said, slowly approaching us.

"Not until he says he chooses Brat Patrol."

"Come on, man. You're hurting him."

"Do you choose Brat Patrol?"

"I do!" I said, holding back tears through gritted teeth.

Malcolm released his grip, and I dropped to the concrete floor. It was like that growing up in the co-op. One minute you could be excluded from incalculably cool activities by someone who went from tyrant to friend in the blink of an eye; next, the curtain would be lifted and you were suddenly a junior member of the Brat Patrol.

That afternoon I held no hurt or malice. I was steeped in the moment as we poured over the black and white pages, laughing and doing ridiculous voices and impersonations—the musty smell of the

old magazines thick on our hands. Folding in the artwork on the back covers, we marveled at the images transforming into something entirely new.

“Wanna take the Brat Mobile over to the vacant lot?” asked Malcolm, throwing the last of the magazines in a corner. It was everything I wanted, cruising down the block, the late afternoon sun sparkling off the shiny metal of the Brat Mobile, mouth open wide in a howl of exhilaration.

“Sure,” I shrugged, as the first wave of many mothers’ bellowing voices echoed names throughout the courtyard, cueing kids to scurry home for dinner.

FANTASY

Surged

By Avalon Suriano

A crisp breeze passing by gets caught in the tangle of long ebony hair atop a small-framed girl. She shivers as the coolness plays at her now-exposed neck. Goosebumps rise along her almond-coloured skin. Her nose runs slightly with each chilled breath.

Fall is a time of brisk air. The iciness cascades throughout the maze of her organs and bloodstream. Her breath puffs out like a locomotive, breathing in, breathing out, oxygen into carbon. As she tramps through the woodlands, freshly fallen leaves crunch under the weight of each step, dissolving into dust and other fine particles.

As she reaches the top of the hill, every fiber of her body begins to surge with electrical energy that emanates from the metropolis below. She overlooks the glowing city as electricity courses throughout the autumn air, soaking into her skin.

Every building lights up as the sun begins to set. The sky is kept dimly glowing by the company of light pollution, masking the once star-filled sky.

Around her, drab bracken and withered branches lie somber in the twilight. She looks over to the place she calls home: nothing but decay and rot cover the land. Anger oozes off the petite girl. Memories of her once pristine forest, now devastated by pollution, descend on her. Taking a deep breath, she raises her arms, tilts her head back, and exhales. With each new breath, electricity surges. Street lights and building windows zap out one by one. Her strength and power absorb the electrical waves of the city. The static surges trace the maze of her veins as she breathes in the enriching energies. Sparks dance between her fingers like morning dew on a spider's web. Rapture sounds throughout each of her cells as they vibrate along the surface of her skin. Her mind becomes hazy and her eyes glaze over, just as

the city below is cloaked in darkness. Hair whipping back, she sways side to side as she walks down the steep hill into the forest. A shaky breath escapes her lips as the autumn weather bites at her exposed skin, numbing her fingers. She gets to work fast.

Microscopic particles bolt through her finger tips, rejuvenating the surrounding forest with each touch. Spark by spark, the landscape comes to life. Vibrant greens, blues, purples, and pinks kaleidoscope all that surrounds her as unimaginable creatures wake from their slumbers to witness the display. Like watching the colours erupt out of fireworks, the evergreen spectacle of nature comes to life. Each blade of grass glows its own shade of emerald as hundreds of wildflowers begin to emerge from the darkened forest. With each breath, the air grows thick with newly flowered perfumes.

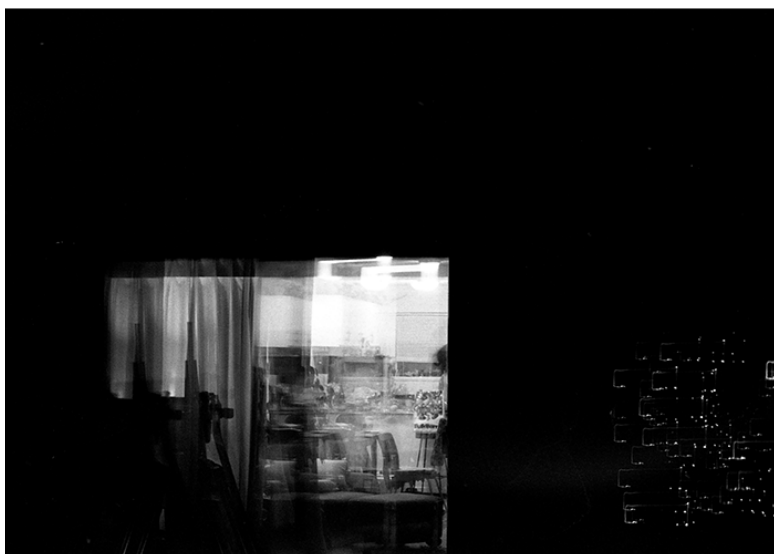
The intensity of the energized matter begins to dwindle within the raven-haired girl as the woodlands absorb the stolen energy source. She enters a small clearing where the pollution of humankind has yet to reach. Stars appear and dot the night sky. Above the girl, their light twinkles gently for the first time in years. Inhaling the cool air one last time, she exhales the last of the electrical energy. Her body relaxes, and her shoulders drop. In one fell swoop, the remaining power pulsating throughout her veins is released. A colour spectrum launches out of her body and is soaked up by the elements of nature around her as all of the city's energy is restored back to the earth. She uses the last of the stolen resource to block out the sounds of the city below, leaving the trees and creatures a peaceful place to rest.

Fatigued, the girl trudges over to her hidden cabin at the foot of another nearby hill. The entrance is cloaked in a curtain of lush emerald vines, while the dirt floor is cushioned by a layer of soft lichen. Beckoning the girl into the corner of the modest dwelling is a bed made of evergreen branches and moss. She shrugs off her clothing and slumps into bed. The soft smell of pine trees invites her into a deep sleep.

PHOTOGRAPHY

Flame

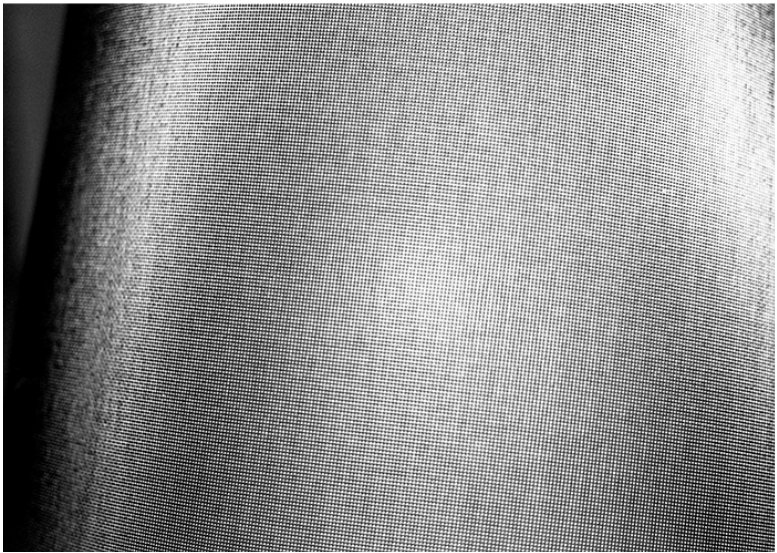
Ashley Barnes













POETRY

Caldera index

By Logan Simonson

secrete from the stone throat,
goo of the monolithic ribcage,

of the stone coil, the rock bolt
of fabric of tissue, lung of the earth.

it yells in reds, and melts, announcing
a conjugation of the land which

is fugitive, that runs from its clotting
parts—a short motion before coagulating.

the sight exists outside of speech,
(though there are terms for

the blood of a dome coming and
the gushing of earthen scab,

and though onlookers know at once
the tongues of inside out) for

magmata is stone-water; mineral
juice, and words are

letters-water. platelets harden
before passing.

onlookers know, too,
the voice of igneous hush.

The Girl Chased by Wolves

By Ciel Lenz

The coffee is hot, still boiling, burning my milky brown hands red and scalding my tongue. Please let the pain help me stay awake. I check the calendar hanging above my desk again; I can't help myself, it can't be back again so soon. My eyelids are so heavy, it's painful. My research notes blur and double. I've barely started on the new stack of books I grabbed from the library after track practice. My eyes won't focus on the words. Maybe it's the headache from my hair, tied back tightly for sprinting heats. I should have let my dark-roast curls down when I got home, but I'm running out of time, so I haven't bothered to change—only stopping for coffee refills. I can't sleep, anything but sleep. Please focus, eyes! This book could have the answers I need.

How many mugs of coffee have I had now? Six? Eight? The taste still lingers bitter on my tongue, but I have been pushing past my distaste for months now. There's a localized earthquake in my body. Jitters from too much caffeine. How much caffeine does it take to overdose? Can you overdose on caffeine? Isn't caffeine poisonous to animals? It's just beans boiled with water. I drain the cup. My throat is burning, but why should I give a fuck? My nerves are shot from stress anyway. I need to refill my mug. Empty cups mean sleepy eyes and I can't sleep. I'm not allowed to sleep.

Sharp. Ice pick. Cold. Pain. Head spinning, brain hurting, cup still empty. So much pain, too much—shit my hands, the cup! Smashing. Ceramic shards in my feet, my hands, broken mug, no more caffeine. You can't make me! Can't make me sleep, not tonight I won't! Why am I holding my head and not another mug? Pain, pain, pain, more pain. Sticky hands, did I break skin? Not again. So many questions about my head, wounds, blood on my hands, world going

dark. When did I lay down on the floor? No. Not again. You can't, I won't! Staying awake is . . . is



The burn of expanding lungs. I jolt up. I lost the fight, dammit, I lost the fight again. This world is so cold. Abandoned cars rusting in the street, faded graffiti, permanently overcast. Layers of grime coat every window thickly enough to leave them opaque. The rest of the windows are broken, shards of glass litter the ground by each one. Whatever broke those windows did so from the inside. The streetlights don't work either: they've all been shot out. Under each one is a pile of orange plastic fragments.

The sidewalk and roads are cracked, the cement buildings slowly crumbling into dust, revealing steel skeletons. The rancid smell of full dumpsters wars with that of wet dog. There are only three sounds in this lifeless world: my breath, raspy and choking; my heart, too fast and dizzying; them, breathing steadily behind me. Breath warm and wet on my neck. I know what I will see when I turn around, know it will scare me. But logic is irrelevant in nightmares. I turn to face it. Slavering jaws, stained muzzle, wicked sharp teeth as long as my pinky finger, lips pulled back into a snarl, eyes bright yellow like lightning against the storm-cloud fur. It is always the wolf. At least six feet tall and seven feet long, bigger than even a gray wolf in the real world, it towers over me even when I'm standing at my full five foot, seven inches of height. The sight of it brings the burn of vomit up my throat and I swallow desperately so I won't be sick. The first few times I didn't swallow. Throwing up doesn't help here. I learned that my first regional track meet. The wolf growls, huffing rotting meat air into my face. It is done being patient. It nods at me, telling me without words to get up. At this point, I know the drill as well as it does. I'm still shaking—from the caffeine of the real world or the adrenaline of this one, I can never tell. Clambering to my feet is difficult, and the wolf is impatient now.

“I know, I know,” I mutter, shaking out my limbs. I don’t have time for a proper warm-up and I can almost hear my coach yelling at me for starting cold. I settle into my starting position like this is a high school track meet and not a hellscape. The wolf yaps and I shoot off like it’s the starting pistol. Track meets overlay months of running in this realm. My nerves are so shot at this point, they should probably just give out. I can barely hear the wolf chasing after me, my heartbeat tangling with my bare feet slapping the pavement mixing with the wolf’s surprisingly quiet paw falls—it’s just a constant beating on my eardrums.

Each empty street has fewer escapes. Muscles in my legs cramp and burn, stitches take residence just below my lungs; each breath seems to bring less relief than the last. I’ve always been a sprinter, not a long-distance runner.

I stub my toe on rubble while stumbling through the next turn—warm breath brushes my neck. Why do I never have shoes here? The wolf is breathing down my neck again. My face is wet but it’s warm: not sweat, must be tears. I’m so scared, it’s numbing me, I can’t . . . I take the next alley, searching, praying, for a ladder, a fire escape, even a window ledge, anything. Nothing. Just another dead end. Every time, nothing but dead ends. I want to turn around slowly, but there is too much too fast.

The wolf is boxing me in with that awful doggy-grin facsimile of a smile, and I hate it. It growls, but it sounds like a chuckle, it’s laughing at me, I know it is. Cold bricks press against my back. When did I back up? The wolf is stalking towards me. Taunting me. I can’t even brace for the lunge it takes me by surprise even when I know it’s coming. Teeth bury in my throat before I can scream. Blood bubbling up out of my mouth and down into my lungs.



I turn onto my side to avoid coughing blood all over my sheets. I know I never made it into my bed, only to the floor (I wonder

who got stuck with carrying me to bed). I cough and hack until I can't feel blood bubbling into my trachea when I breathe. I ignore the puddle with the ease of long practice. It will stain, but there are so many blood stains on the floor already, one more won't make a difference.

Steadying myself on the wall, I head into the bathroom, I need a hot shower. I turn the tap all the way to red and stand under the spray, still fully clothed. Whoever put me to bed just took off my jacket and let my hair down before tucking me in. This is fine. I can't feel the heat turning my skin bright red, but it's fine.

Only when the room is completely filled with steam do I let myself go, banging my knees on the shower floor and choking on my sobs. Great wracking sobs that make it a struggle to breathe. I try to be quiet; I don't want to disturb my dorm mates, only letting out noises quiet enough to be drowned out by the shower. It was only a nightmare. My forehead presses against the cold tile of the shower floor and I hug myself tighter, nails scraping welts into my back from the force. It was only a nightmare the first time.

I can only feel the water when it turns cold. I am so cold. I'll get up for practice when the sun rises. Promise. I'll dry off, check the calendar, and paint a smile on my face. Cover up the shadows with concealer. For now I'm free. Free until the next full moon, when the wolf returns.

LITERARY FICTION

My Husband the Hunter

Sabrina Alyss Klassen

Hadn't you heard, honey?

My husband is a hunter.

He hunts humans—has a hankering for them.

Oh yes, oh yes, it *is* a dreadful habit, isn't it? I'm surprised you hadn't heard, though. He's not quite quiet about it. Doesn't bother to *hide* it. Doesn't bother to cover up *the whispers*. Which is silly, really, because enough whispers whine together and certainly you can make out what they're wailing about!

And sometimes, too, it's not even just whispering. The moaning can get rather drawn out and miserable for all of us. He, too, finds the moaning fairly intolerable—I mean, unpalatable. But they're young, these conquests, so they haven't yet learned how to be *quiet*.

How to *shut up*.

Yes, yes, he likes them young. Flesh still plump, still gratifying to bite into, to lick into, fresh like a sweet peach that still has its skin. Men, women, doesn't matter. Something, though, about the fear not yet having spoiled the meat. The fear has a bitterness to it, apparently. He can't stand that, can't stomach it. Numbs the tongue, ruins the fun.

He truly does love the sport of it, you understand. Has quite the talent for it. His hands simply *have* to hunt humans, he says.

And I say, well I say, I mean, *I simply always am telling him*, I say—

Careful now, my dear.

Your cannibalism is showing.

The drool, you see, it drips down, it drops off the sharp edges of his incisors. It's quite the messy affair. And his eyes, well his eyes they start to dart, start to flicker back and forth, slowly stalking his victims across the quad, down the hall.

They're so youthful, so *appealing*. They draw him in. He's not too picky, either, as long as they are young and they are attractive and they are adoring of him. He thinks he's hiding it. *Ha, he thinks he's hiding it!* But he doesn't have it in himself to help himself from himself.

I can't blame him for his blood lust, now can I? I can't hold it against him!

What is it that my mother always used to say?

Oh yes.

Boys will be boys.

He's just so hungry, you see. Always so achingly empty. Can never get full. He'll feed and feed and feed and never fully get full and I fear for him, I truly do. And I'll say, well I'll say, I say—

Are you hungry, my dear? Let me prepare you dinner.

He's surely starving for affection. Desperate for attention. Eating up the devotion of his many admiring students because they come to him—*they come to him, these dumb-as-rocks kids*—in droves, in

worship, falling on their knees and begging he devour them and he simply must take advantage of their susceptibility—otherwise what kind of hunter would he be, if he let his prey go so easily?

I know the tastes he prefers, the flavour that is his favourite. I imagine the salty brine of his victims' dependency, the sweetness of their naivety. His addiction is to the power, though, peppered on his prey, their pathetic captivation with him his only sense of salvation from the meaningless monotony of his aging existence. But his desire is his downfall because their love just rots in his gut after he gobbles it up. My husband, the hunter. Insatiable, gluttonous, guilty.

His humans give him such terrible wrenching stomach aches. Such maggot-bearing miseries. Sometimes he doesn't even sleep. The maggots—I think they eat him from the inside out. So he's always hungry and he's always empty and he's always hunting to fill that hole. His skin it is sagging, and his eyes they are yellowing, and his body it is hurting.

His hunting is getting harder.

He is getting hungrier.

I hope my husband can hold on to all his hunting trophies. It surely has to be his favourite hobby. Me, too, see, I'm always happy to allow him his hunting season. I'm a very supportive spouse.

You see, I say to him, I say—

Careful now, my dear. It appears your prey is running.

HORROR

The Looking Glass ☹

By Jennifer Hill

The smell hit Melissa like blackjack.

The air sat stagnated with the unmistakable and eerily oxymoronic hues of wet and dry. There was definitely a mould of some kind growing in here—it was entirely possible. The cabin her sister had been staying in, the cabin in which Melissa now stood, was absolute chaos. An easy chair lay knocked over in the corner of the main room with a capsized sofa beside it. Her sister Allie's unfinished novel—the one she had rented this cabin to come out and finish—was strewn all over the floor in a landslide of stationery. Several pages had fallen into the still-roaring fireplace and lay half-burned on the hearth. The mouldy air was thick with smoke as well, and under that something else, something she hadn't smelled in

It was at this precise moment that she noticed the mirror. At first, she didn't recognize it as a mirror at all; she could see right through it. The frame, however, was definitely the sort of thing that should have been holding a tool of vanity. It was large, oval, and gilded with elaborate carvings of aggressive-looking creatures that might have been dragons—she wasn't sure. When she looked into its glass surface, she could see straight through to the other side. Well, almost. She could *also* see herself clearly reflected in its surface. Melissa checked to see if any there was any light to provide a glare, but there was none. The nearest source of light was coming from one of the bedrooms on the far side of the tiny cabin. There she was, nevertheless, staring back at herself. Besides herself, she couldn't make out anything else.

It's as if it only wants to see me.

The thought came to her involuntarily, and she put it aside with some effort. She needed to find Allie. She'd missed Allie's call, but the

message on the machine suggested disaster. The cabin in shambles only confirmed this in Melissa's mind. Allie had sounded panicked, and frightened in her message, and kept insisting that neither of them could trust their father. It was the kind of message that Melissa would have dismissed as bad blood, if it had not been for the unmistakable quiver of fear in her sister's voice. Allie and their father had been on bad terms since their mother had passed two years ago. During their mother's decline, their father had grown distant, and Allie had taken it as indifference. Melissa saw it differently. In her mind, he simply couldn't deal with mortality: not his own, nor that of his wife. Regardless of Melissa's feelings, the bitterness Allie harbored continued to bloom, until she no longer spoke to Dad at all.

Nice way to treat your only remaining parent after his life-partner dies. Another involuntary thought. *I wonder if there's a place in Hell reserved for children who desert their parents?* She hated the bitter resentment at the core of her thoughts. Melissa didn't feel this way most of the time about her sister, and she'd *never* say these things out loud to Allie. But sometimes, the thoughts just came—like epileptic fits. *If you could only hear me now, Sis. I wonder what you'd think.*

The explosive crash, and subsequent tinkle of shattering glass snapped her from her thoughts. It had come from the bedroom.

"Allie?" Melissa called. Icy tendrils of fear snaked their way into her chest. Her eyes darted around the room searching for a weapon in case the sound turned out not to be her sister. The fire-poker, maybe? She looked to the hearth and noticed the poker was missing. Now, an invisible hand reached into her chest, wrapped its icicle fingers around her solar plexus, and squeezed undiluted fear into her being. She settled for the ash shovel instead, resigning herself to the inferior weapon.

Melissa crept up to the bedroom, the tiny shovel raised over her shoulder, ready to strike.

“Whoever’s in there, you’d better be my sister!” she shouted at the bedroom door. For a moment, all she heard was the fireplace. Then she heard a shuffle. Another sound followed. A very weak voice.

“Mel,” it croaked. Melissa recognized Allie’s voice immediately. She burst through the door and saw an image that would remain with her until her final moments on earth.

Allie lay sprawled just out of reach of the doorway. Their father lay at the foot of the tiny twin bed, tucked into the corner of the room. Melissa now knew what the smell she’d been unable to identify had been. It was blood. It was everywhere. Spattered on the sheets of the bed, on Allie’s face (not on their father’s face, however, since his face no longer existed), soaked into the wooden floorboards, slathered on the painting of Abraham Lincoln that hung on the wall. Allie’s midsection was a cavity of gore. Her intestines had fallen out somewhere in the middle of the room. She’d tried to drag herself outside, and had clearly made it as far as the doorway. A shotgun, the likely source of both Allie’s disembowelment, and their father’s missing face, lay in the center of the room with what remained of Allie’s large intestine.

A sound escaped Melissa’s mouth. Perhaps it was a scream. It felt like it could have been. It could also have been a wail. She would later wonder if writers had a word for the sound that ripped itself from her diaphragm. It was primal. It was a part of her she didn’t know existed and it sprang forth, as involuntarily as her previous resentful thoughts.

She tried a lot of things after that. She tried to call 9-1-1 but only half-succeeded. It took her over three minutes to blurt out the address of the cabin, and she was fairly certain that any other sounds she’d made, intended to be words, had come out only as anguished vowels. She tried to cradle her sister’s head in her hands, but Allie cried out almost immediately, making Melissa recoil with the simultaneous shock, and guilt. She tried to calm herself with slow breathing

—*in through the nose (ffff)*—
—*out through the mouth (sssssss)*—
—*in through (ffff)*—
—*the nose (sssss)*—
—*out (ff-ffff)*—
—*through (ss-ss-sss)*—
—*the (f-f-f-ffff)*—
—*mouth (s-s-ss)*—

before dissolving back into grief-drenched syllables. In the end, the only thing she managed to do, without fail, was wail out one word:

“*Why?*”

Allie also tried. In her case, it was only one thing she was trying to do (answer her sister’s plea), but she had a similar level of success. Her impediment was not grief: it was her missing diaphragm. She summoned all of her might to force her lungs to operate her vocal cords. All she could manage was, “The mirror!”

“The mirror?” Melissa blurted. “What about it?”

“It did it! It showed me” Allie’s lungs lost their strength after that, and all she could do was look into the mirror’s selectively reflective surface and point.

Melissa (for a moment forgetting her sister’s mortal wounds) began to spout off about how crazy Allie sounded, and she would have gotten further than the beginning of a tirade of disbelief and reality-checks, if she hadn’t chosen that moment to look into the mirror’s surface.

Instead, she began, “A *mirror* can’t blow someone’s head off with a fucking shotgun, Allie! A mirror can’t kill our dad! A mi—” and then she looked into the reflection, meeting Allie’s pleading eyes.

An electric sensation shot through her nerves, and she let out

a howl of physical agony. It was as if her stomach had been ripped open. The pain was paralytic in its intensity, and it wasn't the only thing she felt in that instant.

In that moment, Melissa no longer needed to know why. She knew why.

No. Wrong.

Not *knew*.

She *remembered*.

Wait, again, wrong.

Allie remembered.

Melissa was *feeling* Allie remembering.

She remembered coming to the cabin at the beginning of the summer months. Remembered toiling over pages and pages of a novel that refused to emerge. Remembered deciding to clean the cabin up to clear her head. Remembered finding the mirror, thinking it a neat little decoration, before putting it in the main room to even things out. She remembered writing some days, drinking some nights, and crying over her mother on others. Sometimes, she remembered, those days and nights were often the same. She remembered a lot of torn pages, a lot of hangovers, and eventually, she remembered thinking about their father. Remembered feeling immense shame at blaming him for his own personal way of grieving. Remembered thinking it would be good to invite him up to the cabin to talk things out. Remembered dialing, hearing the click of the phone being answered, waiting a lifetime before hearing their father's voice asking who was there. Remembered the rush of sorrow that came with hearing his voice. Remembered inviting him to the cabin. Remembered him arriving, and making uncomfortable small talk about how he liked what she'd done to the place before asking where she got the mirror from.

She remembered being about to respond that she'd found it in

the closet, when she turned to look into its surface, and saw the eyes of their father staring back at them in its surface, and feeling a new kind of sorrow.

His sorrow.

And his shame.

Both Melissa and Allie knew the second they felt the sensation that it was a distinctly masculine kind of shame. The kind of shame that comes with a tingling sensation in the groin. Both Melissa and Allie felt this, because in the instant that their father looked into the mirror, he was trying to force an image from his head that truly disturbed him. It was an image of his daughter, Melissa, stark naked before his eyes. He remembered feeling revulsion that a part of him was excited by what he was thinking, and immediately after, he would have chastised himself for being a sick fuck. But instead, he'd looked in the mirror at the same time as Allie, and instantly, they'd both known what he'd been thinking up until that moment.

Melissa did not remember grabbing the shotgun from the dresser drawer, because Allie did not remember grabbing the shotgun from the dresser drawer, but they did remember that it had happened. They vaguely remembered the shouting, and the screaming that followed. They vaguely remembered the scuffle, but the next thing they clearly remember is the first blast of the shotgun, tearing open Allie's abdomen. They remembered thinking it had gone off by accident (or had it?). They remembered Allie firing a shell into their father's face without an instant's hesitation, before crumpling down into the middle of the floor on top of her own entrails.

They remembered trying to crawl to the main room to dial for help, and thinking only to call Melissa, instead of 9-1-1. They remembered—

Melissa's remembering of her sister's remembering suddenly bled away, and was replaced with a duller agony—one that dissolved into black nothing.

As quickly as it had dissolved, she was back with her own mind. Her own body. Her own thoughts. Her own memories. Her own reasons for misery.

In the end, it was a thought that did it.

A single thought—a very *brief* single thought, at that.

But what a thought it was. The kind of thought that changes the whole way you see a person. That thing that, if you know it's in someone's mind, you wonder how well you *truly* know them. And who knows if this one thought was truly a brief moment of internal darkness that exists, in one form or another, in every human being. Perhaps it was, and their father would have never had another depraved image like that cross his mind again. Perhaps the opposite was true, and he was the most hideous of sexual predators waiting to strike. Allie had not seen into him long enough to truly know the answers to this, and because of this, neither did Melissa.

But they'd both felt the thought.

This is what caused—what *really* spilled blood at the cabin. It wasn't alcohol, or bad blood, or any of the other theories the papers later reported on. There *was* alcohol. There *was* blood, and it *was* bad. But those things didn't *cause* what happened. They merely exacerbated something that had been there for a while.

In the end, it was just one thought.

One thought, reflected in a mirror.

LITERARY FICTION

Family Matters ©

By Rebecka Beauchamp-Hole

Alexander Rose was filled with pride when his mother, Maria, gave him his Granny's ring. She opened the faded velvet box to reveal the diamond in a white gold setting while his father, Christopher—the man of the house—clapped him on the shoulder and said, “Now you'll just have to get yourself a girl, son.”

Alex nodded stiffly, and his mother exclaimed, “Oh, what's going on between you and Emma? You two would look so cute together.”

“Mama, I can't date Emma, we're just friends. It would be weird.”

“Well, I'm sure you'll find someone, but it had better be soon or all the good-looking ones will be taken.” His father laughed, while his mother smiled, and Alex got out of there as fast as he could.

Alex couldn't tell them he *was* dating someone. He just knew they wouldn't approve.

Over the next couple of years, Alex graduated as valedictorian of his year, making his mother and father very proud. He moved into a trendy little flat in Vancouver. Every time he came home for Thanksgiving or Christmas his mother would check behind him before closing the door, looking for a girl to be following him. Eventually Alex stopped going home.

After living on his own for about two and a half years—Alex went back. Bringing his fiancée with him. “Mama, Papa, this is Parker. I thought he could join us for dinner.”

“Of course he can!” Maria said, rushing to set another place at the table. Parker glanced at Alex, who urged him forward with a smile.

Dinner was going well until Parker asked for the salt. Maria passed it to him when she noticed the ring.

“Alexander Christopher Rose! What is Granny’s ring doing on the finger of thi . . . this—”

Alex’s father dropped his fork and knife with a clatter against his wife’s good china plates. His face was turning steadily redder as he grabbed Parker’s hand and bent it until his wrist almost snapped to get a better look at the ring. He snatched it off his finger.

“Get out,” he growled, and Parker bolted for the door. Alex stood to go after him. “No, Alexander, you sit.”

He did.

“How dare you shame your grandmother like that. Putting her ring on the finger of a faggot.”

“Father . . .”

“Do not call me Father!” he roared, his rage overflowing.

“But I’m still your son.”

“Not likely, your mother must have screwed some other man. No son of mine would turn out to be a fag. Get out, this house is no longer a home of yours. I don’t want to see or hear from you again.”

Alex stormed out of the house and into the night. He threw himself into the driver’s seat of the car. Parker hardly had time to close the passenger door before Alex reversed out of the driveway and started flying through the backroads of his hometown. Too fast, and too erratically to be safe. More than once Parker begged for him to slow down, to pull over, and let him drive. Alex snarled at him to shut up, and Parker gripped the handle above the door and closed his eyes as his knuckles turned white.

Alex saw the flash of headlights, felt the car twist as metal ground against metal. Parker’s scream reverberated off the windows of the car as the world careened out of control around him. Then the world stopped. Alex gripped Parker’s hand. It went cold long before he heard the sirens.



The neighbourhood grew up around Mr. and Mrs. Rose. Grown children left for several years, returning to visit as newlyweds—the young women’s bellies bulging with babies. Couples were welcomed into the loving arms of parents, smiling and laughing together as the women exchanged pregnancy horror stories and the men drank beer and shared stories of wives driven crazy by hormones. Months later they would return, with little swathed bundles that giggled and cried. Grandparents would fuss and coo over the bundles as little hands reached out to them.

Christopher and Maria Rose saw what they were missing. Boxes of toys stacked neatly in the corner of houses when they went to visit. The ladies exchanged stories of their grandchildren at knitting group while Maria listened, knitting her husband socks while tiny baby socks took form all around her. Christopher struggled with his fishing line as his friends taught their grandsons to cast off the dock. He remembered teaching his son the same thing, and how after a summer of not catching anything, his little Alex caught a fish bigger than he was. But that had been a long time ago, and he no longer had a little Alex.

When the Roses returned to their house, they noticed the absence of toys. The silence that deafened rather than the piercing shrieks of grandchildren. Most of all, they noticed how empty the house was with Alex’s bedroom long since converted into an office.

That summer, Alex’s old friend Emma stopped by with her two children, Laney and Zain. Laney was almost four, and her brother was just three months old. Laney investigated the house, which seemed unfriendly, with lace doilies on side tables and expensive glass figurines perched on every surface. Laney was confused. There wasn’t a crayon in sight, and she wasn’t allowed to play with the glass elephant. A few hours went by. Laney had been contented with a few toys from Emma’s bag and Zain had fallen asleep, with the Roses

letting Emma put him down on their bed.

“Emma, how did you meet your husband? In Toronto at school?” Maria asked, setting down a tray of tea and cookies. Maria was thinking about many years ago when Alex would bring Emma over after school, and Maria would let them have cookies before dinner—if— they finished all their homework.

“It’s a rather long story, how my husband and I got together.” Emma responded taking the cup of tea Christopher handed her. She smiled, looking down into the cup. “You were always so kind to me. After my parents’ divorce, my friendship with Alex and your kindness really saved me.”

The air in the room became thick at the mention of Alex. Christopher swallowed, and Maria’s eyes filled with tears.

“My husband was engaged once before, while I was still living in Toronto. He was from around here and we knew each other growing up. They were driving back to Nanaimo after visiting his family and there was an accident. His fiancé didn’t survive.” Emma paused to take a sip of her tea. “He called me the next day—we had stayed in contact—I had just graduated, so I flew back. I stayed to help him arrange the funeral.”

“What about their families? Didn’t they help?” Christopher asked. Maria had a single tear running down her cheek. Both she and Christopher had heard about a similar accident involving their own son. Still enraged by the news of their son’s homosexuality, they hadn’t reached out, and they had never heard from him. The guilt still plagued them seven years later.

Emma shook her head. “They weren’t close. I ended up staying in Vancouver. I got a job teaching English in one of the high schools. It allowed me to help my husband recover emotionally from the loss of his fiancé, and slowly our friendship changed.” Emma sipped her tea while the Roses retreated into their own thoughts.

The Roses were so caught up in their thoughts that they almost missed the crunching of tires in the driveway. Quickly, Zain was snuggled into his car seat and Laney's feet were tucked into Velcro-fastened sneakers.

"Shouldn't your husband help you with these two?" Maria asked as Emma lifted her bag and Zain to leave.

"Well, he wasn't sure if he should."

"What do you mean?" Christopher asked.

"My husband Alexander wasn't sure he would be welcome here," Emma said.

Maria and Christopher watched as their son stepped from the car after he parked in the driveway, ready to help his wife buckle their children in. Maria swayed on her feet at the sight of her son. Christopher just stood there. Laney threw her arms around his legs in a hug before running out the door.

"Goodbye, Mr. and Mrs. Rose. I'm sure we'll see you again soon," Emma called over her shoulder as she walked to the car, with Laney running ahead of her into her father's outstretched arms.

POETRY

My Sister's Boyfriend ☹

By Sabrina Alyss Klassen

She says hello,

I say hello.

We speak no more.

The silence is unsettling.

He calls to her.

I hold my whole

self

still.

He cannot know

she has a visitor;

I am most unwelcome.

How mechanical though,

Her features go

as her body grows so cold.

Her soul is no longer tethered there.

He has a hold.

So tight.

So sure.

She must be suffocating.

The bruises show.

Inkpad fingertips bold

all along her collarbone.

I want him gone.

She wants him home.

I don't know how to help.

CREATIVE NONFICTION

Larry

By Aidan Nelson-Sandmark

He was a funny guy. Not necessarily the kind of thing you'd want to be remembered for, believe me, but he never seemed too concerned with being remembered at all. That's how everyone acts when they're nineteen, I think. We started hanging out the most then, when he was in first year and I was in second. I always had a strange reverence for the time we spent together. Not really knowing why people enjoy my company is my problem, but as we got more familiar, I grew to understand that he was more or less the same. He just didn't show it. We'd leave campus in the afternoon to go smoke somewhere. This one spot by the water was where we usually ended up, at least until we could pester someone enough to let us over to theirs.

The hill was off a beaten narrow hiking path overlooking the ocean. A small grove-like area separated the perch from the outside world. Some homeowners from down the bluff climbed up one evening brandishing wine glasses, their dinner guests gushing about the view they had just beyond their backyard. Being burnouts (although particularly sly ones), we tended to get flustered when people disturbed the peace of the hill. They joked about how we had something figured out knowing about this place, and we laughed playing along, paraphernalia conveniently hiding underneath an old jacket we kept around for that express purpose.

We'd be there rain or shine, but I remember the spring there most vividly. There was a sense of timelessness about it all. The moniker 'Garden City' seemed to make more sense from up here. All but a few houses were drowned in a sea of trees. It was an important place for us; I garnered an appreciation for our environment there, an environment that is so easily taken for granted. I think he did, too. It was always hard to tell what he took for granted, though. He had a flippant exterior and a crude sense of humor. Using both as a sort of protective shell against any responsibility or pain, among

other things. I never asked him about it; he and I were similar in that regard. I had an idea of where our other friends were at in terms of psyche based on how often they'd speak frankly with me on emotional subjects or the like. With Larry, it was like looking in a mirror. He rarely had anything serious to say, and I mean rarely. I liked that about him, but it also frustrated the hell out of me. If he spoke about something personal, you listened, but those moments were often brief, and there was usually an air of discomfort about him when he got like that. Perhaps he was a little too stoic for his own good. I think he was just afraid of being embarrassed.



Another spring. We had known each other for almost four years by now. We had just gone out the night before, and Larry was on his way to the hospital to get checked out. He said his vision had been doubled for about a week or so. I didn't want to be involved, but I had offered some words along the lines of, "It's a good idea to get it checked, it's probably nothing." I had to work that day. That's the excuse, but I could have gone with the rest of them to visit before I started. The truth is, I was scared. I don't like hospitals, and like him, I tended to sleep in if I worked nights.

One of our friends showed up to my work to tell me it was a tumor, most likely benign. Which is something I'm starting to think they just tell everyone, but a tumor it was, nevertheless. I got drunk that night—very drunk. Another excuse. I struggled with the idea of how he would have acted if our roles were reversed. If I was more trusting, perhaps it would have been a simpler problem.

I wasn't there for him when it counted. I told myself I was too busy, and that the rest of our friends knew him better, and therefore were more appropriate companions for him at this time. He went through radiation for the better part of six months. I felt like I was missing something. If it was benign, then why was he being subjected to this? Was it precautionary? I made a mediocre effort to

spend time with him, but now his time was mostly occupied with treatments. I made it to his place maybe twice over the summer. Our time together seemed to slip through my fingers. The price of negligence, I suppose.

September came around and he found himself back in the hospital. Some of our friends began to spend more and more time with him, and his mother urged the more distant of us, to come and see him. A hospital much closer to me this time. Newer, more specialized. A frightening thought. I went to join them one day, after school. A few of us had made plans, but those got circumvented. I'd been by this place so many times since it had been built, several years before. It seemed fitting that this should be the reason that I set foot within, for the first time. The lobby was huge, and I was nervous being in such a sterile place with a cold. I thought everyone that worked at any medical institution was finely tuned enough to pick out my minute sickness and slap a mask on me. I arrived gingerly at reception. They were replacing some electronic bits in the front desk and, after a quickly assuaged apology, I was given a room number.

The eighth floor. Hospitals always terrified me, and as I would find out after the fact, the higher up you go, the more severe your situation. Such was the case here, at least. The floor was calm. Very few people shuffled about their business, and no one stopped to ask what I was doing there.

There were more people than seats in his room, to be sure. Hardly anyone spoke. By the door, his mother quietly thanked me for coming. I could tell where he got it from. She could barely hold it together, but you wouldn't notice had you not known her. I stepped into the room proper, and crammed myself between two of my friends who looked relieved to see me. I struggled to hold back a sneeze, and made myself cough as a result. A bad luck charm, I decided I was, knowing full well how ridiculous that would have sounded to anyone there at the time. He lay there in the center,

fully integrated into the works. The system of tubes and monitors that most hospital patients find themselves subject to. Reliant. So far from the independence he showed back in the days of the hill, almost four years prior. He was pale, barely present.

Six months' worth of explanation caught me silently in the face, and I found myself sitting for the next few hours without saying a word. Family and friends would come in, catch up, speak to Larry for a moment. A friend of ours would crack a joke, and we'd all giggle softly, as if the room was made of paper. Larry himself was in and out of consciousness by the minute, often during conversation. An effect of the experimental steroid which seemed to burn him from the inside, it hadn't exactly dulled his wit. The two of our friends that knew him the longest had been there with him for days, weeks possibly. They fed him ice chips and helped clear the bile from his throat with a suction device. They did the dance with our usual sense of humor, despite Larry being nearly speechless as a result of the surgery he'd undergone. Normally boisterous and unfiltered, he now struggled to whisper. It terrified me, although I knew he was still in there. He was always unbreakable in a way. And here he lay, a broken figure, somehow stronger than ever. We stayed late and mostly just sat. The only thing I could think to say as we left was "Try and get some sleep, okay?" I barely heard him respond. He said, "Okay."

I never spoke to him again.

DYSTOPIAN FICTION

Alee

By P.J. Davies

The storms grew stronger in April, and by August the country was a battered mess of windswept peaks. October saw national infrastructure in tatters and the federal government declare a state of emergency before being swept away themselves. The suburban sprawl that Bree grew up in was flattened and dispersed, and those who managed to withstand the onslaught of the ceaseless winds sought shelter in the caves and hollows of the nearby hills. Furious air lashed all obstacles in its way, and the rain pierced the earth and uprooted everything that grew.

Bree's family lived at the foot of a mountain under a great slab of stone that had fallen between two ancient trees, now toothless roots that clung to the ground. Below the stone there was a fistful of space. Bree and her family nestled into it and braced themselves against the roar of the unsteady earth. There were two respites from the wind: dawn and dusk. As the light returned or left, there was a liminal time in which precipitation and sudden changes in pressure systems occurred. It was during this time that the wind stopped and the world stood still, catching its breath. Bree, her mother and her two brothers took turns venturing out to hunt deer and small game on the golf course, taking cover from the rogue winds in dugouts and sand traps. It was a terror to separate and go forth as an interloper in this betwixt world, but the family unit needed to regularly splinter and then regroup. It was the only way to keep everyone fed.

Bree was shimmying along the green, gaining on a lizard, when a raven landed beside her. Glossy blue-black and hook-beaked, it regarded her momentarily before gesturing with its right foot. Bree removed a filthy plastic bag tied there with red string, and eased the cracked plastic open, letting a piece of paper fall into her hand.

Unfolded several times and smoothed out, the note read:

WE HAVE A STRONGHOLD
RAISE THE MECHANICAL FLAGPOLE
OBSERVATORY ON GLINT MOUNTAIN
DAWN
STILLNESS IS NEAR
WE WILL COME TO YOU

Mount Glint was to the East. Narrow and peaked, it rose straight out of the earth and deep into the sky, an ideal spot for astronomers. A road spiralled and snaked around the perimeter, gaining in elevation by way of repetition. The observatory had been built into the stone, then shuttered and abandoned long before the wind began, with the door welded shut to protect against vandals and Astrofanatics. Bree turned and faced the hills of the Blue Mountains to the West. They were too far for her family to reach on foot in the shortened days of early winter, but supposedly had excellent protection in the form of a subterranean cave system that went on for miles. If there was a stronghold, she reasoned, it would be in those hills. The raven leapt into the air and looped towards them, as if to confirm her suspicions. It was a carrier bird, delivering messages to people left within the valley who could still be rescued.

Back home beneath the safety of the stone slab, she argued with her mother about the note. Her younger brother thought it was wondrous; her older brother wouldn't even look at the note. Their mother didn't want to risk it, to be caught on the precipice when the wind started up. But when they tried to imagine alternatives, they all drew blanks.

"This is our only chance at a true refuge," said Bree, tracing the letters for the hundredth time. "If I don't at least try to send them a

signal, we'll all wonder what could have been. We can't hold on here much longer."

They spent that night and the next outfitting her for the journey. Their mother tore clothing into strips and wound it around her legs and arms, insulation against the bite of the residual winds. Bree's task was to rise before dawn, with the calm, and run to an underpass halfway up the mountain road, where she would shelter until nightfall gave her an hour of ease to reach the observatory. Her backpack needed to be light to grant her speed, but she packed walking stick, rope, a small piton, and a sponge filled with water. Then she turned to her family, a lump rising in her throat. They had not been apart for longer than a handful of hours in many months. Those hunting trips had been hard enough, but Bree had yet to spend a night away. Her younger brother flung his arms around her and gifted her a handful of frog jerky, knotted in his cleanest sock. The moment before she stepped outside, her older brother shoved a pair of swimming goggles into her pocket and gave her a stiff sideways hug. Her mother embraced her, then firmly pushed her towards the yawning mouth of the cave. Bree immediately felt achingly exposed, a tall blade of grass in a layer of moss.

She set off at an easy jog towards the gate that marked the beginning of the observatory road. The animal in her wanted to run full tilt, to exhaust itself, but she forced herself to set a pace. Burning herself out too early could mean death, a swift descent down the mountain. She passed the gate and made her way up the steeply sloping hill. The morning light was just beginning to flood over everything, and from her spot on the mountain, Bree saw the land stretch on for miles, not a man-made object in sight, every edifice toppled. She had seen so little for so long, hunkered down, going from the stone slab to the golf course and back again. She wanted to stop and soak in the beauty of the rolling hills relaxing in their hour of repose from the storm's assault. But the sun made itself fully known

above the horizon and the wind was picking up, so she pressed on, chest burning. Rounding a corner, she saw a concrete arch blasted into the side of the mountain to let the road pass through. She darted towards it and flung herself into an alcove within the curved interior, pressing into the small space. Her legs buzzed with heat and she gasped for breath. The shriek of the wind rose in pitch, and the air was suddenly filled with dust. It occurred to her that the dust was the mountain, and that given enough years the storm would wear it into the ground as well. She pulled her brother's swimming goggles over her eyes and lost her gaze within the swirling sandstorm inches from her face.

Bree woke with a start, nearly falling from her perch. The light was fading, and the wind was dying. She extended her arm out of the alcove, and felt her sleeves buffeted by the remaining breeze. She rose and stretched as best she could, then stepped into the road. Immediately she felt herself pushed back, but she used her walking stick to find purchase on the ground and pressed on. The sky was lit up with pinks and blues, and the clouds were slowing their skittering.

She soon came to a section of the road that had split in half, the lower part having dropped several feet. The remains of an old tree were exposed by the collapse of the road, and her walking stick against a root created a boost to the base of the splintered cement. She tapped in her piton where earth met stone. Balancing on the root, she pulled her walking stick up and stuck it in the muddy wall. With the extra leverage, she hauled herself over the lip of the road. Bloody chinned, Bree reached down for her walking stick. It stuck fast in the mud, and a gust from behind made her clasp herself to the ground. Abandoning stick and piston, she trotted towards the observatory.

It looked achingly close, but the road tucked around the left of the mountain instead of forging straight ahead. This was the pedestrian-only Sky Walk, a fenced walkway that hugged the side of the peak. All the railings had warped, curled in on themselves. In some places,

the railing had been snapped off entirely. Bree dropped down and shuffled on her arms and knees, covetous of the firm ground. Even in the calmest of twilights, this was a windy place. The path narrowed where the rock had eroded and contributed to the sandstorm below. Bree stood and flattened her back against the hardness of the rock. The air screamed and snatched at her ears, loosening her woolen hat and sending it spiralling into the blackness below. Her curls swarmed her face, and she staggered to get a grip. Between strands of furiously lashing hair, she spied the domed entrance of the observatory, protected from the wind. As the sun blinked below the horizon and flashed green, the walkway opened and she reached the promontory. She ran across the courtyard and slid into the doorway, her ears popping. There was a coppery wetness in her nose that burst with the renewed gale, and she braced herself for the turbulence. And yet, the tempest did not rise in pitch, but mellowed. Casting her scarf beyond the mouth of the shelter revealed nothing. She walked into the courtyard.

Bree was met with a gently persistent breeze, the likes of which she had not felt since before the weather turned. Getting as close as she dared to the edge, she peered down the mountain, into the swirling darkness. And it was swirling—the storm had not died so much as moved on. The peak of the mountain pierced the eye of the storm and held it fast. She returned to the observatory entrance and propped herself against the door, stretching her legs in front of her. Fifteen feet away was the raised concrete box with the mechanical flagpole inside it, folded beneath the earth.

In the morning the eye of the storm still had not shifted its gaze. Bree approached the flagpole at first light with a scarf in hand. A device like a ship's wheel was set into the side of the flagpole box. Taking hold of it, she wrenched it to the left. The lid of the box opened, and the flagpole began to extend itself. She tied the red scarf to the top of the pole, then resumed turning the wheel. The flagpole

shot into the sky, her scarf slapping to and fro. At its fullest height the scarf snapped off and snaked into the sky. The dawn upon the land below had not yet reached the Blue Mountains opposite the observatory. She searched for a response among the low hills, her heart within her mouth. Finally, she saw her answer: a flash and a steady glow. A beacon of light spread across the valley towards her, illuminating a path to safety in the early morning gloom.

FANTASY

Tomb Bomb

By **Conor McCallum**

8:16 PM

The gravel crackles under the black and white van's tires as the bomb squad files out and stands in formation until I give the signal to proceed. The crunching under our boots is the only sound we hear as we make our way to the freshly built skyscraper. It's one of those fancy new ones where the walls are all glass, leaving little privacy and few hiding places. Once we're in the building, I lead the charge down some dark hallways. The electricity hasn't been installed yet. We make our way up to the fifteenth floor where the message stated the bomb had been placed. The building smells like a hardware store. Everything is too new, and I don't like it.

8:19 PM

On the fifteenth floor, Tillmen and Okawa slide up against the glass door. One advantage of modern architecture is the bomb can't be strapped to the door or we'd see it. I point forwards and make some light clicking sounds, which signals Tillmen to direct his flashlight around the room to confirm no wires are tied to the door. Tillmen joins his right thumb and index finger to signal the coast is clear, and we open the door, exiting the stairwell.

8:21 PM

After a minute of searching, Okawa whistles with two quick bursts then holds a third. Tillmen and I join him, and sure enough a pipe is sitting on an eggshell-white counter. I smile. How simple.

"Ready men?" I ask and they nod.

8:21 PM

Time freeze.

I walk towards the now frozen bomb and cut open the caps at

both ends. Why do they think pipe bombs will work on us? Twelve years ago, there was a huge issue of pipe bombs constantly disrupting daily life. I was a simple traffic cop back then and had to deal with the aftermath quite regularly to the point where it just became habit. They weren't very good. Usually someone would just watch a YouTube video and not really understand what they were doing, placing it somewhere that caused very little damage. It was still problematic for a small county like ours, a few hundred miles from the nearest bomb squad.

10:08 PM, 12 Years Ago

One crisp autumn night, I was headed out for patrol in the black and white cruiser. It was old and would never start the first time the key was turned. That night it was being even more troublesome. Finally the car shuddered, and I heard the soft sound of the engine purring to life. It had given in and decided to start. About halfway through whatever 80s rock song had been playing on the radio, a voice that didn't sound like any of the announcers spoke.

"Michael, you have been chosen."

I thought the car was spewing something causing me to hallucinate, but then I noticed it wasn't moving anymore. Neither were the few cars around me or the seagull frozen outside my driver's window. The voice came back.

"Use your power to stop the bombs."

"But why me? Can't you do it?"

"No. I cannot physically touch anything in your world. It is taking all I have to simply grant this power to you," the voice responded.

"What do you mean 'my world'?"

"I'm from a parallel world where the time bomb pranks got out of hand. People started getting good at making them and they caused major damage, even death. Anyway, I don't have much longer. I'm afraid I need to go."

“Wait! You never answered why you picked me!”

My shouts seemed to have been in vain as the voice stopped responding. I realized I could activate this new power by simply thinking *time freeze*.

I followed the voice’s command, and soon the chief realized what I could do. The chief formed a bomb squad with some other rookie traffic cops, with me as the leader.

8:21 PM

I laugh to myself as I empty the contents of the bomb into a yellow metal bucket. It shouldn’t explode without the pressure of the pipe and caps, but we can never be too careful. Once the material is safely in the bucket, I place it on the ground away from us, step back and unfreeze time. Okawa completes his nod and quickly joins Tillmen in staring at the yellow bucket. After a minute of waiting, it doesn’t explode, so I pick it up and we exit the building. Once we’re outside, my nose happily meets the smell of the dirty, grimy city and begs me never to go near a hardware store. We enter the police van, and Okawa and Tillmen begin talking about some football game tomorrow.

8:23 PM

“Michael. Thank you.”

The voice doesn’t sound like Tillmen’s or Okawa’s. I look around and realize time has frozen once again, only this time I had nothing to do with it.

“It’s been a while. You never gave a name.” I look straight forward, unable to decide on a better place to look.

“Sorry. As I said twelve years ago, granting you the ability to freeze time took an immense amount of power, so I was on a time crunch. I just wanted to let you know it seems your power is no longer necessary. I’m offering you the choice of keeping it or losing it.”

“The bomb threat is over? How do you know?” I’m fairly confused at the extent of the voice’s power.

“It isn’t over, likely never will be. With your training it’s very possible you’re able to disarm them without the power, however.”

I can’t answer. If the voice is right, I have no need for the power, but “I can’t risk Tillmen’s and Okawa’s lives by slipping up while time is unfrozen.”

“Thinking of others before yourself, huh?” The voice sounds as if it’s smiling. “Very well. Thanks for saving your world, Dad.”

I jump a little at that final word, but before I can ask, time has resumed, and Tillmen and Okawa’s conversation continues.

PHOTOGRAPHY

Freedom to Exist (Extend)

Lee Ingram





POETRY

The Two Hands of Power ㊦

By Ben McFee

The Lesser of the Evils

You know I ain't no good for you. You know I done you wrong.
You know I done you violence, and your money's all but gone.
But each time you come back to me, and meet me with a smile.
He'll hit you worse than I will, and we've known it for awhile.

'Cause it's me, or it's the other guy, that gets to bring the pain.
I promise I'll protect you from my puppet on a chain.

You may decide to leave me, but I took all the cash.
I own all of your property; I found your secret stash.
I get to make the rules, and I'll rule myself a win.
I mighta hurt you badly, but I'm *nothing* next to him.

I sold you down the river once, and I'll sell you once again,
As long as you're still frightened of my puppet on a chain!

Who cares if I'm a toxic love? I got a pretty face.
I'll beat you with decorum; he'll beat you with disgrace.
And if you up and choose him, I'll help him beat you worse,
Then tell you it's your own fault, for leaving in the first.

You mighta seen us talking nice, but kindly check your brain,
And don't you dare ask questions 'bout my puppet on a chain.

The Greater of the Evils

I've got you, motherfucker!
I have you by the mind.
Your balls, I snipped a while ago.
I own you now. You're mine.

I own the food you eat.
I make the booze you drink.
Next, I'll take your water,
Then your internet, I think.

You are my human resource.
Your children are my stock:
Useful as my soldiers,
Or in my prison blocks.

Resist me and I break your bones.
I'll break your spirit too.
'Cause *no one* takes what I have got!
(Remember. I've got you.)

You'll do the things I tell you to.
You'll think you thought them first.
I've grabbed you by your ethics,
Then I squeezed them 'til they burst.

Facts are now a felony.
Context is a crime.
I've got you by your history;
Your memory is mine.

The Girl Who Never Knew Herself ©

By Brie Fennell

Alice sat with the bonfire in front of her. She was far enough away to keep warm, but not close enough to cook. Her knees were curled deeply into her chest, and the damp ground beneath her soaked through her robes.

Marrielle, her girlfriend, leaned into Alice's side. Her arms loosely wrapped around Alice as she teetered off into a drunken sleep. Some thirty feet away, patrons cheered drunkenly as music flowed from the bard's instruments.

Alice surveyed her surroundings. Other couples sat around the fire; some snuggled up to each other, while others snogged, and one couple just outside the circle tried to push their intimacy beyond the status quo.

The night sky had cleared, and Alice could see stars glistening as they aimlessly drifted through the cosmos. A streak of light darted across the sky. Alice looked at it and wished that one day this moment would become her reality; hoped that the happiness she felt in this moment would never fade. That when she woke up in the morning everything would be as it was in this moment. Alice's eyelids grew heavy and her thoughts became blurred. She leaned herself into Marrielle and fell into a slumber of her own.



A cold light shone through the dusty curtains. The bedroom reeked of uncleanliness; a pile of unwashed clothes, dyed black with grease and oil, sat next to the hamper. Last night's dinner sat half-eaten on a desk. Garbage littered the room: coffee pods, pop cans, fast food containers, and opened hot chocolate packets.

Michael was lying on his bed, the sheets around him stained red.

A razor blade rested on the bedside table next to him. Groggily, his eyes opened at the introduction of the light. A single headphone dangled loosely from his ear, blaring music at detrimental volumes. He let out a long-winded sigh as he sat upright and leaned against the backboards of his bed. His body was slow and unwilling to respond so early in the morning. His thighs stung as he shifted them, the freshly closed gashes from the previous evening violently covering the surface of his legs. Underneath his boxers a flagpole had risen, as if his body was celebrating that it had survived the onslaught of his mind. He looked at it with disgust, hoping that it would shrivel into nothingness if he ignored it.

He thought to himself about the dream he'd just had. The details were fuzzy, but the emotions he felt during the dream were clear: warmth, happiness, and belonging. All those feelings had faded when the sunlight intruded his room. Now, he felt sadness for the dream that never became reality, anger at the sun for pulling him to consciousness, and hate towards his body for being what it was. The more he chased the dream, the harder it became to immerse himself in it. Just as he felt close to reaching his dream, again, someone spoke from the other side of the bedroom door.

“Michael, are you awake?” Michael’s mother said. “You’re going to be late for school.”

Michael already knew this—his phone said 7:47 a.m., and school started at eight. He had no intention of going, he wasn’t wanted there anyways.

“I’m not going today, mom,” he said.

“Are you not feeling well? I can get you some Tylenol if you’d like.” She tried to open the door, but it had been locked the night before. “Hey, Mikey, I know that it didn’t go well the last time, but if you want to try counselling again, I can try to get an appointment tomorrow?”

“I’m fine, please just leave me alone.”

“Okay, hun, but call me if you need anything. I need to go to work,” she said.

Michael was silent as his mother walked away. He hated speaking. He wished he could tear out his vocal cords. The walls shuddered as his mother closed the front door of the house. Michael reached for the string that hung carelessly from the curtain mount. He pulled the string and watched as the winter sunlight vanished from his room. Seconds had passed, then minutes into quarter hours, before hours had disappeared as Michael sat in a corner with his body curled in a ball. His stomach rumbled throughout the frail body he refused to feed. He stared aimlessly, wondering what was different about him. Did he have Dissociative Identity Disorder with multiple alters influencing his thoughts?

What if souls were real, he wondered. Perhaps he had the soul of a woman that was placed in the wrong body.

When he could no longer bear sitting in the same position anymore, he stood up and rustled through the dirty pile of clothes that laid beside the hamper and shivered as he searched for something of relative cleanliness. Once he found something and was dressed, he sat in a worn-down office chair. He pressed the power button of his computer, and with a flicker of green light, the machine awakened. An out-of-tune melody played as the computer brought itself to life. The monitor on top of the desk illuminated its display, showing the login screen. Michael entered in his password, taking note of the time on the display: 3:22 p.m. School had just finished, not that it mattered to him. He would have been amazed if anyone had noticed his absence.

Once Michael’s desktop loaded on the screen, he moved his cursor to the icon titled *Kingdom of Magic*. The video game opened, Michael clicked on the saved game titled “Alice Spellbinder” and waited to be brought into the only world where he felt he belonged.



Alice trod carefully as she made her way across the frozen tundra alone. The cold nipped at her hands and feet despite the heavy fur cloak she wore over her robes. In her left hand, she held a staff with a crystal orb atop it that illuminated her surroundings while her right hand prevented the blizzard from entering her eyes. In the distance, the light of a fire reflected off a rocky outcrop.

When she reached the camp, she saw that tents made of hide had been constructed, and her companions were unloading their packs. Hafthar was the first to notice her; he was a beast of a man at 6'5," and his weapon of choice was a battle axe as large as Alice herself.

"Alice, you made it!" he cheered as the other party members listened in. "We thought you'd been eaten by Frost Wolves or worse, Tundra Spiders."

Alice smiled at Hafthar. "Thanks for sending out a search party to make sure I was okay."

"What? We were about to, we just wanted to wait a—"

"She's teasing you, Hafthar," a voice said from the nearest tent. Marrielle was the one to walk out of it. She leapt towards Alice and gave her a quick kiss.

"Glad you made it, love, did you find what you were looking for?"

"Yes, I did. It wasn't easy, but I found it." Alice gestured to the silver dagger sheathed under her cloak.

"Great, everyone's around the fire," Marrielle noted as she pointed towards the others. "This way."

Alice followed Marrielle to the fire, joining the rest of the party members who were merrily drinking and sharing stories. Markell—a mage known throughout the empire for his prowess in the arcane arts, and Alice's part-time mentor—was busy stoking the fire with

flame spells; Flynn, Alice's longtime friend and a talented archer, was sharpening arrowheads; and Adriel, a thief who preferred to keep her past under wraps, was preparing the shafts. Alice sat down with Marrielle, leaning into her for warmth, and was wrapped underneath her lover's cloak.

"Hey, Markell," Flynn said, reaching for his attention.

"Yes, Mister Archer, what is it?" Markell asked.

"Remember that time you reincarnated a tundra spider to scare Alice?"

"How could I forget? She was so frightened that she cast an oblivion spell and nearly tore the fabric of time and space apart," Markell laughed.

"Heeeyy," Alice interjected. "I had control of the situation. Besides, that tundra spider was the size of a mammoth, and you know that I'm afraid of them."

"Control of the situation? If Adriel hadn't knocked you unconscious with a poison dart, none of us would be here," Flynn said.

Alice looked over to Adriel. The quiet thief gave a small wave of her hand and smiled at Alice, as if to confirm the retelling. Alice's focus shifted back to Markell. "At least I didn't conjure a dragon inside The Emperor's personal chambers."

"She's got you there, Marky," Marrielle chimed. "Oh, and what exactly were you doing in The Emperor's chambers?"

Markell blushed and dipped his head. "That's . . . that's a story for another time."

A collective wave of laughter passed around the fire. Alice was pleased with her rebuttal, if not a little bit concerned for Markell's pride.

At the end of the night, Hafthar walked up to the fire and

gathered the attention of everyone. “Listen up!” his voiced boomed. “Tomorrow we enter the dungeon. We don’t know what’s down there, so everyone needs to be ready.”

Alice knew what she was required to do as the party healer; her job was to get everyone out alive until her magicka was depleted or the last drop of her blood dripped. She would get her party out safely, regardless of the danger to herself. It was a daunting task, but she knew come morning that everyone would be counting on her.



The light in the sky had faded long ago and Michael’s eyes had grown heavy. He looked at the time to see it was 1:09 a.m. His body wanted to sleep, but Michael didn’t want to return to reality. He wanted to stay in the world that *Kingdom of Magic* let him escape to; he wanted to be Alice Spellbinder. Not for the magical powers she possessed, but for the comfort Michael felt when he was her. He saved the video game and shut down his computer. In the darkness, Michael stood up, and hit his left thigh on the computer desk. A stinging pain shot through the self-inflicted slashes covering his leg, reminding him of his own mortality. He lay down in his bed as his leg stung, thinking about the adventures he’d had as Alice. He remembered the dream he’d had last night. He thought about the feeling of warmth and comfort that accompanied it, and how that as Alice—not Michael—everything felt proper to him.

As Michael drifted off into his sleep, he whispered, “To anyone out there who can hear me, whether you’re an omnipotent god or a benevolent spirit.” He paused for a moment, desperately hoping that someone would respond. “Tomorrow, when I wake up. I want to be Alice Spellbinder. And if that can’t happen then I don’t want to wake at all.”

Transferral

By Douglas McLean

I entered the black pyramid with uncertainty, as the doors slammed on the Martian landscape behind me. The normally bustling entry chamber had only one other occupant, a small cloaked sorceress who wore a pentagram on her robe and stood in front of the door to the main chamber. The door depicted a great shadow that eclipsed the sun. Thirteen tendrils flowed off the door onto the walls, and each ended in one of the immortal priestess's sigils.

The last time I was here was to perform the final trial. I had to siphon a portion of the sun into myself with the materials provided. I couldn't. By adding my own blood, I had enough power to succeed in the task, but in doing so I broke the trials' oath of conduct. I had to force myself to keep moving as the disciple opened the massive door; she bowed as I passed her.

Inside the chamber stood the thirteen priestesses. They wore pitch-black robes that concealed their faces and forms, only differentiated by the red sigils on the front of each robe. Behind them was a large mural that showed them as they gathered power from a solar eclipse thousands of years ago. They used that power for the ritual that freed our small community from the tyranny of Earth's gods and delivered us to the untouched mountains of Mars. On the floor before them lay a pentagram of blood-powder, with several objects at the points: Jupiter gas, a lizard's eye, a mummified rat, a human tooth, and a chunk of rock from Saturn's rings. A power transferral spell? Did they know I cheated on the last trial?

"Your abilities have brought you before the coven on this fateful day to perform a crucial and honorable role," spoke Priestess Ennea, "to serve us as so few do."

A wave of relief washed over me. They must have chosen me to

be a disciple! I'd worked toward this all my life. Years of studying and training had finally paid off.

"While it is rather sudden, you will be replacing Priestess Penta," Ennea finished.

"R-replacing?" I blurted out. But that's impossible, they're immortal. No, only their power is immortal, transferred from body to body across the eons. Their flesh must age like the rest of us. They pick someone they deem has the talent and capacity to learn, like myself, to be taught by the remaining twelve.

"Yes," replied Priestess Penta, "this body is no longer fit to be a priestess. We have convened and decided you are the best candidate for replacement. You will become a part of us."

"That's . . . thank you so much," I managed.

"We should be thanking you. Now please, step into the pentagram so the transferal can begin," said Priestess Triskaideca.

I did so gleefully, stepping in to begin the ritual with Priestess Penta, while the other priestesses formed a circle. I waited for a long moment, before the blood-powder started to liquefy, accepting the Jupiter gas into its writhing form. Then, the mummified rat, human tooth, lizard's eye, and Saturn's rock quickly followed. Priestess Penta's power began to flow into me, there was so much of it. The pressure was immense, like something trying to force itself into my head. Then I blacked out.

I was still upright when I came to. The pressure was still there, worse than before. It felt like I couldn't do anything. Like I was going to be trapped, standing there, for the rest of my life.

"Help," I tried to say. I tried again and again, but nothing happened.

"She's a sticky one," I heard my voice say, as my body bent down to pick up the former Priestess Penta. My hands stripped the priestess; her dried corpse fell to the ground.

“It’s been too long since we’ve had a mind that survived the ritual. Are you going to send her to The Sun-Eater or keep her for yourself?” asked Ennea.

“Feels like it wants her,” said Triskaideca.

She was right, there was something there. I could feel it, just outside of my mind.

“I’d better give it what it wants then,” replied my voice.

I felt a pull on my soul. Penta must have cast me out. Whatever that thing was, it took hold. I tried to fight it, but without my body, without my magic, I was powerless.

When it finally pulled me from my body completely, I understood everything. I could feel the minds of the others who had suffered this fate before me, each distinct voice coming together as one. A mindless, never-ending scream.

LITERARY FICTION

Euphoria ©

By Rachelle Bramly

The first thing I notice is the sweat. It sticks to my skin as I enter the building and weave through masses of people congregated by centre stage. The air is thick and dank, humidity formed by manic movement and human perspiration.

It's dark, save the pulsing of psychedelic patterns projected onto the concrete walls. A strobe light flares, and a burst of colour temporarily illuminates the room. For a moment, the illusion is broken. The warehouse is simply a warehouse—then darkness again. The lights oscillate as the speakers quake and the music reaches its climax. The crowd around me quivers, the fast-paced tempo reverberating through their bodies. They're experiencing something I can't quite grasp—not yet anyways. They're on a different level, in a different headspace.

After the climax, the breakdown is my favourite. Soft beats, spaced further and further apart, cradle the audience and deposit them back to earth with a gentle hand. The afterglow is palpable.

A teenage girl pushes past me. She pulls her friend behind her, their fingers intertwined, palms pressed together. The girl in front—smacking her gum with impressive speed—she's a veteran like me. She gives all the right signals of someone knowledgeable about being lifted. The roots of her hair are damp, her mascara moist and running, her bottom lip set in a determined line. A litany of plastic-beaded bracelets canvas her arms. She fishes a box of cigarettes from her bra. Camel Crush—typical. My eyes drift to her thighs, the appetizing gap of skin between the top of her tall socks and the bottom of her tutu.

The girl locks eyes with me. She's felt me staring. Her expression reads conflicted, a paradoxical concoction of *leave-me-the-fuck-alone* and *please-notice-me*. It's a challenge I'm willing to accept.

I can see the outlines of reddish-purple marks nibbling their way up the right side of her neck. Someone's already marked her as their territory.

The music changes and a new mixset begins. I follow the girls with my gaze as they march towards a heavy metal door, propped open with a cinder brick: the smoke pit.

I head towards the door. It's time to join the collective. I snake between dancers at an increasing speed, my heart pounding, anticipation gurgling inside of me. My body knows, my body remembers, and my body wants more.

It's time.

I slip out the exit and into the open air. Chain fences, seven feet in height, enclose us like livestock in a pen. Barbed wire prevents the curious from hopping over. Christmas lights decorate the fences. Outside, the music is faded: the echo of the bass still throbs, yet the finer details are lost.

I beeline to the outhouses. They stand in a neat row against the exterior wall of the building. I slide into one, allowing the door to thump closed behind me. I turn the lock and pull down my pants. Reaching into my boxers I extract, from under my balls, a small package I taped there earlier. Some might call me overly-cautious, but security can't pat you down everywhere—and at least I never get caught. Ripping the plastic open, I unearth two round, pressed pills. They look like candy. They are the size of Smarties, each sunshine yellow and emblazoned with a horseshoe. I shake the pills in my hand so the horseshoes face upright. Tonight, I'll take all the luck I can get.

I put the pills in my mouth, one at a time, and suck. They taste terrible, but it's part of the ritual. I sit on top of the toilet seat, pants still at my ankles, and my mouth fills with chemical acidity. The pills begin to disintegrate, turning to mush. I hold the drugs with my

tongue for as long as I can until it's too much, and I have to swallow. They burn all the way down and into my stomach.

I stand, pull my pants up, and exit the outhouse. Back in the night air, I scan the crowd and find the two girls collapsed together against the far fence. The girl in the tutu is rubbing her friend's forearm with intense, drug-induced vigour.

My stomach flip-flops.

I find somewhere to sit down. I'm familiar with what's happening; it happens every time. Nausea overruns my core and I feel queasy—sitting helps. I choose a spot with a clear view of the girls; their features are subdued by shadows. As I keep tabs on them, I take deep breaths. Inhale—hold—exhale at half the speed.

Hold again.

Repeat.

It's all part of the ritual.

A security guard shines a LED flashlight in my face. The illumination is jarring and temporarily blinds me.

“Everything okay here?” he barks.

I nod, struggling to regain my eyesight, and the security guard moves on. I watch him work his way down the line of people pressed up against the fences, asking the same question over and over again, each time in the same tone of voice. I wonder how much he is paid an hour. Enough to care if someone answered “no”?

I pull out a cigarette and light up, taking long, slow drags, the anxiety in my stomach subsiding.

I wait and I breathe.

Across the way, the first girl is laughing, brandishing her Camel Crush, her cheeks aglow. Her friend parrots her behaviour the best she can. A halo of light extends from each of their bodies in all directions. The drug is kicking in, colours swirling into emotions

swirling into patterns exploding in my body like fireworks—like that moment right before you come, directly before release.

The friend, the tag-a-long, gets up and wanders to the other side of the smoke pit, disappearing into a porta potty. The first girl looks after her, sitting with her back against the fence, sipping at her cigarette. I can't tear my gaze away from her. She is intoxicating.

The girl turns her head slightly and we lock eyes for a second time that night. I know I have no choice but to go to her.

I get up. I can feel my heart bellowing in my ears. The energy in my body seems to shoot upwards and out the crown of my head with the rushing of an upside-down waterfall. I feel weightless.

She reaches for me as I sit, hugging me with intimate passion. I love this drug because the walls we normally surround ourselves with melt away—not because we are “fucked up,” but because we are finally safe. In our euphoria, we can trust; we can let our guard down.

“I'm Starburst,” she says.

I stay silent.

“Give me your hand, come here.” The girl reaches out and makes a peace sign with her fingers. “We need to be properly acquainted.” I mimic her motion, pressing the tips of my index finger and middle finger against hers.

“Peace.”

She morphs her hand into half a heart. I do the same and again our fingers touch, creating the full shape.

“Love.”

Our fingers intercept, wrapping around each other, bonding tightly.

“Unity.”

She looks at the bracelets stacked up the length of her arm. Selecting one, she pulls it overtop the others, downwards towards

our hands. She stretches the elastic cords outwards and guides the bracelet over our clasping fingers onto my arm. The beads are yellow and orange. In the centre, a white bead shaped like a shooting star.

“Respect.” She looks up at me with a smile. It is complete. We are now forever linked. I feel bad I don’t have something to give her in return.

She smirks and teases.

“Dontcha know about PLUR?” She thinks I’m new here.

I lean up against her shoulder, my head rising and falling with the quickening of her breath. She smells musky and fragrant, all at the same time.

The girl leans back into me, bringing her cigarette to her lips for one final drag. We are now supporting each other with our weight. There exists nothing else but the heat between our shoulders—the way her breath catches when I move my mouth closer to her ear.

I need more.

I hug her close, her body melding with mine in dazzling delight. I am bound to her, every particle of her body a particle of my own. When she inhales, I inhale. When she exhales, I exhale too. We are one moving mass of bone and muscle; one creature, crafted from cartilage and sinews, curled in the darkness of a warehouse rave’s smoke pit.

I kiss her. Minty, menthol smoke still lingers in her mouth, and I suck it into mine. My tongue explodes into a fresh frenzy of sensation. The coolness burns and soothes, soothes and burns.

Her skin is soft. My fingers dance down her right arm and find her hand. I interlock my fingers with hers. The electricity between us is visceral. Real. Alive.

I reach her neck with my lips and pause, noticing once more the slither of bruises winding their way up towards her right ear. The

marks taunt me, and I think of whoever left them behind.

I want her to be mine.

My hand releases her hand and travels down her front, finding her *tutu*. The polyester tulle is rough against my fingers. I brush it aside. In between the warmth of her legs I find cotton panties and push those away too. Even before I touch her, I can sense her wetness. Then, I am up to my knuckles in her, getting to know her from the inside out.

Her body stiffens and I am pleased. Her body's movements sing to me. Her pleasure is my pleasure; in it, I find validation.

I realize all at once—almost not at all—that she is pushing my hand away; I don't understand and push back, once more plunging my fingers up into her. She grabs my wrist but loses her grip. I am stronger than her.

“No. Stop.”

Her words are hushed, and I don't believe she means them. I push harder. She tries to scramble backwards, only the fence is in the way. My fingers are still inside her and they're not ready to leave. I come closer, pressing my body against her. I can feel her sweat on my skin. I kiss her. She's not kissing back anymore.

I look at her, confused. This time her expression reads *panic*.

She catches me in my pause and throws herself sideways, twisting away from my grasp. I am confused because I just felt her—my fingers are still moist from her. I am confused because I thought I had felt her as surely as I feel myself, and yet—

She jumps to her feet, her head sweeping back and forward, scanning the crowd. She is looking for her friend. I stay seated on the ground and watch her feet scamper to my left, disappearing around me. I turn to watch her go and try to find her name in my mouth. Instead, I find it empty.

I don't understand.

Her presence hangs in the air with a ghostly permanence. I can still feel the outline of her body leaning against the chain metal fence. I reach out to try and touch her—but she's gone.

I sit on the concrete for a long time, fingering the girl's bracelet around my wrist, as I listen to the whirlwind of noisy chatter and pounding bass. The music hangs hazy in my mind: heavy, assaulting. The external world feels miles away, but it continues to intrude upon me, regardless of distance. I search for the girl in the tutu, the girl who let another deface her neck, but would not let me take her farther. I can't find her anywhere.

I am blinded once again by an LED flashlight. The security guard is back, having completed his circuit.

"Everything okay here?" he barks.

I shake my head; I am beginning to understand.

"No."

PHOTOGRAPHY

The Lady

Leigh Nicole Leal



To Whom the Queen Bows

by **Tori Schroeder**

Queen Lillian left the throne room with a swish of her gown, the wails of a peasant lost in the clack of her heels. She navigated the long winding halls with ease; trailed by the fading sobs that echoed off the stone walls, she began climbing a grand staircase. She paused at the first landing. Her fingertips drummed against the banister in anticipation. A resounding slam assured her that the issue was entirely dealt with, and that servants would be along shortly to clean any remnants of filth the beggar had trailed in. Satisfied, she continued.

In her ascent, the queen passed many lavishly furnished chambers. Parlours, libraries, and guest quarters flew by in her periphery, though all were devoid of life and scarce of the sun's warmth. She followed a path of lit sconces, up a further spiral of stairs. The train of her wine-coloured dress snaked up the steps behind her and glistened with the passage of each flickering flame. The entire castle seemed to resonate with emptiness, save for the piercing click of her footfalls.

As the silence struck Lillian, her pointed eyebrows furrowed. Then her step quickened. Reaching the top of the stairs, she was met with an ambient warmth and the scent of charred timber. She crossed the threshold into a very well-kept room, decorated with a four-poster bed, an intricately engraved wardrobe, and a velvet cushioned seat which faced the crackling fireplace. A few servants puttered around a seated figure, who was completely obscured to Lillian behind the chair's tall frame. Despite this, she knew exactly who resided there.

"Where are my musicians?" she demanded.

The servants averted their gazes and gave her a wide berth so as not to incur her wrath.

"I sent them away." A tired, gruff voice came from the seated man.

“What?” She stormed around the chair to face him, the servants scuttling like mice around her furious form. “Whatever for?”

“They hadn’t eaten in three days, Lily.”

“They hadn’t played anything adequate in three days. You can’t expect me to reward those who fail to perform their duties.”

The man breathed a long sigh, his eyelids heavy, and brow abundant in lines. He hunched, and brought a spindly hand adorned with multiple rings to his temple. Despite the luxurious accommodations, he appeared profoundly tired.

“They were trying . . .” he began, but she quickly interjected.

“I will not have you make *excuses* for them.” Her tone was laced with venom, and the servants instinctively flinched. She turned to the nearest one. “You, retrieve my musicians, or find superior ones.”

The woman gave a quick bow before hastily scrambling out the doorway.

“The rest of you, leave us!”

Within moments the pair was alone in the room. When the last of the servants had disappeared down the staircase, Lillian strolled to the western-facing arch window of the chamber and looked out over the landscape. From here, she caught the last dying rays of daylight as they stretched out from the horizon, casting fiery orange and rosy red tendrils over the distant farmlands.

“You know, I have always held a deep admiration for this view. It is only from this tower that you can watch over the proceedings of the entire kingdom,” she turned to face him once more, “and that is why I wanted you to have this chamber.”

“And my aching knees thank you dearly each day for the climb,” he chuckled half-heartedly.

She continued, undeterred. “I wanted you to have this chamber so that each morning you could awaken to the sight of our great

accomplishment. That you could be greeted by our burgeoning city, and behold all that we own and defend.” Dusk’s amber glow bathed Queen Lillian’s angular face. She leaned forward against the window sill and met the cool evening breeze, letting it seep into her lungs. Her eyelids drifted closed as she basked in the invigoration of both the chill and her unquestionable authority over the land.

“Lily,” the gravelly voice began again, “this has gone too far.”

Instantly, her serenity was shattered.

“No, things are exactly as they should be, *exactly* as I planned.”

“The dungeons are full, the city is empty. This . . . this isn’t what I wanted.”

Despite her ebbing irritation, Lillian now looked upon him with only a mild discontent. “If they refuse to serve me, they refuse to serve our kingdom. For that they must be punished. I will make this land secure and strong, like we always dreamed.”

She didn’t want to fight with him; he was her father, after all. He would see reason. She had no doubt he remembered—surely better than she did—how in her childhood their small cottage on the kingdom’s outskirt had been subject to countless raids. At least twice their fields had been torn asunder, and any provisions or money they gathered with the intention of finding a home elsewhere became a tithe they paid to the marauders in return for a flimsy guarantee of safety. It didn’t last. Not even the king, supposedly sworn to protect and serve his subjects, took any initiative to solve the problem, dismissing it as a minor concern on the scale of the whole kingdom’s needs. But now? Now Lillian could imprison every last barbarian that threatened the innocent. Now she had the power to personally ensure that all her people were safe, and that nobody ever suffered the same fate that they had all those years ago.

Her father’s head hung low, his stare distant with contemplation. “But . . . at what cost?”

Lillian knelt beside him, taking his hand. Then, just as he used to say when she was a child, she repeated back to him, “Safety is its own reward.”

The corners of his mouth twitched with the hint of a weak smile. A glimmer of pride surfaced briefly despite the turmoil within, but soon his conflicted gaze came to rest somewhere in the middle-distance. She knew this would not be the end of their discussion. But perhaps at least she could remind him of the vision they had once shared.

“The kingdom will soon understand,” Lillian continued. “And once we quell the dissidents and transition to new laws, our people will never have to fear, not ever again.”

Her father placed his other hand atop hers with a deep sigh. “That would be the day.”



A thud rattled the walls, followed by a piercing shatter. Heavy footfalls passed by, and Lillian clutched the knob of the pantry door tightly shut, holding her breath. The sounds of skidding furniture met her ears, mingling with shouts from outside. For a terrifying moment, Lillian heard nothing at all. She froze in her huddled position, listening intently. Sweat formed on her brow. Then a resounding cry came from somewhere distantly to her left, and the footsteps lumbered by her once more, hastened. A tell-tale creak from the front door indicated the marauder's exit. Lillian took a minute to breathe, still curled up between a sack of potatoes and the stew pot, her knees tucked close to her chest.

A few moments later the door swung open suddenly. Lillian recoiled and shut her eyes.

“Lily, it's alright.” It was her father's familiar gravelly voice. “It's safe to come out now, we chased them off.”

She opened her eyes to find his broad-shouldered form filling the

doorway. He was loosely gripping a dirtied pitchfork in one hand, with the other extended towards her. He helped her up and out of the pantry. After retrieving the chairs from where they had been shoved across the room, her father rested the pitchfork against the wall and slumped into his seat at the dining table. Lillian joined him.

Though his head rested in his hands, she could see the scuffs and still-bleeding scrapes he'd sustained. Her brows knit together in concern. "Father, you're hurt."

"It does not matter."

"But, you're not a warrior, they can't expect you to—"

"It does not matter."

She gently rested a hand on his arm. "Maybe . . . maybe you shouldn't fight them anymore. I-I know it's to keep us safe but . . ."

Lillian's father took her small hand in his own large and calloused one. His eyes had a determined set. "Safety is its own reward, Lily, never forget that. And as long as the bandits torment us, as long as the king stands idle—and leaves us with nothing, *nothing*—we must fight. Without hesitation. They show us no mercy, so we cannot be merciful. And we must not yield. Do you understand?"

Though his face bore many creases, there was a vigor in his eyes. Lillian admired it. His drive, his determination—her father was so strong and brave that nothing could stop him.

She mustered a deep breath, balled her fists and sat tall. "When I grow up I'll fight too, father. I'll keep us both safe, and the other farmers, and I'll make sure the whole kingdom is safe! Just wait father, just wait!"

A smile tugged at his cheeks and made his eyes crinkle. "That's my girl."

Lillian bounded from her chair, across the room, and returned with the familiar texture of rough canvas beneath her fingers.

Excitedly, she unrolled the map on the table before them, as they had done so many times before. Both their fingers became busy tracing the neighboring mountain ranges and valleys, the rivers and forests and the castle, atop it all. Her father began describing strategies and cunning tactics, tracing lines along the landscape, instilling her with the taste of victory, imploring her to imagine, just *imagine* what they could achieve.

Eyes aglow, Lillian did just that, entirely rapt with visions of what the future would hold.

Occlusion

By Kristan Saefkow

The traveller pulls the comb roughly through his hair, the teeth scraping against his scalp as the hair parts before them, dandruff and greasy dirt falling into the void between his head and the stained gas station bathroom sink. He glares at his reflection in the cracked mirror, the harshly fluorescing light helping mark every scar and imperfection in his marred, thirty-three-year-old face. The red-rimmed eyes of the overtired man are watery and bloodshot. He hasn't slept since Friday afternoon, but he doesn't know how many hours ago that was. He will not be sleeping for quite some time, barring some fatal slip up. Then he would be acquainted with the unfamiliar and unsolicited sleep of the dead, rather than the familiar sleep of the restless, from which he is becoming estranged more and more each hour.

The comb slides into his pocket as he shoulders open the door and walks out into the electric hum of the station. Red, yellow, and blue packages of food stand stiffly to attention, packed densely onto blue wire shelves and displayed with supreme confidence. Stalking through the festival of consumption, his gaze shifts constantly, as though he distrusts the spaces he cannot see. The dark cavity within each bag of chips, the shadows in the drinks' cooler. Looking out through the glass door of the gas station, his gaze moves over every object, searching for something. He looks for some imperfection that would mark the start of a bad day, the beginning of what might be the end. The gloom of the mid-morning rain offers neither solace nor confirmation of his suspicion, and he shoves the door open, grabbing a package of beef jerky off a shelf as he leaves the building.

The cry of the young freckled man behind the counter is cut off by the thud of the door and the rush of water under the wheels of a

passing semi-truck. The gas station is the only point of civilization on a long, lonely stretch of asphalt. Looking out at the misty brown expanse of rain-soaked fields and rotting hay-bales, the traveller feels a sense of unease fall over him. It settles over his shoulders like the arm of an old enemy who, having met him in a bar, was making friendly conversation before later trying to strangle him in the alley. He walks swiftly to his car, a beat-up brown sedan, and gets in, the smell of dust and cigarettes surrounding him. The only thing he sees in the back seat is a ratty blanket that he hopes to use again soon. In the passenger seat is a backpack, stained and torn but still usable. The zipper is open just slightly, but no light seems to fall within, and the contents remain a mystery as his eye lingers on it. He digs the keys out of his jacket pocket and starts the car, keeping his eyes in the mirror as he backs out, the motor coughing in its ingratiating way as he pulls out onto the highway.

His lone working headlight scouts no landscape that the crepuscular light of the sky doesn't reveal, its weak beam failing to make itself seen. He looks in the rear-view mirror and back. The sound of the tires on the road and the whistling of the wind in the holes in the floorboards seem to stretch time. The sun rises through the clouds, reaches its zenith, and sets, night taking him from his seat and spinning him through the starry sky as he drives, single headlight bringing no relief to the chasm of black, rain-slicked asphalt lined with faded flaking yellow that swallows him.

As the sun rises again, the red lids of his eyes begin again to droop, heavy with the unshed weight of his days of vigilance. Looking into the passenger seat while the blast of air from an oncoming semi-truck pushes the car down onto its shocks, he thinks about how he arrived here. They had said to meet them at the crossroads. They had said one more delivery, and he'd be done, he could move on. The backpack had to reach them, they said, and he mustn't look at the contents. The shadowy gap in the zipper seems to call to him,

nonetheless. He stares at the road, its lines stretching unbidden into the grey of dawn, no crossroads in sight. What was he doing? Where was this place? Deep down he knows he should be turning the wheel, navigating, but he knows only that he has been driving for days without any sign of humanity beyond eighteen wheelers and gas-stations. His gaze snaps to the mirror, reflexively, without thought, then back at the road. He looks again, alarm in his eyes.

Something is there.

It has no light, no substance. A smudge, at the edge of the horizon. He knows it. Something following. Something wanting. Whatever's in the backpack, it's wanted. He wishes he hadn't agreed to any of this. He wishes he could remember agreeing to any of this. His decision, his consequences, but he finds he cannot remember the face of who hired him. He knows that any given road might be his last, but for the life of him he can't think of a time he wasn't travelling down one. This life of travel has sent him in a direction that he could not find on any compass, if he carried one. He's travelling on a direct route, and deviation is not a requirement or a possibility. His foot bears down on the accelerator, urging his stuttering steed to greater speeds, hoping for salvation in velocity. Some instinct tells him that if he does not reach his destination before his pursuer reaches him, he will not reach it at all. In the distance he sees the lights of another station, and glances at the empty package of beef jerky on the seat beside him. Ignoring his hunger, the lights swell before him, fill his vision, and fade behind him.

He drives with sweat and fear in his eyes and hears something beyond the thrum of rubber and wind. A keening, like the ringing of a finger on the edge of a glass. It fills the car and his ears. It seeps between his teeth and behind his eyes. The car shudders as the resonance builds, and he looks in the rear-view mirror just as the lights of the gas station disappear. It's not a dimming, or a flash before darkness, just a sudden absence of light and the presence of

something in its place. Shaking, he turns his eyes to the road and focuses on the place where the road meets the horizon, concentrating on the destination. He ignores the sound as best he can, but a new thought has begun to press on his mind. Where is he going? The sweat trickles down past his eye, riveting on the fixed line of darkness that sutures the earth to the sky, and he wonders if he can escape the thing behind him. If whatever is following him wants the thing in the backpack, it might not be the best idea to bring it to the people who want it. What is waiting for him at his destination? Who or what knows and understands such things as that which creeps at the border of light and dark, following the razor's edge of cognizance? The horizon seems to take on a quality of imperceptibility as he stares at it. It's there, waiting for him to reach it, but only through monumental effort will he do so. The traveller's eyes begin to water as he stares, not wanting to turn his eyes from the destination. He stares, willing it to come to him. He stares, slowly becoming convinced that if he takes his eyes off it, it will flee into unbounded distances beyond his comprehension and abandon him to the darkness that hounds him. He wonders if the horizon has been so fleeting since he started this trip.

Something nags at the edge of his attention, something that he realizes he's forgetting. He wrenches his gaze away from the road, blinking to clear his vision, looking to the backpack. Of course, he thinks, this is the key to it all. The traveller wouldn't be on the road if it weren't for this . . . thing. His eyes do battle with the darkness just visible within the gap in the tattered zipper. The darkness inside the backpack is impenetrable, the contents an enigma. His brow begins to furrow at the thought of opening the backpack, of seeing the curse he bears. The consideration that the darkness in the poorly secured vessel that he transports seems to bear a resemblance to the non-thing that follows him begins to nibble at the corner of his mind. It, too, lies just beyond his perceptions. He feels the car around him seem to

expand as his senses become dulled to everything save what he thinks he sees in the shadow. One hand on the wheel, head turned, eyes streaming, the shadow reaching into him, wrenching at his mind.

Get rid of it.

The words find themselves falling soundlessly from his lips as he stares, daring not to look away, at the destination he flees to and from, never at the thing or things which threaten to catch him. He reaches for the bag, gripping the strap, the compulsion to return darkness to darkness dragging his hand through the air. The air slashes at his face and neck as he cranks the window, but as he does, something catches his eyes, something breaking away from the rim of the world. It's the crossroads, it must be. His attention now held by his rapidly approaching salvation, his hand returns to the wheel. As the highway slides past underneath him, drawing him and the crossroads closer together, his jaw sets, and his knuckles whiten. He slows the car and comes to a halt. The traveller sits for a moment, staring, before snatching up the bag and stepping out of the car, but what there is, is the horizon, wavering and still just within reach, the vastness of the division between earth and sky threatening to rend their joining.

There is also a man, in a suit, holding a backpack. They stand at a crossroads.

The man gestures with his free hand, indicating the backpack in the traveller's hand. His face is a terrible thing, difficult even to glance at, but the traveller tries for a moment. Just to see who is responsible for all of this. There is the visage of a predator and the suggestion of flame before the traveller looks away. He does not look again. The rough nylon fabric of the backpack strap pulling his arm to the ground refocuses his attention and he looks down, eye drawn to the dark gap. The ringing of the air is strong around him. The traveller's gaze moves from the backpack, past the man who stands patiently, one hand extended, to the horizon. Something is still there, same as

what pursued him, but it remains just beyond his vision. He focuses on the man, whose hands are gloved in old silk, and whose fingers seem too long. The bag is heavy.

He weighs the options in his mind. His gaze rests on the backpack once more and the darkness inside, so unknown and unseen, so similar to that which lingers in wait for him in the distance, so far away. Now the thought, to open it, to understand it, comes over him. Why not? He's done so much . . . come so far. Surely just a glimpse . . . no. Stepping forward, he lifts his arm. If he doesn't deliver the bag, what was all this for? Surely this is the end meant for him, after so, so long. As the man with the terrible face takes the bag, he lifts his other gloved hand and holds out the new backpack, unblemished, pristine. The traveller shakes his head, no, he can't. The terrible faced man drops the backpack, and the traveller's eyes follow it to the ground . . . the ground that stretches out to the horizon and at the edge of which lies only the smudge of unseen dread.

The backpack is in his hands almost before he can consider his options. Some suggestion of satisfaction flees across the awful face, and the man points at something behind the traveller. The traveller turns and walks to the brown sedan which sits parked, facing down a dark and rainy road edged with a misty brown expanse of rain-soaked fields and rotting hay bales. He gets in, the smell of dust and cigarettes surrounding him. The only thing he sees in the back seat is a ratty blanket that he hopes to use again soon. In the passenger seat is a backpack, unblemished, pristine. The zipper is open just slightly, but the contents remain a mystery as his eye lingers on it. He digs the keys out of his jacket pocket and starts the car, keeping his eyes on the horizon as he pulls out, the motor coughing in its ingratiating way as he pulls out onto the highway.

PHOTOGRAPHY

The Viewing

Keely Covo











FANTASY

Dream Cutter ☺

By Shuang Gong

In the clouds he flew. Icy wind whistled past his ears, the air thin but refreshing. Bright sunshine fringed the clouds with golden edges; the sky was of the purest blue he'd ever seen.

He kept flying, the clouds making way for him.

His eyes roved around joyfully.

Up and down, clouds and sky. He was in the midst of white and blue.

He looked back.

A wagging tail went into his sight, then two huge wings fluttered in the air. He raised his hands, two claws covered with scales shining in the sunlight.

Startled, he lost balance in the sky and fell down. The scene changed rapidly in front of him, sky, horizon, mountain, forest, and a town.

He flipped his body, and flapped his wings to regain balance.

He hovered over the town, where the streets were empty, where people died in vain, where dead bodies piled up high outside hospitals.

His claws shivered; tears brimmed his eyes.

The scene faded to black.



Light came back slowly.

Vinz opened his eyes. He was in the forest, lying on the blanket with his normal human body. Birds twittered in the trees; golden morning sunshine came through the leaves.

It was just a dream, shadowed by reality.

He got up, his gaze falling on the silver knife beside his backpack.

He remembered finding the knife by chance in a creek. With a thin arching blade and slim handle, it had a tiny line of words carved on its back.

Dream Cutter.

Vinz picked it up, imagining one day he would take it back to town.

Though the day would never come.

He stared into the reflection of his own eyes on the shining blade.

Those weak and powerless eyes.



“Doctor, please save me”

The patient on the bed choked and vomited blood. The white bedsheet under him was stained with yellow pus oozing from the festering ulcers in his skin. Desperately, he reached out his shaking hand to the doctor standing by the bed.

Vinz watched the hand stop inches from his white coat as the patient convulsed and twisted into an eerie helical shape. Blood ran out of each of his pores, soaking the bedsheet.

Vinz turned his head sideways; the white surgical mask on his face hid his expression.

Then came the clear cracks of the bones.

Vinz took a deep breath before turning his head back to see the patient dead in a pool of blood and pus. Silently, he went out and came back with several hospital staff; together, they wrapped the body with the bedsheet and pushed the rollaway bed out of the ward.

Outside the hospital, a huge square hole in the ground was jammed with bodies stacking high.

The plague raged.

Like all other doctors, Vinz used to work day after day tirelessly in the hope of saving the patients. It didn't last long. One by one, the

doctors themselves were claimed by the plague. Until one day, they found there was no cure at all.

The hospital soon lost its function and turned into a glorified funeral home; for a lingering doctor like him, there wasn't much left to do other than receiving patients and watching them tortured to death.

His coworkers, friends, neighbours, and—one day—his family.

The day when his wife and son lay there on the stretchers in the narrow corridor, Vinz sat beside them, holding their hands. No last words, blood in their throats choked them. No deathbed privacy. The corridor was crowded with groaning patients. Vinz watched them take their last breath as the crimson teardrops on their faces slid down into the pool of blood.

Gently, he covered their bodies with bedsheets.

“I will join you soon.”

That day after reaching home, he packed his backpack briefly and splashed the whole house with gasoline. Stepping outside, he lit a match and dropped it on the floor.

In the soaring flame, the house burnt to ruins.

He went into the mountains. The one with lush forest. The one they used to go to for hiking. He wouldn't live long, he thought. Having contacted so many bodies, the virus must have settled down in him.

He didn't fear death. His own life no longer meant anything.

He was a doctor of no use. He couldn't save his patients, coworkers, and family. People said he was the best doctor in town, his coworkers respected him, and his family was proud of him. But he failed all of them.

His heart bled.

In one night, he dreamed that the plague had subsided, and peace had returned. When he woke up, the night was still deep, as

deep as his sorrow.

It was later in the same day, he found Dream Cutter in a creek.



The cool air smelt of the fresh scent of forest.

He stood by the lake. The shore was soft and moist under his feet. He opened his eyes, looking into his reflection on the smooth water surface.

Horns on the head. Claws. Wings. A long tail.

He was in that dream again.

He squatted down and studied his reflection, running his sharp claw across his scaled lower body.

He stared at his image before standing up and flapping his wings.

He flew fast towards the town, the place he missed.

From high in the sky, he saw a dark figure standing in the centre of town. Clouds of flies were flying around it. A deathly aura filled the air.

Vinz dove down from the clouds and landed behind it, folding his wings.

The figure swung around to face him, its face inky black except two green eyes.

A name jumped into his mind upon seeing this face.

“Exterminans.”

“Lord of Plague.” The demon grinned.

It was this demon that brought the plague. Vinz’s body shook.

“You shouldn’t be here,” the demon said.

“What shouldn’t be here is you.”

“Just by looking at my face, you know my name.” Exterminans pointed at Vinz’s chest. “Looks like that has given you much power.”

Vinz lowered his head. A necklace hung on his neck, its pendant the Dream Cutter.

Seeing the surprised look on Vinz's face, the demon smiled more. "Don't you understand," it said, "the cutter reads your mind, interprets it and casts it into your dream."

"I have only heard of Dream Cutter. Today is the first time I see it."

Exterminans walked up to him. "Can I take a look?"

Alert, Vinz backed off, his wings fully outspread.

Dark clouds gathered in the sky, and purple lightning flickered menacingly.

Exterminans raised its head and looked into the sky; the smile vanished from its face.

Without any warning, it pounced on him.

Vinz swiftly turned his body aside to avoid this attack; the demon's flies immediately encircled him, the rotten smell from them choking him.

Disgusted, he let out a low roar; all the flies caught fire and burned to ashes. He looked around, only to find Exterminans had fled.

He clenched his claws until his knuckles cracked.



Vinz was lost in a trance when he woke up. For one second, he wondered which world he was in; only by touching and feeling his human body could he tell he was in reality.

The boundary between reality and dream blurred.

He took out the Dream Cutter and touched its reflective blade, thinking of the demon Exterminans and what it said about the knife.

He shook his head a few times and put it back. A dream was just a dream. He told himself not to overthink it.

He had some biscuits before packing his bag and left.

Deep down into the forest he walked. Far from the trails, far from the town, and far from his grief and despair. As he went further, the forest got thicker, and then, in the green sea of trees, came an open space with a lake.

He stopped on the shore; the lake looked familiar like he had been here just minutes before. He walked around it, looking for clues to explain this familiarity.

Scents of forest and grass whirled in the fresh air. The lake surface was calm and smooth like a mirror.

He noticed some footprints on the soft sandy shore.

Footprints of claws, four toes with long sharp nails, like those of a lizard. The front part of the footprints was deeper than the heel, the sign of toe walking.

Vinz looked at the shoes he wore and the human footprints he left behind him. Suddenly, he remembered.

It was the lake in the dream, where he looked at his reflection and left for town.

He couldn't be wrong. He followed the footprints and saw how exactly they matched each of his steps in the dream, from where he stood to where he flew.

He inhaled deeply, feeling the lake and forest spin around him. And among the turbulent whirlpool of thoughts, a single one hit him.

If what he did in the dream affected reality in the same way, what would happen if he killed Exterminans?

This thought, once risen, couldn't be suppressed any more.

Outside the mountains, people were still dying. One day the plague would claim them all, like it did his family.

His blood boiled.



Quietly Vinz sat on the clock tower, wings folded, his eyes fixed on that dark figure in the hospital.

Exterminans—followed by its flies and rats.

Climbing onto the bed, the rats gnawed at the patients; from cheek to feet, they feasted on their bodies, not missing an inch of flesh. Flies landed on their faces, crawling into their noses and mouths.

Vinz's slit pupils dilated upon witnessing this scene.

At the same time, the patients, one by one, began to vomit blood, convulse and bleed. With the crack of their bones, they died.

This was why the symptoms were so violent, Vinz realized, for they were made by the demon's hands.

Buzzing and squeaking, those demonic creatures left the dead bodies, their sizes getting visibly bigger. One by one, they did the same to all the patients.

Tears trickled down his cheeks. Vinz let out a roar, his body tensed with rage.

Icy winds rose up. Sunlight faded away. The sky turned crimson.

Outside the hospital, door by door, Exterminans led the flies and rats to people's homes. They were spreading the plague.

Vinz jumped from the clock tower, darting towards the demon at full speed.

Before Exterminans could even look back, Vinz knocked it down onto the ground, plunging his claws into the demon's chest.

Exterminans wriggled under him. Suddenly, it vanished into black smoke, slipping away from under his claws.

Vinz sprang up from the ground, his long tail sweeping the whole area around him.

A long shriek sounded.

Exterminans emerged from the smoke, bleeding from its chest and legs. Its long hair waved in the wind. Its eyes flared green.

Fire, like raindrops, fell from the flaming sky, burning all the flies and rats to ashes.

Still trembling, Exterminans straightened its body, a cold smile played about its lips.

“Mr. Doctor,” it said jokingly, “seems you are very determined . . .”

A flash of lightning hit right beside it.

“I’m not interested in talking to you,” Vinz said.

Exterminans grinned more, revealing its sharp teeth.

“The moment I saw you, I knew I was no match for you,” it said lightly. “Dream Cutter grants power according to its holder’s mind. You are strong-minded, that’s why it chose you.”

Vinz listened, his face revealing no emotion.

In the sky, the lightning wove into a dazzling web. As Vinz raised his arm, the web of lightning travelled down to his shoulder, his chest, until his whole body was flaring with lightning.

Exterminans drew back, its body turning into smoke.

Before it moved an inch, Vinz grabbed onto its neck, his claw tightening with intense strength.

“You won’t want to kill me . . .” Exterminans choked, “I die, you won’t end up any better than me . . .”

Vinz raised his eyebrows, loosened his grip, and threw Exterminans to the ground.

The demon coughed, standing up.

“Dream Cutter breaks the boundary between dream and reality, but there are limits and consequences.” It wiped off the blood on its lips.

“You kill me, thousands of people who are supposed to die will

survive. You change the order of reality more than you are allowed to. Once you do it, chaos will fall on this dimension, and you will be locked in the void for eternity.”

Vinz lowered his eyes.

“What’s the use of saving these people’s worthless lives?” Exterminans asked. “They won’t know what you’ve done for them. They won’t even remember you. I’m sorry for your family, but they won’t come back even if you kill me.”

“What you said about Dream Cutter, is it all true?” Vinz asked, the lightning on him still glaring.

“Every single word,” Exterminans said, stepping closer to Vinz.

“Think. What do you really want?” The demon smiled. “Money? I can give you plenty, enough for you to start a new life anywhere. A woman? I can give you that too, more beautiful than your wife. Let’s make a deal. You give me the cutter, and I’ll give you all you want.”

Exterminans reached out its left hand, gesturing towards a handshake.

Vinz looked to the sky.

Dream and reality interwove, so real and so unreal.

Within all the unknown and uncertainty, he had only one thought—that would never be changed by anything.

The sky cleared up.

“What do you say?” Exterminans urged.

The lightning on Vinz blazed fiercely; it flew skyward and shaped into a dragon head, outshining the sun.

“I said, what shouldn’t be here is you.”

At the speed of light, the dragon’s head shot out and crashed into Exterminans.

The explosion was deafening. Among the splashing sparkles, the

demon roared in pain. Its body evaporated into wisps of dark haze in the scorching heat.

In the shockwaves, Vinz stood upright. The moment the last trace of the demon melted away, the Dream Cutter around his neck crumbled.

Under his feet, the ground vanished. The sky cracked into pieces like a broken mirror. The sun shattered into hundreds of drifting shards; with the last trace of dim light, he saw an approaching swirl made of the fragments of nothingness.

The swirl of the void.

He smiled, feeling a huge weight lifted from him.

Drowsiness crept up on him. Before he fell into eternal sleep, he saw a picture in his mind.

High above the clouds, he was flying freely.

A Lesson in Self

By Cam Bradley

Where were you when you were the best person you have ever been? For me, it has always been in half-cut in a bar somewhere, far away from home.

Well, that sounds rather lackluster, doesn't it? Allow me to elaborate. There is an openness which runs in tandem with the desultory and decadent revelry of travelling, an ease of heart and soul which leads strangers to friends faster than any other means I have yet seen. I stood my soul before this discovery and breathed deep. Through travelling, I discovered strength and a way to better myself by bringing joy and empowerment to others.

Something important I thought about while I wandered is that we often don't realize what we leave in our wake. Take, for example, the old glass-paned transit stops sprinkled around town. On a chilly day, delicate silhouettes remain on the glass where someone waited, a lingering impression they left behind. The same idea extends person to person; a seemingly tiny gesture can ignite sparks of recognition that leave someone remembering a past kindness: a door held open, a smile flashed to a stranger, or even just a simple "thank you." We have the power to change anybody's day, to leave warmth swirling in the wake of our passage rather than an indifferent shadow. Keeping this in mind as I travelled, laughter and compliments became the tools of my trade, and friendships, no matter how brief, my art.

I capered across the globe like some kind of good-times-vigilante. I waxed poetic through those nether hours in which the sunrise seemed so distant, and radiated genuine compliments as often as I was able to. Genuine: what an important term. For me, it meant to lose any form of ulterior motive, any tie that would rein me into the realm of someone who sought to gain from others. And yet I gained so much. A vast wealth of something utterly irreplaceable,

and I cannot help but smile at the thought. Countless experiences kindled, the company royal like kings and queens of myth, and I stood emboldened, empowered by their presence in the woven tapestry of my mind.

I mentioned that the other half of this experience was inebriation, so that leaves liquor; liquor was the vessel. It was the *S.S. Enterprise* or *Millennium Falcon*, a rocket straight into the stars of emotion, invincibility, and discovery. I found it empowering, listening close and sharing in the hurts, woes, and aspirations of others. I believe many people consider themselves broken or shattered in some way. I know I did. It was these precious moments away from home, spent in close company with perfect strangers, that made me realize something. All it takes is being one step removed from everyday life to recognize that our little individual broken shards of self can be seen as a beautiful whole. A kaleidoscope of what it means to be human.

I remember the bittersweet goodbye of friendships weeks in the making, a farewell initiated by one of the most beautiful sunsets I've ever seen. There were seven of us on a hillside on Koh Phi Phi. I'd snuck a bottle of bubbly to the overlook and wordlessly produced paper cups. As the sun sank beneath the ocean, we had a surprise toast, a champagne cheers of gratitude for all who were present.

I remember running around a Laotian city awash with celebration. Water splashed and sprayed from hoses, guns, and balloons. It blended with colored powders and ran from our skin as we spent our time bonding with a local family. The words we understood were few, but our shared language was elation.

While the facts of time or place are important, what I truly remember most is the solace of memories and aspirations laid bare. The feeling of connection I achieved from digging into the depths of other's souls and sharing in the burden of their hurts and aspirations was truly meaningful.

I once wrote "Do what and all you can for others and whether you

see them again or not, know they'll remember you for your genuine gesture." That is immortality to me. Until all the perfect little broken shards of my human kaleidoscope wink out and all that remains is a handful of faded photographs bearing smiling faces whose names are lost to time. Memories may not last forever, but for me it is enough.

My journey has wound so many unexpected courses and left me so much more than who I once was. So, I ask you this: Where were you when you felt most empowered as a human being? Where were you when you were the best person you have ever been?

POETRY

Etched in Stone

By Bonnie Weisz

Wind blown down from
 mountain tops
 where fish swam
 outside of history
and ancient breezes later
blew more ancient dust
to hide tiny winged creatures
and vast majestic canopies
 turning them
 into rock.
All rock and breeze
our history and our future
captured in stone.
 Memories in bedrock.

PHOTOGRAPHY

Tyrico Bay

Leigh Nicole Leal



Contributors

Ashley Barnes was born in Edmonton, Alberta and has always had a passion to communicate via visual art. Barnes chose to relocate to Vancouver, B.C. in 2012 and eventually relocated again to Vancouver Island to attend Camosun College as a student in the Visual Arts Diploma program with an interest in film photography. Barnes currently resides on the traditional territories of the Lkwungen and W̱SÁNEĆ peoples in an area also known as Victoria, British Columbia.

Rebecka Beauchamp-Hole is a Camosun student raised on Vancouver Island. She is a lover of literature from Shakespeare's classics to modern fantasy. Boundless curiosity and creativity eventually led her to writing, creating stories for readers from all walks of life.

Cam Bradley is a part-time student in the supposed twilight hours of his twenties. While he is a life time fan of novels, writing is a brand-new hobby. His favorite thing so far is the community. There truly is something to be said for the positive and articulate ensemble at Camosun.

Rachelle Bramly is a former Camosun writing student, now published in *Beside the Point* for the third time. Her work has also appeared in *EVENT* Magazine. A multi-genre writer, Rachelle is first and foremost a poet, although she is currently working on a novel featuring a main character from another planet. Rachelle lives in Victoria with her fiancé, her animals, and her plants.

Keely Covo put off going to art school for many years before she finally enrolled at Camosun. At the beginning, she knew she had a lot to learn, but she didn't realize just how open-ended it would all be, and she quickly accumulated more questions than could ever be answered. She is about to graduate with a Visual Arts Diploma, feeling excited, frightened, and strangely comforted by all these question marks waiting on the horizon.

P.J. Davies is a local writer currently studying anthropology. Her interests include animals, cold water swimming, magic, ethnobotany, drawing, significant otherness, cooking, and writing. She is currently working on a collection of science fiction stories that explore the relationship between humans and the natural world, and the delicate balance of elements that allows human habitation to take place.

Brie Fennell is a young author studying at Camosun College. She started writing stories as a way to escape the world she lives in. At some point along her journey, she realized that she could use her platform as a writer to tell the stories that no one wants to talk about. Through fiction, she wants to address issues that plague society, hoping to shed light on stories that would otherwise remain in darkness.

Shuang Gong is a writer, artist, and former Camosun College student. During her time in the Comics and Graphic Novels program, she learned to write both graphic novels and short stories. Now she spends her free time writing stories and drawing characters. Horror and fantasy are what she is interested in, and to her, creating an imaginary world is a way to enrich the plain day-to-day life. This is her second publication in *Beside the Point*. Currently, she is working on her first novel.

This is **Jennifer Hill's** first publication.

Lee Ingram has taken courses in Visual Arts, among other subjects, and spends a lot of time in nature.

Sabrina Alyss Klassen sleeps on an air mattress as she's afraid of the longer-term commitment demanded by permanent furniture. She considers more than one trip from the car with groceries a personal failure. She prefers her flowers grown in the cracks of sidewalks as

opposed to store bought, walks far faster than Google Maps can fathom, and has perfected the art that is the blueberry pancake. Having spent the last few years discovering these things about herself, she is tentatively deciding whether to add starving author to her list of defining attributes. This will be her very first publication.

Currently living in Victoria, British Columbia, **Leigh Nicole Leal** is a Trinidadian / British emerging visual artist graduating from the Camosun College Visual Arts program in 2019. She received her PGDip in Jewellery (metalsmithing) from the University for the Creative Arts in Surrey, England, and her B.A. (Hons) in Criminology from the University of Greenwich, London, England. Her focus on mixed media productions in film, photography, and sculpture has been shaped by her interest in exploring concepts of cultural and social identity through lived experiences as well as in a historical context.

Ciel Lenz is an avid reader and writer. Ciel has been a story teller from a young age; their parents have always encouraged them to keep writing, and now they hope to make it a career. Ciel feels that they do not write stories or poems, but rather the stories and poems write them. They hope to be accepted into UVic's Creative Writing program next fall.

Conor McCallum is a writer who enjoys the supernatural and unexpected. "Tomb Bomb" is his first non-online published story with a completed web novel titled *HH Bubblegun* and an ongoing sequel titled "Unit 4" being his previously published works. Conor hopes to continue sharing his stories with the world as he continues studying Creative Writing at Camosun and UVic.

Ben McFee is an actor, writer, poet, musician, and playwright. He has been thrice published in *Beside the Point*, including his best-known poem "The Killing Time," and the science-fiction short

story “The Final Flight of the C.S.S. Starlight.” Back in 2014, his play *A Brief History of Tomorrow*—which predicted the rise of Donald Trump, and the mounting tensions with Russia—was mounted by CASA On Stage, in the city of Lethbridge. He is currently the host of *Speak, Easy*—an open-mic variety show, hosted at Victoria’s The Mint, that traffics in underground poetry, literature, and music. He lives in Victoria with his fiancée, and their animals.

Douglas McLean is a student at Camosun College. Rediscovering a love of reading not long ago, he decided to try his hand at writing. Taking inspiration from H.P. Lovecraft, heavy metal, and the occult, he strives to create strange worlds and characters that feel authentic. He hopes to hone his writing and create stories for years to come.

Aidan Nelson-Sandmark formerly studied in the Writing Department at the University of Victoria and is now attending Camosun College. He is normally interested in reading and writing science fiction, although he does have a special interest in creative nonfiction. He has no pets, no spouse, and usually no money. This is his first publication.

Kristan Saefkow is a full-time student of English at Camosun College. He lives in Victoria, British Columbia, and spends his time writing, studying, cooking, and taking walks of varying length on the beach at all hours of the day. Kristan is a road-tripper, an avid dice-roller, and thoroughly enjoys expanding his pool of experience.

Tori Schroeder is an aspiring Canadian writer with a penchant for fantasy, history, and all things in between. Her work has been previously published in a compilation of youth short fiction by Polar Expressions Publishing. She is currently studying at Camosun College and striving to broaden her creative horizons.

Logan Simonson is a Victoria-raised undergraduate student of English Literature and Writing. His poetry has appeared as two chapbooks, has been on stage with bill bissett and Magdalen Pope, and has been on the pages of *Runestone*, *Beside the Point*, and *Warren Pieces*. Logan is the editor-in-chief of independent publisher Megalith Press.

Avalon Suriano is a Camosun student, and this will be her second publication with the journal. She has a passion for writing and loves to draw nature into almost every piece. Some of her other hobbies include reading and making jewellery.

Christopher Vickers survived the batty lifestyle of an adolescent actor. He has been published in the *Rifflandia*, *Monday*, and *Metropolitan* magazines. He is currently taking classes at Camosun College to make the leap into the University of Victoria's Creative Writing program. In regards to most of his aspirations, he sticks the landing like Alfred E. Neuman.

Chelsea Vignola is an emerging artist still discovering and developing her practice, processes and voice. She tries to be as intentional as possible in her art practice, considering her materials and processes, doing her best to maintain an awareness, and learning of potential historical and socio-political factors in her work. She considers art as a tool to explore information and gain a better understanding of humanity and the world. Photography is one of her favourite mediums, and she loves working with film and experimenting with historical methods of creating photographs.

Bonnie Weisz recently relocated to Ladysmith, British Columbia, following a career as a professional writer and journalist. She started writing poetry when she was fourteen, moved by the political events of the 1960s. She now spends much of her time volunteering and writing, in the hope that poetry will save her soul.

Content Warnings

Looking Glass

Gore; disembowelment; reference to incest

Family Matters

Homophobia

My Sister's Boyfriend

Physical abuse; domestic violence

The Two Hands of Power

Graphic violence

The Girl Who Never Knew Herself

Self-harm; dysphoria

Euphoria

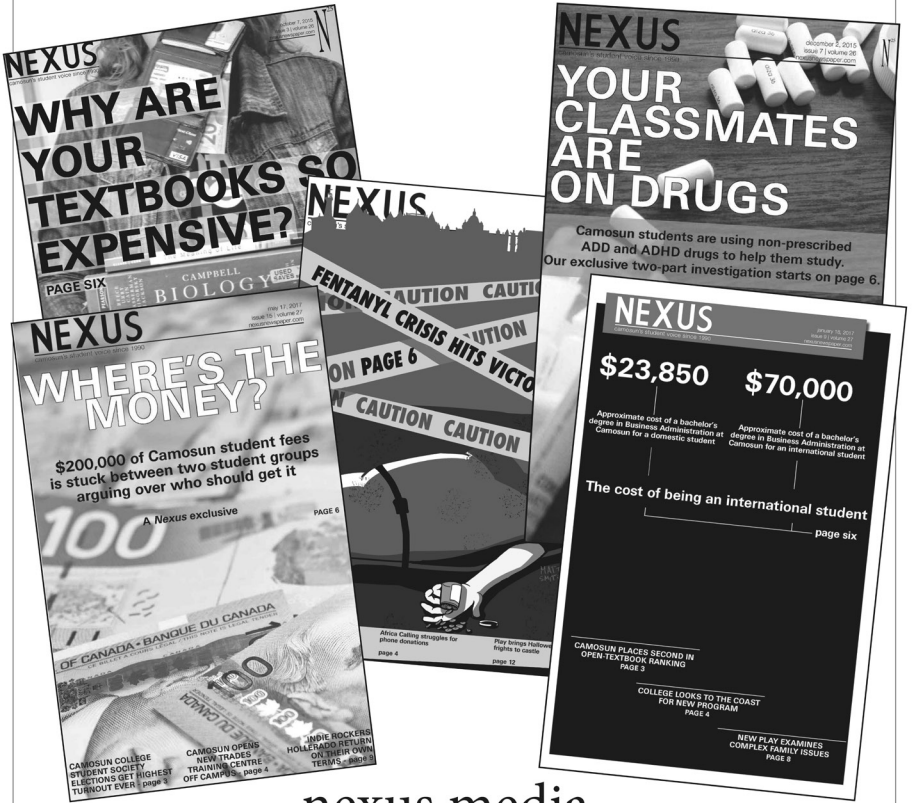
Drug use; non-consensual sexual activity

Dream Cutter

Body horror

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BESIDE The Point

FEATURING THE WORK OF:

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Rebecka Beauchamp-Hole

Cam Bradley

Rachelle Bramly

Keely Covo

P.J. Davies

Brie Fennell

Shuang Gong

Jennifer Hill

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